Coined in the late 1890s, the term geopolitics has had a controversial scholarly history. The Swedish political geographer, Rudolf Kjellen and other early-20th-century writers such as Friedrich Ratzel considered the geographical foundations of the state and national power with reference to natural resources, population, and geographical location. Like other terms that gain academic and political popularity, a geopolitical way of thinking was judged to be timely in the sense that Europe in particular was undergoing a series of political, economic, and cultural transformations, including regional alliance formations, imperial change, and conflict over trade and resources. Later, geopolitics was implicated with Nazism and became deeply controversial as a consequence of such an association. Notwithstanding the opprobrium, the term proved to be resilient and has even enjoyed a revival in many parts of the world, especially in the post-Cold War era.

Origins of the “Science” of Geopolitics

In the earliest phases of its scholarly history, geopolitics was taken up with great interest in Germany, Italy, Japan, and the United Kingdom. As a portmanteau adjective, geopolitics attracted interest because it hinted at novelty. It was intended to convey an interest in the often unremarked geographical dimensions of states and to posit “laws” in international politics based on a series of geographical facts such as the relationship between land- and sea-based powers. Informed by social Darwinism, the struggle of states and their human creators was emphasized, as was the need to secure the “fittest” states and peoples. According to Ratzel, the state should be conceptualized as a super-organism that existed in a world characterized by struggle and uncertainty. To prosper, let alone survive in these testing circumstances, states needed to acquire territory and resources.

Strikingly, in Germany after World War I, an influential figure, General Karl Haushofer, was pivotal in the creation of a journal of geopolitics in 1924. As a former aide-de-camp to Rudolf Hess and an established expert on Japan, Haushofer became professor of geography at the University of Munich. Like earlier writers such as Ratzel, he believed that German survival, let alone consolidation, in the aftermath of the 1919 Peace Conference would depend on the country understanding the geographical realities of world politics. As a defeated nation, Germany's national boundaries had changed, and empires such as the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman were dismantled. Europe was in a state of flux, and the alleged scientific status of geopolitics was important in establishing intellectual legitimacy and policy relevance in Germany and elsewhere.

For Germany to prosper, Haushofer opined that interwar Germany needed to appreciate five issues: (1)
physical location, (2) resources, (3) territory, (4) morphology, and (5) population. If Germany was, what he termed, a “space-hopping” country rather than “space bound,” then it might be able to capitalize on all available resources and territorial opportunities. He also contended that if the world were organized into a series of pan-regions, then it might be possible for Germany and other states such as the United States and Japan to exercise global leadership. Under his global model, Germany would dominate the Euro-Asian landmass and Africa. He was a keen supporter of the proposed Berlin-Baghdad railway and of German colonies in Africa. As a consequence of his close relationship to Hess, these ideas have been credited with informing Hitler's plans of spatial expansionism in the East and were even seen as contributing to the final solution involving Jews, communists, and others, including the disabled. While Haushofer was fascinated by spatial relationships and Germany's reemergence after World War I, there is neither any evidence that he shared Hitler's hatred of European Jewry nor evidence that he viewed the world as being controlled by an international cabal of Jews and communists. By the late 1930s, Haushofer's influence was on the wane, and he thought the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941 was a geostrategic error. He later committed suicide in 1946, after being sidelined in academic and policy-making terms.

While the relationship between geopolitical thinking and Nazism was never as clear-cut as some may have believed, it did not prevent a new generation of émigré intellectuals such as Hans Weigert, Andreas Dorphalen, and Robert Strausz-Hupe from warning American audiences about the dangers of the “science” of geopolitics. The latter was invested with great scientific potential, and popular magazines such as Reader's Digest warned about the shadowy Institute of Geopolitics at the University of Munich. The truth was less prosaic, and German engagement with geopolitics was, in different ways, being replicated in other countries, including not only fascist Italy but also Portugal and Spain. In each case, geopolitics appears to have been popular because it offered a way of looking at the world that tied a country's destiny to an analysis of resources, territory, and population. Maps, including those found in school textbooks, were important in communicating those ideas to both popular and scholarly audiences.

Germany's and Japan's defeat in 1945 had consequences not only for global geopolitics but also for the academic study of geopolitics itself. One important figure in the case of the latter was Father Edmund Walsh, Jesuit priest and American colonel, who interviewed Haushofer in the aftermath of the conflict. While Walsh was convinced that the German professor and former general should not be tried for war crimes, he described the latter as a “master geopolitician.” Although he did not blame German geopolitics for Hitler's racist and expansionist policies, the “science” of geopolitics was damned in the eyes of many observers. A new generation of American political geographers (and their Soviet counterparts) spurned the term geopolitics and were careful to distinguish their own activities as intellectually objective and less deterministic with regard to the spatial and environmental parameters influencing states. With very few exceptions, the term geopolitics disappeared from the American academic scene and was not revived until the 1970s. Distinguished geographers such as Isaiah Bowman and Richard Hartshorne had warned their colleagues about the poisonous reputation of the subject matter.

One partial exception to this generalization was the geographer Saul Cohen, who for about 40 years has been reminding colleagues of the importance of understanding the changing global political map. Inspired by a Dutch American geographer, Nicholas Spykman, Cohen sought to convey how the onset of the Cold War made it even more important that Americans understood the geographical basis of the
struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union. In his pioneering work, *Geography and Politics in a Divided World*, he explored how the world was composed of a series of shatterbelts and showed how the two superpowers were locked in conflicts over territory, resources, and access. He also emphasized the importance of understanding regional differences and not assuming that the Cold War struggle against communism was occurring against a backdrop of uniform political, economic, and cultural geographical relationships.

**Geopolitical Revival: The Kissinger Factor**

Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, a German-born émigré and intellectual, has been credited withreviving American interest in geopolitics even if his use of the term was more informal than that by academic scholars. In the midst of the Cold War, Kissinger was involved with President Nixon in some highly significant geopolitical maneuvers, including negotiating a more cordial relationship with China and relative détente with the Soviet Union. The United States was also in the process of leaving Vietnam. Kissinger's use of the term *geopolitics* was in part a way of coming to terms with these changes and in part to underscore the significance of global balance and permanent national interests. He was particularly mindful of the Soviet Union's "geopolitical ambitions" and "geopolitical aspirations" with regard to the Euro-Asian landmass. The United States had to maintain its presence in the region and seek to contain its ideological challenger.

Although Kissinger's use of the term *geopolitics* was often vague, it did invoke earlier writers such as Halford Mackinder, a former director of the London School of Economics and Reader in Geography at the University of Oxford, who had drawn attention to the importance of the Euro-Asian landmass (the Heartland, to use his term) before and after World War I. Although not cited by Kissinger, another leading policy figure and intellectual under the Carter administration was informed by Mackinder's legacy. The Polish-born National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, was a keen advocate of geopolitics and wrote about the need to contest Soviet expansionism in the Euro-Asian landmass. After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, this call took on an added sense of urgency as America looked to the anti-Soviet resistance and regional allies such as Pakistan to contest the occupation. Some political analysts assert that American military and financial support throughout the 1980s not only helped defeat the Soviet war machine but also, paradoxically, created the conditions for the al-Qaeda terror network to later rely on the battle-hardened veterans in Afghanistan to carry out deadly attacks from the 1990s onward.

During the last years of the Cold War, some policy intellectuals and academics in the United States came together to establish the Committee on the Present Danger (CPD), which used geopolitics and other academic pursuits to argue that the United States needed to ditch policies such as détente and take up a more aggressive foreign policy committed to achieving victory in this titanic struggle. The Reagan administration epitomized this geopolitical worldview and committed the United States to intervening all over the world, including Central America and the Middle East, in an attempt to secure such a victory. This strategy frequently resulted in American support for dictators such as Saddam Hussein in Iraq and countless military regimes in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The bigger geopolitical picture involved the defeat of the Soviet Union and its allies. In 1989, Eastern European socialist allies such as East Germany and Czechoslovakia folded, and the Cold War was considered terminated. Two years later, the Soviet Union collapsed, and the realist and geopolitical approaches advocated by the CPD appeared triumphant.
Toward a Critical Geopolitics

At the same time that the Cold War was entering a more confrontational phase, a new generation of geographers was preparing the ground for the emergence of a more critical engagement with geopolitics. For some geographers, this meant exploring the peace literature, and for others, it entailed an engagement with world-systems theory and a more politico-economic understanding of global capitalism. During the 1980s, political geography and geopolitics were revived in the universities. While Henry Kissinger had repopularized the term, world events coupled with 40 years of its absence from the political forum made it easier in the English-speaking world for a new generation of scholars to reclaim the term. In other parts of the world, this option was either less straightforward or simply not relevant. In the Soviet Union, for instance, the term *geopolitics* was still considered to be deeply problematic and offensive. While in Latin America, scores of mainly military officers were using geopolitics with little to no apparent concern for its alleged associations with Nazism.

American-based scholars such as Gerard Toal, Simon Dalby, and John Agnew began to reengage with this controversial intellectual train, later to be dubbed critical geopolitics. Rejecting the notion that geopolitics was an objective “science,” they conceptualized geopolitics as a discourse and political practice. In other words, attention was drawn to how geopolitics is performed and the manner in which it constructs representations of the geographies of global politics. If geopolitics is a discourse capable of producing and circulating spatial understandings of world politics, then it is imperative that we consider, so they contended, the consequences of such representations. For one thing, we might explore how certain geographical understandings of Cold War America were critical not only in securing a sense of political identity (as the leader of the free world) but also in justifying a vast investment in military and technological resources (the military-industrial complex).

Since the 1990s, these writers have maintained that geopolitics can be considered to exhibit three forms: (1) a form concerned with academic manifestations of the term, (2) a practical form that involves the policy-orientated geographical templates used by presidents and prime ministers in their policy discourses, and (3) finally a popular geopolitical variety that notes how the media is central in creating and reproducing geographical understandings of local, regional, and global politics. In the case of the latter, recent research has explored how cartoons, television, films, newspapers, and the Internet contribute to the geographical socialization of citizens in the Euro-American world and beyond.

**Conclusion**

Geopolitics has had a varied and at times controversial history. Shunned by some, it has also been embraced by others, especially in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States when pundits and journalists embraced the term. What geopolitics offers to many is a convenient term that seems to promise a rugged respectability and a willingness to ponder the grim realities of world politics. It also frequently attracts commentators anxious to make predictions about the world, usually for the benefit of one country as opposed to others. For critical geopolitical scholars, these kinds of claims need to be scrutinized and challenged, not the least because they neglect the persistent inequalities between the North and the South, the highly gendered geographies of human security, and the environmental consequences of global political and economic patterns.

**See also**

Critical Geopolitics, Haushofer, Karl, Mackinder, Sir Halford, Mahan, Alfred Thayer, Nation, Nationalism, Political Geography, Ratzel, Friedrich, State
Further Readings


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