A Simple Paradigm for Noopolitics: The Geopolitics of Knowledge

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IDRISS J. ABERKANE, OCT 15 2015

Arquilla and Ronfeldt (1999) developed the term *Noopolitik* as a political strategy focusing on the use, and denial thereof, of information. The term, reminiscent to Realpolitik, was informed to establish a policy, that of "Being in Athena's camp", in the sense that the practitioner of Noopolitik should belong to the side that handles, correlates and uses the maximal amount of information in a rather decentralised fashion. The emergence of Intellipedia, the crowdsourced intelligence database, is a textbook example of Noopolitik. What this conception of Noopolitik did not, however, is codify a more general geopolitics of knowledge, in which power would not be subserving knowledge, but rather knowledge subserving power. The development of such a paradigm is the purpose of this article. It is especially important to focus on knowledge since early Noopolitik almost only focused on information, which is of a lesser quality than knowledge. Knowledge is intrinsically less perishable than information, for example, and wisdom, which is self-knowledge, is not information. Besides, well-informed is not synonymous with sage; a state or an individual can be erudite but foolish, and to this early Noopolitik offers no particular cure.

Geopolitics is a complex system and could be studied as such. It can be defined as the interaction between land and power; indeed, there is no geopolitics where there is no idea of power. Practical geopolitics, that is the one of policy-makers, tends to routinely manipulate notions such as power and interest as if they were almost self-evident; it is very interesting to study political and diplomatic discourses in their use of the very word "interest" or "vital interest", and observe how they do pose these notions as self-evident. Yet, nothing could be further from the truth. The entire assumption of contemporary geopolitics, especially from the practical perspective of modern decision-makers, is that there is such a thing as *Homo geopoliticus*, a fallacy comparable to that of *Homo economicus*. If the idea that economic maximising agents are fully rational is a gross oversimplification and more of a myth than an empirical observation, so is the one assuming that strategists and policy-makers know their interest *ex ante*. I regard as more realistic to consider that policy-makers can only have an *ex post* understanding of their interests, and that even then such an understanding is usually very limited.

Indeed, just as there is a behavioural and cognitive economics, there is such a thing as behavioural and cognitive geopolitics, since there are many cognitive biases in geopolitics and history. The essential idea of this article is to codify not the interaction between land and power, but the interaction between knowledge and power. Its two founding categories are the noosphere and the kinesphere.

On the Kinesphere

In the study of proprioception, the physiological correlates of our body's ability to compute its position in space, the kinesphere is defined as all the possible reach of a body. One could simplify it as the set of all one's possible movements with at least one foot remaining in contact with the ground. Here, let us simply define the kine-sphere as the set of one's possible actions. The noosphere, in turn, will be the set of one's possible thoughts, including one's possible knowledge. I will call "the noosphere of a state" that of its actual knowledge and thoughts, and simply "the noosphere" the universe of all possible thoughts and knowledge, which is considered the same for any state.

Strategy, as defined by Xenophon, is the art of maintaining one's liberty of action. Brzezinski has compared classical

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geopolitics to a "Grand Chessboard" (1997), and this comparison has many accurate historical correlates. The most strategic part of a chessboard, all things being equal, is its center. Thus, controlling the center of continents has remained an essential strategic goal to empires throughout the ages – hence MacKinder's (1905) classic "Heartland theory", and hence the very reproducible balkanisation (division between many sovereign and, if possible, competing states) of the centres of strategically-important zones by empires: from Central Africa to Central Asia to Central America, all are extremely balkanised and therefore volatile. That empires seldom fought over Australia made it such a unified continent. That the United States of America ended up cohesive, although their territory had been much disputed by powerful empires from France to Spain to Great Britain to the Netherlands, was an essential contribution to their sense of "Manifest Destiny". They are the only modern exception to this simple geopolitical rule: any area over which empires have fought has ended up balkanized. That the Treaty of Tordesillas dividing the newly discovered lands outside Europe between Portugal and Spain in 1494, had only been decided between two competing empires limited, but did not prevent the balkanisation of South America. That the Portuguese-speaking territories of South America ended up all united politically in spite of history's many complexities also contributed to a geopolitical sentiment comparable to Manifest Destiny in Brazil.

If strategy is the art of preserving one's initiative, it is also that of damaging that of the opponent. In those terms, geopolitics is more reminding of the Go game, in which effective containment is key to success. Much has been written about this art in geopolitics, and it is at the very core of the current geopolitical doctrine of the OECD, under the leadership of the United States, towards the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO): limiting Beijing and Moscow's initiative and degrees of liberty in the economic, media, political and of course geographical spheres while at the same time attempting to preserve its own liberty of action.

Classical geopolitics is essentially seen as a game of power, an arm wrestle by which the bargaining powers of states and various other entities interact with each other in a non-linear manner. Contrary to a regular game of arm wrestle, however, the expenditure of subserving an opponent tends to augment in degree of the level of subservience (as long as hard power is concerned, of course). Total dominance over a population is not proportionally more expensive, in any resource, than relative dominance. It does not cost the same to impose an embargo on an opponent as it does to occupy it fully; expenditures then escalate almost exponentially as one nears total submission, because, as Sun Tzu very well understood, cornering an enemy is tantamount to despairing him, and despair leads to suicidal decisions.

Still, classical geopolitics resembles the endless and reciprocal interaction of kinespheres over what are usually zero-sum exchanges (territories, natural resources, stable markets, trade routes, etc.). In this interaction, classical doctrine posits that it is in the interest of states to achieve maximum power over others. This is precisely the current attitude of the OECD leadership, namely the USA: attempting to achieve "full spectrum dominance" over anything politically organised that is outside its kinesphere. The collision of kinespheres, its pendulum effect of defeat and revenge (e.g. the occupation of either Lorraine or the Ruhr on either side of the Rhine river in Europe) has always defined geopolitics. There is, however, a very clear, transcendent escape route to this self-destroying phenomenon by which humanity, and states, are regularly self-organizing their own annihilation. This route is that of the noosphere, which transcends the kinesphere.

On the Noosphere

The noosphere is an expression popularised by Teilhard de Chardin (1955), which I use here to define the universe of all possible human thoughts, including knowledge and pure speculations devoid of connection with the phenomenal world. An interesting part of it, the universe of all possible human knowledge, is clearly infinite, unlike raw materials, allowing for an infinite resource for human growth, especially economic, to tap into. The interest of elements of the noosphere is well defined by Soudoplatoff's law, a very clear formulation of an otherwise more confusedly known principle by geographer Serge Soudoplatoff (1984; 2009):

Soudoplatoff's law (1)

When one shares a material good, one divides it. When one shares an immaterial good, one multiplies it.

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… which one can reformulate as that knowledge exchanges are positive sum: when one gives away, say an ounce of gold, one does not have it anymore; when one gives away knowledge, or an idea, one still has it. In the immaterial world, one can have their cake and eat it too. This is a good news of course, since the possession of oil deposits, trade controls, freshwater reserves or territories in general is not positive sum at all. In classical geopolitics, win-win agreements are but the exception, not the rule, and when it comes to sharing a territory, it is the zero-sum game as usual, for which there must be a winner and a loser. Transcendence, as defined by Galtung and others (Galtung 1996, Webel & Galtung 2007), is of course a way to go beyond the zero-sum game, and the early construction of the European Union could be seen as an example of it, just as the reunification of Germany, or Korea, or the Levant could be.

If the old adage that "sometimes you win, sometimes you learn" is true, that is, to the cognitive individual that is investing enough attention and time in the study of their failure to achieve an objective, then whatever states may lose in their kinesphere, they can recover, and beyond, in the noosphere: this is the base of the "observation (4)" I will make here. This is apparent even outside the time of armed conflicts: it is interesting to remember that South Korea is, today, exporting more than one billion USD more than the entire Russian Federation, with three times less population and 171 times less territory, because it is exporting original know-how, which it is free to create wherever it wants, independent from its geological destiny.

The noosphere is a strategic ocean to which absolutely every nation can have an access. Better: while a foreign nation may indeed deny another nation's access to the sea by blockading it, the single most efficient noosphere blockade is self-imposed. Countries themselves are their worst enemy in noopolitics, because in the geopolitics of knowledge one's most stubborn opponent is one's own ego: was it in the interest of France to impose the payment of ludicrous compensations after the Great War? Was it in the interest of Louis XIV to wage war with the Low Countries? We may define self-knowledge as wisdom, and whatever is not self-knowledge, simply as "knowledge". If, with Alexandre Percin (1927), Edmond Potonié-Pierre (1877) and William James (1907). we consider that there is such a thing as a "war against war", that is, the idea that in any conflict, at any time, the enemy is not the opponent but war itself, then one can extend Clausewitz's notion of a "fog of war" (ie. the ignorance of the enemy's intentions, positions, and actions) to the war against war, and define it as the ignorance of the means to transcend a conflict. The notion of ignorance extends beyond classical warfare, and it is this notion that Arquilla and Ronfeldt considered most in their works.

Noopolitical fog of war (2)

Any conflict is a mixture of knowledge and ignorance. It takes the knowledge to wage war, and the ignorance to wage war against war. Or in other words: the knowledge to wage war, and the ignorance to wage peace.

Simply put, any conflict needs the knowledge to deal harm to one's opponent, and the ignorance to deal harm to the conflict itself, to one's ego among others, to transcend the conflict. As a consequence then:

Noopolitical positivism (3)

In total knowledge, including total self-knowledge, there would be no war.

Besides, the interaction between knowledge and power shows an interesting paradox defined by Nassim Nicholas Taleb (2012) as antifragility, and simply captured by the saying "what does not kill me makes me stronger". The more a state is pressured in its kinesphere, the more it is pushed towards the exploration of its noosphere, so much so that a geopolitical victory can end up a tremendous noopolitical defeat for the attacker, and vice-versa for the defender.

Noopolitical victory (4)

A geopolitical defeat can be converted into a noopolitical victory

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This is precisely the current situation of the confrontation between the OECD and SCO, a geopolitical constraint to the SCO yet a dramatic noopolitical expansion at the same time, that is, an expansion of its knowledge and wisdom, and therefore, an expansion in the noosphere rather than the kinesphere. States are cognitive , meaning that, unlike inert stones, they do not respond in the same way to the same stimulation throughout time. They can learn and adapt, and therefore there is such a thing as cognitive geopolitics.

Classical geopolitics, and again, the practical geopolitics of the working politician, posits that states know their interest. This is plainly wrong. The moments in which they come close to their true interests are transient and exceptional. All the rest of geopolitics is made of unrealistic desires, geopolitical, life-costing cravings. States, as individuals, have an ego, a "commanding self", the very opposite of their "true self". The "commanding self" asks "give me what I want", while the "true self" asks, infinitely more rarely, "give me what I need".

The Commanding Self (5)

Very often, states crave not what they need, and need not what they crave. States have a "true" and a "commanding self" (an ego). The first asks "give me what I need", the second "give me what I want". As a result, states, as human beings, rarely know their true interest.

This fundamental observation has been completely left out of classical realism, and it is what should most clearly separate Noopolitik from Realpolitik. However, a fundamental flaw (or, in a positive mindset, a fundamental way towards improvement) in Arquilla and Ronfeldt's original Noopolitik is that it still supposes a control of power over knowledge. Here I defend exactly the opposite: "Noopolitik" should be an internal policy of flowing knowledge as much and as fast as possible for a state, a policy of knowledge and wisdom, as Edgar Poe would put it, "where deep thoughts are a duty". "The worst of sages is a visitor of princes, the best of princes is a visitor of sages", the sufi proverb perfectly captures genuine Noopolitik as the art of wisdom to precede power. In true Noopolitik as well, there is a certain "knowledge panacea doctrine", meaning that knowledge, including self-knowledge, can cure all the ills, as statement (3) gives a particular importance to knowledge flows, to the art of producing and flowing transcendent knowledge in general.

Conclusion

The interaction between knowledge and power reformulates very simple geopolitical principles that have been all-to-often forgotten by Classical Realism, and that were known to such enlightened princes as Marcus Aurelius and Gandhi. One of its clearer formulation is that states should not strive to achieve power over others, but rather power over themselves, which is the ultimate form of power:

State Stoicism (6)

It is in the interest of states, just as of humans, to seek not power over others but power over themselves. Self-power is the ultimate goal of international relations.

The mission of flowing knowledge internally, along with proposition (2) of this paper's principles of noopolitics, also leads to the idea that there is more profit to make in the peace industry than in the war industry. Every time a military technology has made it to the civilian world it has changed the world, from semiconductors to radars to computers to jet propulsion to the Internet etc. It is possible for man today to turn a blue planet into a red planet, but nobody has the technology to go the other way around. Such "weapons of mass construction" would surely yield much more power than those of mass destruction. This observation founds the Peace-Industrial Complex:

The Peace-Industrial Complex (7)

Maximal peace profiteering is infinitely superior to maximal war profiteering. Military technology and ingenuity should always be allowed – or even forced – to develop into civilian applications. There is more power in weapons of mass construction than mass destruction.

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About the author:

Idriss J. , Ph.D teaches the Economy and Geopolitics of Knowledge at Ecole Centrale Paris (Paris-Saclay University). He researches software neuroergonomics and biomimetics at Ecole Polytechnique (Paris-Saclay) and is an affiliate scholar of the Kozmetsky Global Collaboratory of Stanford University and is an Ambassador of the Unesco Unitwin "Complex Systems Digital Campus". He is also a Professor of Knowledge Economy within Mazars's "NExt MBA" EMBA Program, and the co-founder and ceo of Scanderia ltd.