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Meta-Geopolitics: the Relevance of Geopolitics in the Digital Age

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NAYEF AL-RODHAN, MAY 25 2014

Geopolitics: a contested discipline

Geopolitics – the study of the interaction between geography, international politics, and international relations – has seemingly passed its heyday and critiques are now coming from several fronts. Geography in this regard includes both features that are ‘fixed’, such as location, topography, strategic chokepoints, climate, and natural resources, as well as elements of human and political geography, such as a country’s size, national boundaries, and historical, religious, and cultural physical sites. In the ‘digital age’ that we live in, marked by instant connectivity and an unprecedented spread and use of communication technologies, the relevance of geography and territory appears falsely outdated. Not only are economic interdependence, multilateral institutions, technological change, or the rise of non-state actors considered to weigh decisively in global affairs, but the simple reference to geopolitics among liberals is often taken to mean something reactionary (even revisionist), outmoded, or sinister.

However, the discipline of geopolitics has attracted opprobrium much before the ‘digital age’. Geopolitics has long been considered an avatar of imperialism due to its traditional association with social Darwinism and its preoccupation with the survival capacity of states and societies. In the late 19th century, the German writer Friedrich Ratzel put forward the infamous idea that states, like organisms, compete to increase their living space of *Lebensraum*. The “intellectual poison” imbued in the term ‘geopolitics’, as well as its association with imperialism, discredited the entire academic field for a long time.

A less combatant understanding of geopolitics existed in other schools of thought. The British geographer Halford Mackinder employed an understanding of geopolitics as ‘grand strategy’. Looking at the wider interplay between resources, nature, and technology, Mackinder presented a strategic vision for the future of rivalries between land-based vs. sea-based powers. His geopolitical vision was still propped-up in a discourse of dominance and great power rivalry. The Cold War years did little to change this interpretation of geopolitics, which continued to be understood as a discipline about great power rivalries and machinations.

A fragmented discourse against geopolitics already emerged at the end of the Cold War, challenging established notions of spatiality, geographic dichotomies (e.g. East/West), and the construction of meanings about territory. Geopolitics was critiqued for mostly serving the interests of major powers and, at the same time, for privileging an exclusive focus on states as the main units of analysis.

Geopolitics in the digital age

In the 21st century, the position of geopolitics as a discipline is further attacked, as geopolitics is essentially a ‘territorial’ paradigm in a world that is increasingly depicted as affected by non-state and de-territorialized threats. Cyber warfare and cyber espionage can now produce high-level political tensions and international crises. Delocalized threats and cyber attacks on key infrastructure can have devastating effects on the economy and security. The rise of digital media is among the most cited critiques of classical geopolitics, as it is employed as a tool and means for political mobilization and digital diplomacy, as was the case during the Arab Spring.

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Cyber weapons are now available not only to enemy states, but also exploited by isolated individuals, ranging from “bored teenagers to wild-eyed terrorists”. This Geopolitics 2.0 reality implies that a set of major shifts have taken place in international relations, empowering non-territorial actors and posing unmet challenges to states. During the street protests in Iran in 2009, the regime was quick to blame a litany of Western agents, including Google, YouTube, and Twitter.

Moreover, issues such as climate change, which transcend the classical interstate dynamics and rivalries, alter the scope of the traditional geopolitical. Climate change, for instance, makes industrial activity and human action at large directly responsible for shaping the geopolitical context in which the next generations’ struggles and arrangements will take place. Old-fashioned geopolitical scripts would therefore appear increasingly outdated when seen from this prism. However, this may not be necessarily true.

The endurance of geopolitics

While all these issues make a fair point in underlining the complexities of our world, I believe some perennial assumptions of geopolitics still remain as relevant today as they were before. Geopolitics will always be relevant because of geographic structures that are not mobile and which cannot be overlooked, ranging from resources to emotionally relevant historical sites, locations, and regional/neighborly relations. In this regard, the fast-paced 21st century has not fully managed to surpass some of the limitations and determinations of previous times. For a start, despite efforts to curb dependency, or supplement or regenerate natural resources, the world is still heavily dependent on sources of energy, and this affects political choices, shapes interests, and influences patterns of interstate cooperation. According to the OPEC World Energy Model report of 2012, oil remains the world’s single most important source of energy and the world demand is set to increase for many decades to come. China, which has just recently outranked the US as the world’s biggest oil consumer, is showing an increased interest in Central Asian cooperation and had already initiated, in the past years, plans to construct extensive pipelines from Kazakhstan via Turkmenistan. The geopolitical competition in the region is complicated by the increased interests and presence of Russia, a leading energy exporter, which is trying to benefit from China’s energy vulnerability. The US and UK are also carefully trying to manage pipelines to bypass Russia and Iran. The countries of the region, more and more confident and able to leverage on their oil wealth, benefit from revenues to sustain highly corrupt and often draconian regimes.

This sketch of opportunistic geopolitical relations is one illustration of the persisting and compelling logic of geopolitics, as it is understood in its traditional sense, involving interstate dynamics. It would be utopian to consider that we are close to a post-geopolitical world in which basic tenets and enduring truths of geopolitics will become entirely inapplicable and irrelevant. The 21st century is indeed an era marked by unprecedented global communication, transnational agents, and non-state threats. Yet, despite these shifts, traditional understandings of geopolitics (as a study of the interplay between territory, economy, demography, and state politics) need to be rightly placed in explanations of our contemporary world. Globalization and transnational phenomena, technological innovation, or transcultural issues and synergies are all factors that bear on international relations. So, however, are geopolitical constraints and interests. Like in the past, a set of material and geographical factors will continue to have a say in international politics. Natural resources, cultural fault lines, strategic chokepoints, or weather patterns will continue to constrain or give extra leverage to states on the global scene.

Into the 21st century: *Meta*-geopolitics

The choice for a paradigm is therefore not between classical geopolitics and a narrative of post-territoriality. Rather, the paradigm of what I call *Meta-geopolitics* is more appropriate now, accounting for both traditional notions of geostrategy and the volatile and shifting nature of today’s security context. This framework encompasses the numerous interlocking dimensions of national and international security and proposes a multidimensional view of state power, comprising both soft and hard tools, and taking into account seven state capacities. These refer to social and health issues, domestic politics, economics, environment, science and human potential, military and security issues, and international diplomacy. A *Meta*-geopolitical approach is now more relevant as it better captures the enduring relevance of classical geopolitical thinking, the challenges and normative shifts of our contemporary era,

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as well as the numerous factors which shape and determine state power and international politics. Accepting that our contemporary world is a highly complex environment means precisely acknowledging that both old and new security issues coexist, rather than being mutually-exclusive.

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