

# What Is Critical Global Geopolitics? Cold War 2.0 and the Disappearance of the USSR

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*For overwhelming Western political analysts, journalists, scientists, etc., the disappearance of the USSR in 1990/91 was symbolized overdramatically by the physical destruction of the Berlin Wall followed by the removal/destruction of statues/monuments devoted to the communist leaders and communist ideology.*

This geopolitical change called for a new world order in international relations (IR) and, in fact, heralded global peace, international democracy, and worldwide security and stability in foreign affairs after the Cold War 1.0 (1949–1989).

The period of the Cold War was a historic period lasting from the time of the establishment of the NATO pact in 1949 to the destruction of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

During that time, global politics was structured around a binary political geography that opposed US-led global capitalism to Soviet-type communism. Nevertheless, although the world did not face during that time a direct military confrontation (like in 1962 during the Cuban Crisis) between East and West, the period of the Cold War 1.0 witnessed serious economic, financial, military, political, and primarily ideological rivalries between at that time two (nuclear) superpowers (USA and USSR) and their allies (NATO and Warsaw Pact).

According to the well-known concept of “the end of history” which reflects the end of Cold War 1.0, the global battle of the previous 40 years – in the Western propaganda eyes, the final battle between (Western) liberties and (Eastern) “Evil Empire” – was over (at least for some time).

The world seemed unified under the New World Order (directed by Washington). Immediately after 1989, any combination of multipolarity of the post-Cold War 1.0 order in IR was understood as a real danger to global security.

However, from the point of critical geopolitics, it was suggested that the world would soon miss stability in IR which existed during the Cold War 1.0 due to the military, political, and ideological opposition by two superpowers and their allies. In other words, according to those critics, the New World Order after 1989 will lose the clarity and stability that the Cold War 1.0 era had. Therefore, the post-1989 world concerning the IR, according to, for example, S. P. Huntington, was going to be a more jungle-like world of foreign affairs and of multiple dangers for global security with hidden traps, unpleasant surprises, and moral ambiguities. A new mantra in IR started after 11/9 (2001) when US President George W. Bush put clear lines of good and evil on the global political map.

During the Cold War 1.0, the “free” capitalistic world was fighting against the “non-free” communist world (particularly if someone lived in the “promised land” of the USA). The “promised” West demonstrated the inevitability of countries falling under “devil” communism like dominos (a “domino effect”) unless the USSR was contained behind the Iron Curtain. Nevertheless, after 1989, some political theorists offered new visions of global politics based on chaos and fragmentation claiming the threats and dangers from many corners around. Such critical global geopolitics became incorporated into the imagined geography of G. W. Bush’s proclaimed the War on Terror after 11/9 when the US administration sharply divided the world into two halves meaning that each state was either for the USA or for the terrorists. It was, in fact, no in-between space. From a wider perspective, the use of geographical imaginaries in forming global political models (like those two during and post-Cold War 1.0) is usually understood as *geopolitics*.

From the point of human geography as an academic discipline, it understands geopolitics as an element of the practice and analysis of statecraft that considers geography and spatial relations both of which play a crucial impact in the process of making IR. The political reality concerning IR has to take seriously into consideration certain frameworks of laws of both geography and politics: concerning geography, distance, proximity, and location as they are understood to influence the development of political action (for instance, war). From the very points of geopolitical arguments, the impact of geography on politics is founded on the geophysical reality but not on ideology. It seems in historical practice that geographical science is going to have predictable impacts on political action.

Such above-presented arguments are challenged by those who claim that geographical relationships and entities are specific to historical and cultural environments. That means the nature of the influence of geography on political events can change.

We have to keep in mind that the term *geopolitics* was historically first used by the Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellen in 1899. Nevertheless, the term was not very much used before the early 20th century. However, the British geographer and political strategist Halford Mackinder’s promotion of the study of geography as an academic discipline to assist statecraft stimulated the view that geopolitics can influence geographers to offer a way in which they could influence the IR. In essence, geopolitics as an academic research discipline is dealing with the question of which geographical factors can shape IR. Basically, these geographical factors include the continental space followed by the distribution of physical landscape and human resources. Concerning geographical research, some territories are predicted to be easier or harder to defend. In addition, the notion of distance affects politics and some topographical features can significantly participate in the security efforts of the state but as well as may also lead to its security vulnerability.

It can not be ever forgotten that the issue of security was all the time and is going to be in the future fundamental to the study of geopolitics. It, basically, means the maintenance of the state in the face of threats, usually from external powers (aggression from outside). The crucial point is that geopoliticians claim that they can support the concept of national (state) security by explaining the effects of a country's (and around) geography and that of potential conquerors, on future power-political relations. In other words, the experts in geopolitics have to be able to predict which areas could make a state stronger, helping it to rise to prominence, and which might leave it vulnerable. The geopoliticians argue that geography is the most important factor in IR for the very reason it is the most permanent one. Subsequently, the study of geopolitics is considered to be of a very practical nature and the most objective one regarding IR. From that point of view, it is quite separate from political theory.

Usually, geopoliticians present the world and IR as one closed system founded on interdependent relations between political actors, basically independent states. Accidentally or not, the interest in geopolitics as an academic discipline that can explain the world and the system of IR happened at a time when the entire world was explored by Western imperialistic colonists. Therefore, now the world has become available for the territorial and economic expansion of the nation-states. Soon, around 1900, the West European policy of colonialism reached its height. In principle, colonialism is understood as the rule of a nation-state (or other political power) over another, occupied and subordinated territory and its people. Originally, geopolitics was understood as the study that explains and even legitimates the policy of colonization and making overseas empires. Practically, before 1945 geopolitics in many cases was offering a way for nation-states to protect their territorial possessions at the time (before the process of de-colonization) when the "empty lands" (and "terra incognita") became ultimately occupied by the West European (and other) states and powers.

From the very pan-global perspective, the best-known geopolitical thesis is of the British Mackinder – "Heartland Thesis". According to the thesis, the Asian "Heartland" is a pivotal area of global geopolitics. Who controls this area provides a chief position in world politics and, therefore, global domination. This "Pivot Area" is surrounded by the "Outer Rim" of the lands divided into two territories: 1) "Inner or marginal crescent"; and 2) "Lands of outer or insular crescent"). If not resistance from the area of the "Outer Rim", which is proximate to the "Heartland", some occupying power could quite easily come to control first Europe and then the world. According to Mackinder's thesis from 1919, the precondition to command "Heartland" is to rule East Europe. However, whoever rules "Heartland" commands the World Island which is a precondition to rule over the World.

Mackinder's geopolitical analysis of world politics, nevertheless, had a very practical task – to assist British global colonial imperialism. In other words, he suggested to the British policymakers to be wary of powers that are occupying the "Heartland", and should establish a "buffer zone" around the territory of "Heartland" in order to prevent the accumulation of power in the future that might challenge the hegemony of the British Empire within both "Inner" and "Outer Crescents". Mackinder's geopolitical reasoning had a certain influence on both British foreign policy and popular imagination. Nevertheless, not all geopoliticians agree with Mackinder's conclusion that the location of global power is the land as, for instance, the US geopoliticians Mahan, instead of the power of the land, promoted the concept of the power of the sea while later others promoted the significance of air power. Nonetheless, each of these three groups came up with different core areas from which

political, military, and economic dominance can be imposed.

The notion of geopolitics after WWII was quite negative as in many eyes it was associated with Nazi *Geopolitik* policies of territorial occupation, expansionism, *Lebensraum*, colonization, holocaust, and war atrocities. Practically, during the Cold War 1.0, geopolitics, as expressed in pure spatial (geographical) models, became obsolete and out of use at least in its original form. Nevertheless, the Western (American) theory of the Domino Effect (chain reaction of states falling to the communists, like a row of falling dominoes) was in essence connected with the factor of territory (geography) as the spread of communism/socialism was seen not as a complex political process of adaptation and conflicts but primarily as a direct result of proximity to a territory ruled by the USSR. The process of chain reaction would not stop, according to this theory, until it reached the last standing domino (the USA), and made future political action appear inevitable unless proactive action like a pre-emptive strike is done.

However, after 1989 appeared new approaches to geopolitics usually called “critical geopolitics”. For all of them, the common issue is the refusal of the objectivity and timelessness of the effect of geography on certain political processes including IR.

Differently from traditional geopoliticians, supporters of critical geopolitics are taking into consideration a wide spectrum of factors that influence political action and IR. Additionally, traditional geopolitics is criticized for the reason that it takes into consideration only the state or primarily the state as chief or even only player in international politics especially at the time of “Turbo Globalization” after 1989/1990 when, clearly, other actors and powers are involved both at the sub-state level (like ethnic, regional, or place-based groups), and at the supra-state level (such as transnational corporations or international organizations like NATO, EU, UN, ASEAN, NAFTA, BRICS, OPEC, Arab Union, African Union, Council of Europe, etc.).

It has to be stressed that critical geopoliticians are particularly interested in questioning the language of geopolitics, or in other words, the so-called “geopolitical discourse”. For geopoliticians, discourse is a way of talking about, writing, or otherwise representing the world and its geographies. The discourse is simply seen as a way of representing the world – the way that is, in fact, shaping the reality of the world, rather than just being a way of presenting a reality that exists outside of language. Linguistic expression can be a problematic issue as language is metaphorical and, therefore, firstly understood differently by the listeners/readers and secondly directing the opinion of others. All the time exists a choice of words, expressions, and metaphors and the type of terms used affects the meaning of what is being described. For instance, the members of some organizations can be described as “terrorists” or “freedom fighters”. To properly understand the character and aims of their political activity, therefore, very much depends on the used linguistic description of them. As a consequence, there is a politics of language.

Critical geopolitics is founded on postmodern concerns with the politics of representation. For the supporters of such an approach, political geography is not a collection of indisputable facts but, instead, is about power. It means that political geography is not an order or facts but, instead, geopolitical orders are created by top individuals and chief institutions and then imposed worldwide. Political geography is the product of cultural context followed by political motivation. One of the focal points of critical geography today is that it examines the question of why international politics are usually understood from the point of space or simply through the eyes of geography. Consequently, critical geopolitics

seeks to uncover the politics involved in writing the geography of global space. This process is called “geo-graphing” (writing about earth/land) to use the process of geographical reasoning in the practical service of political and other powers.

Critical geopolitics is not so much interested in classical geopolitical problems like the true effects of geography on international relations (like whether land, sea, or air powers are the most influential). Rather, critical geographers investigate whose models of international geography are used, and above all, whose interests these models serve. For them, power essentially depends on knowledge and, therefore, the knowledge has a crucial impact on political action. Examples of how science (knowledge) can be used in politics are the cases of Mackinder who wanted to help maintain British overseas imperial colonies and, therefore, its hegemony over world affairs, and Mahan, a naval historian, who was interested in building up the US Navy to assist the creation of the US Empire.

Supporters of critical geopolitics tend to analyze the impact of geography in any description of the world or its parts from a political viewpoint – for instance to describe or predict a foreign policy of some nation-state is, in fact, to be engaged in geopolitics. Any geopolitical description can influence political perception. For instance, knowledge of other regions and the character of their inhabitants described in a particular political-ideological way can be significant for political action – using constantly the terms “Evil Empire” or “Devil Axis” to describe some country and its political leadership, serve to legitimate its own foreign policy and military actions.

The focal claim by the supporters of critical geopolitics is that conventional, or traditional geopolitical arguments are too much of a pro-geographical nature. Contrary to the traditional geopoliticians, their colleagues in critical geopolitics prefer to reduce the factor of space and place (that means not being crucially concerned with understanding and analyzing geographical processes) to concepts or ideologies. Ideology, from the very perspective of critical geography, can be understood as a meaning that serves to create or/and maintain relationships of domination and subordination, through symbolic forms. Regarding international politics, critical geopolitics argues that geopolitics is not simply linked to the function of describing or predicting the shape of IR. However, geopolitics has to be focal to how identity is formed and supported in contemporary (multi- and hybrid) societies.

In conclusion, we can say that geopolitics continues to be a powerful form of geographical reasoning, but used in support of powerful political interests. Geopolitics can create “moral” maps of the world, and locate enemies to the nation-state. However, critical geopolitics is a significant challenge to the traditional geopolitical imagination of IR and global politics which offers another way to imagine alternative connections between different human groups in the world.

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