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# Defining Geopolitics: Western and Russian Perspectives in Comparison

Shokirjon Mahmudov and Dilroba Arzumetova

University of Tsukuba

**Abstract:** The concept of “geopolitics” has so far never been defined in a precise and universally applicable way. The literature on geopolitics is ample in definitions, reflecting a broad and ongoing intellectual debate between scholars of various academic backgrounds. While there are different approaches to geopolitics, a thorough scrutiny of contemporary geopolitical discourse shows that they share various similarities.

In this paper, the authors provide and interpret a number of definitions of geopolitics by two contemporary Russian geopoliticians, Aleksander Dugin and Nikolay Nartov. Their views will be compared and assessed alongside classical geopolitical theory and recent Western interpretations of geopolitics.

**Keywords:** Geopolitics; Western/Russian geopolitics; power; space; geography

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## Introduction

Looking at different aspects of political affairs, geopolitics can be interpreted in various ways, making it impossible to come up with an all-encompassing definition. The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Politics (McLean, 2003, p. 203) rather vaguely states that geopolitics is “[...] an approach to politics originating in late 19th century Germany that stressed the constraints imposed on foreign policy by location and environment.” Most contemporary definitions provided by Western scholars see early 20th century geopolitics as a fundamentally nationalistic science, e.g. the association of geopolitics with German Nazism; and interpret recent geopolitics as a methodical tool to analyze the interaction between geographical settings and political processes (Cohen, 2003, p. 12). While inspired by Western geopolitical scholars, post-Soviet Russian geopoliticians focus on geopolitics as a worldview, as well as an interdisciplinary science. Even though geopolitical interpretations tend to reflect the interests of the nation to which the author

feels attached, very often there exists more than one view or school of geopolitics within any given country. One example for this is the differentiation between the “Tokyo School” and the “Kyoto School” of Japanese wartime geopolitics (Spang, 2006, pp. 146-149). Moreover, many scholars are influenced, as we will demonstrate below, by classical geopolitics.

The deeper one gets involved with geopolitics, the harder it seems to provide an appropriate explanation of its core elements. In spite of that reality, while approaching their subject from various angles, scholars from different countries and eras still share some important points when defining the term “geopolitics”, particularly with respect to their interpretation of the influence of such factors as geography, economics, and demography on politics in general and on foreign policy in particular.

This paper makes an attempt to look at definitions of geopolitics espoused by two noted Russian geopoliticians, Aleksander Dugin and Nikolay Nartov. Both scholars represent two of the most influential streams within early 21st century Russian geopolitics. Their understanding of geopolitics will be compared and put into context with classical geopolitical theory and modern interpretations thereof. It will be demonstrated that Dugin

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and Nartov understand geopolitics in distinct ways, which is probably because of the fact that different Western scholars have had an impact on the way they view geopolitics.

The first section of this paper explores definitions of geopolitics given by the pioneers of the field as well as by contemporary Western scholars. This part of the article is mostly based on the writings of Bernard Cohen and Klaus Dodds because they not only provide detailed information about the origins of geopolitics, but also present many definitions given by Western scholars. In other words, many definitions given by early scholars are English translations taken from Cohen and Dodds. In the second part of this paper, Dugin and Nartov are introduced and their conflicting interpretations of geopolitics described. Following this, Russian and Western definitions are compared and discussed, with a focus on the question of whether there is anything like a specific “Russian” versus an explicit “Western” geopolitics.

### **Classical Western Geopolitics**

According to Dodds (2009, p. xx), “classical geopolitics is concerned with the inter-relationship between territory, location, resources and power”. As we will demonstrate below, classical geopoliticians were indeed concerned with territory, resources and power.

The Swedish political scientist and politician Rudolf Kjellén (1864-1922) coined the term “geopolitics” in 1899 as part of his concept of political science. Later, Kjellén defined geopolitics as “the theory of the state as a geographical organism or phenomenon in space”<sup>1</sup>. This early definition already contained two elements that have been crucial within the concept of geopolitics: the organic notion of state and space (territory).

Karl Haushofer, a German major-general, geographer and geopolitician, whose ideas influenced top Nazis as well as some Japanese leaders (Spang, 2006, p. 144), added the term “political processes” to the definition of geopolitics. Reading the following definition, it becomes clear that Haushofer considered (political) Geography as the basis of geopolitics:

Geopolitics is the new national science of the state; ... a doctrine on the spatial determinism of all political processes, based on the broad foundations of geography, especially of political geography.<sup>2</sup>

While Kjellén called geopolitics “a science treating the state as a geographical organism or a spatial phenomenon”, Haushofer distinguished between political geography and geopolitics.<sup>3</sup> The distinction between political geography and geopolitics has widened since 1924, the year when Haushofer published his first major contribution to geopolitics “Geopolitik des Pazifischen Ozeans” (Kiss, 1942, p. 641). Haushofer himself viewed political geography as distinct from geopolitics. “[...] Political geography represents the science of the distribution of political power over different regions of the world and the conditioning of political power by, and its dependence on, surface features, climate and cover.” Geopolitics, in contrast to political geography, is essentially dynamic: “it is a way of educating the masses in the concept of space” (Haushofer, 1925, p. 87<sup>4</sup>).

Such terms as “organic state” (Kjellén, 1916; Ratzel, 1897), “heartland” (Mackinder, 1904), and “rimland” (Spykman, 1944) are at the center of geopolitical thinking of the classical Western geopoliticians. Territory and resources were perceived as essential to national security and the “healthy” development of the “organic” state. Therefore, informed by a type of social Darwinism, classical geopolitical thought was frequently Eurocentric and imperialist in tone and outlook, as territory and resources were perceived as essential to national security and the ‘health of the state’ (Dodds, 2009, p. xxii).

One of the most debated geopolitical notions is the old idea of a principal dualism and confrontation of sea-based and land-based powers. This opposition was discussed by Alfred T. Mahan and Sir Halford J. Mackinder. According to their point of view, land-based powers are characterized by austerity, conservatism, non-migration, and tradition. While sea-based powers are adaptable, dynamic as well as open to social and technological innovations. These two opposing civilizations were often seen as

constituting an antagonism in international affairs and the degree of their conflicting interests or their ability to create a balance of power varied according to Mackinder and Mahan from one historical period to another. So, in his 1890 book, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History*, Alfred T. Mahan emphasized “the predominance of naval supremacy over land power”. Mackinder dedicated his famous article “The Pivot of History” to this discourse. In 1919, he concluded his ideas as follows: “Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; Who rules the Heartland, commands the World-Island; Who rules the World-Island, controls the World” (Mackinder, 1919, p. 194)<sup>5</sup>.

As mentioned in the introductory section of this paper, Cohen and Dodds define geopolitics by discussing the classical geopoliticians first. In his 2003 book *Geopolitics of the World System*, Cohen not only cites the above-mentioned classical definitions of geopolitics, but he also formulates his own explanation, which focuses on the dynamic interaction between power and space (Cohen 2003, p. 12):

Geopolitics is the analysis of the interaction between, on the one hand, geographical settings and perspectives and, on the other hand, political processes. (...) Both geographical settings and political processes are dynamic, and each influences and is influenced by the other. Geopolitics addresses the consequences of this interaction.”

Another author who formulates his understanding of geopolitics by discussing classic and modern geopolitics is Klaus Dodds. According to Dodds (2009, p. xx), the central focus of classical geopolitics is “the inter-relationship between territory, location, resources and power”.

To sum up, classical geopolitics is fundamentally concerned with the state as a geographical organism (Kjellén) and the related political processes (Haushofer, 1924). The debates over dynamic notion of geopolitics and static concept of political geography were put forward by classical geopolitical thinking (e.g., Mahan, 1880 and

Mackinder, 1919). Although there have appeared critical, popular, and feminist geopolitics<sup>6</sup> which elucidated the shortcomings of classical geopolitics, the grounding notions of geopolitics such as ‘organic state’, ‘heartland’, and ‘rimland’ were raised and discussed by the representatives of the Western classical geopolitics.

### **Russian Geopolitics in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

In this section, the definitions of geopolitics provided by two Russian geopoliticians, Dugin, and Nartov, will be discussed. Both of them have had a significant influence on the development of modern geopolitics in Russia.

Aleksander Dugin, a professor at Moscow State University in the Faculty of Sociology and International Relations, is one of the most influential right-wing ideologists of Russian nationalism, with close ties to the Kremlin and Russian military intelligence. His political activities are directed toward restoration of the Russian Empire through partitioning former Soviet republics, such as Georgia and Ukraine, and unification with Russian-speaking territories, especially Eastern Ukraine and Crimea (Dugin, 2010).

There have been two geopolitical schools in Russia: a synthesis of traditional Western geopolitical concepts and Russian Euroasianism. The second school responded to the need for “fundamental rethinking of the old theoretical synthesis” (Solovyev, 2004, p. 90). In the 1990s, Dugin emerged as the primary theoretician of Euroasianism. Having grown up during the heydays of Soviet power, the 50-year-old Dugin (b. 1962) draws a parallel between geopolitics and Marxism. He maintains that geography and territory play a crucial role in geopolitics in the same way that capital and production are essential components of Marxism:

Marxist analysis is equally important for both the forces of Capital and for the fighters for emancipation of Labour. The same applies to Geopolitics – it teaches large states (imperia) how best to maintain territorial hegemony and to continue to expand. The opponents, however, also find this theory useful for

learning about their self-protection and “national redemption” (1998, p. 7).

Dugin considers geopolitics as a worldview and defines it not as a simple science, but as an interdisciplinary subject/science. Marxism is viewed as an analogy to geopolitics. Dugin interprets world politics referring to the old idea of a principal dualism and confrontation of sea-based and land-based powers (Solovyev, 2004, p. 91). Based on old ideas like these, Dugin sees a conflict between Eurasianism and Atlanticism as an inevitable phenomenon. The ever changing balance of power potentially leads to new confrontations. If we consider geopolitics from Dugin’s point of view, it seems to be a discipline for a privileged group of people (political elites) and has some negative and aggressive overtones. For him, state power is the main focus of geopolitics.

In contrast to Dugin, Nartov expounded a somewhat different view in which geopolitics is a system of knowledge about control over territory (Nartov, 2007, p. 18). Similar to Haushofer, who considers political geography as the basis of geopolitics, Nartov addresses both political geography and geopolitics. He clearly distinguishes between the two by defining political geography as a static science and geopolitics as a dynamic science, a differentiation that goes back to the 1920s (see Haushofer in the previous section). Nartov criticizes Dugin and other Russian geopoliticians for not considering the object of geopolitics. He maintains that “(...) the term geopolitics has already existed for more than hundred years. In intellectual debates on the essence and boundaries of geopolitics as a science, its object has not been singled out.” According to Nartov the object of geopolitics is a certain territory, water (sea and ocean), as well as geopolitical processes and phenomena. Precisely, there is a geopolitical system consisting of the space, geopolitical processes and geopolitical events (Nartov, 2007, p. 19). The term ‘space’ (prostranstvo in Russian) includes territory, water, and air (zemnoe prostranstvo, morskoe prostranstvo, and vozdušnoe prostranstvo). To him the subject of geopolitics is the control over space.

Nartov (2007, p. 18) maintains that the subject of geopolitics undergoes changes, i.e.,

it is dynamic, whereas its object is static. In order to illustrate the dynamic nature of the subject of geopolitics, he elaborates on a set of factors that expand the subject matter of geopolitics. He distinguishes between geographical, informational, technological, and economic factors that broaden the subject of geopolitics. Working in such a complex discipline, geopolitical thinkers analyse the events that reflect interests of individual states and their coalitions on global, regional, sub-regional and intrastate levels. Under the influence of new events, the world changes and these occurrences are, of course, influenced by geographical factors. For instance, due to globalization, the end of the 20th century witnessed many changes around the world. In globalized world, the role of economical factors has increased. Globalization of economic processes leads to the globalization of international trade, flow of capital and funds, and information flows. These processes have a huge influence on all spheres of life, including geopolitics and geopolitical understandings (Nartov, 2007, p. 20).

Geopolitics came to be based not only on geographical factors (space, climate, landscape), but also on disciplines such as history, economics, demography, ethnography, religious studies, environmental studies, as well as military affairs, and ideology.

Taking into consideration the above-mentioned factors, Nartov (2007, p. 20-21) defines geopolitics as follows:

Geopolitics is a field of activity and a science which studies mechanisms and dynamics of the development of political relations between states and regions. Geopolitics studies space, the location of states, as well as the influence of the sea, air, demographical, informational, religious, ethnic, defensive, social economic and other factors.

The definition given by Nartov is broad and quite vague. It encompasses mechanisms and dynamics of political relations between states. Moreover, based on his discourse on factors causing change in the subject of geopolitics, we can say that dynamics and

mechanisms as well as political relations change. Space, location of states and various dynamic factors are crucial in understanding the essence of geopolitics. His definition is influenced by well-established notions of geopolitics previously discussed by classical Western scholars.

### **Similarities and Differences in Understanding Geopolitics**

Our brief analysis has shown that Western geopolitics, which developed much earlier than its Russian counterpart, was for a very long time Eurocentric and imperialistic in tone. Similarly, Russian geopolitics emerged as a response to stereotypes about the confrontation between Russia and “the West”. It has also shown that it is difficult to make differentiations between Western geopolitics on the one hand, and Russian geopolitics on the other. First, there is neither a unified Western nor a homogeneous Russian school of geopolitics. Second, Russian geopoliticians, as well as modern Western geopoliticians, are influenced by the writings of the founding fathers of geopolitical thinking, among which are Mahan’s sea power theory, Mackinder’s heartland theory, Kjellén and Ratzel’s organic state, Haushofer’s transcontinental bloc theory, and Spykman’s rimland theory.

The fact that the Western group of scholars include geopoliticians from different European countries with various perspectives and experience led to various ways of interpreting geopolitical reality. As for the Russian scholars, although they are from the same country, their interpretations are influenced by different scholars. For example, Dugin’s explanation of world politics is based on the idea of a principal dualism and confrontation of sea-based and land-based powers, an idea that was discussed by Mahan (1890) and Mackinder (1904). As for Nartov, his approach is influenced by Haushofer’s differentiation of political geography (a static science) and geopolitics (a dynamic science). What distinguishes Nartov from other geopoliticians, including Dugin, is his detailed discussion of the object (space) and subject (control over this space) of geopolitics as well as factors which influence the subject of geopolitics which is dynamic by definition.

### **Conclusion**

Our brief review of selected definitions of geopolitics by Western and Russian scholars shows that those definitions are often a mixture of objective and subjective arguments and therefore differ depending on the era and the background of the respective authors. Since the development of the concept of geopolitics around 1900, power (influence, politics) and space (territory) have played a crucial role in most definitions of geopolitics. Initially, the definitions of geopolitics included only the state as a powerful entity. Current definitions also look at other actors and phenomena that influence the subject of geopolitics. Russian geopolitical scholars are influenced by different classical scholars. Therefore, it is difficult to look at them as a homogeneous school of thought.

### **Notes**

1. Rudolf Kjellén, *Staten vom Lifsform* (1916). Published in German as *Der Staat als Lebensform* (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1917, pp. 34-35). The quote is a translation from the German version taken from Cohen (2003, p. 11). For a brief discussion of Kjellén’s theory and the missing English translation of his work, see Spang and Milovanovic (2011, pp. 10-12).
2. Haushofer et al., *Bausteine zur Geopolitik* (1928, p. 27). English translation is taken from Cohen (2003, p. 11).
3. Haushofer, *Zeitschrift für Geopolitik*, 1924. This is quoted in English by Crone (1948, p. 104).
4. English translation is taken from Kiss, G. (1942).
5. Refer to Spang and Milovanovic (2011, pp. 12-13) for what territories “heartland” and “world-island” encompass.
6. See Spang and Milovanovic (2011, pp. 8-9) for brief introduction on these distinctions of geopolitics.

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**About the authors:** Shokirjon Mahmadv is currently studying at the Masters Program in International Area Studies at the Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences of the University of Tsukuba, Japan. His major research interests are international relations, national

identity, Russian geopolitics, and contemporary history of Central Asia. Dilroba Arzumetova is a Master student in International Area Studies at the Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences of the University of Tsukuba. Her main research interests are media and politics, geopolitics, conflict management, and peace-building.