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Metamorphosis of Geopolitics in the 20th and 21st Centuries

Abstract: The paper first gives an overview of the genesis of the idea and the concept of geopolitics in socio-political theory and through the history of different periods of civilizational change, with a particular emphasis on its formation into a separate scientific discipline, geostrategy and practice. The author's focus of consideration is the trend of its metamorphosis from the 20th century to date: from geopolitics in the service of the imperialist predator practice of conquest, subjugation and national exploitation, through its transformation in the era of neoliberal globalism into geoeconomics, i.e., the struggle for the redistribution of resources (water, oil, gas, nuclear energy, ores – minerals etc.) and, finally, into geoculture in the forms of action of global media and symbolic violence as a hybrid form of warfare in modern times. At the end of the paper, the author points to the current neoconservative politics of Trumpism as protectionist politics and rise of multipolarity forces in the form of the BRICS movement and the project of convergence of different systems in the modern world.

Keywords: geopolitics, geoeconomics, geoenergy, geoculture, metamorphoses

Duty gives birth to new obligations:

It won't allow for evil to triumph.

Honour is a nation's sacred relic:

Let the struggle go on without respite.

Let it be what men thought could never be.

(Petar II Petrović Njegoš)

Everyone wants to rule the world,

and I would like to make it the property

of all humanity with my discoveries.

(Nikola Tesla)

Genesis of the idea and concept of geopolitics and different periods of civilization

The evolution of human consciousness has been described by various authors as ranging from a rhythmic-

mic-cyclical flow to a spiral flow. The path to the rise of a developed scientific consciousness was preceded by forms of mythological and common-sense consciousness in various forms – geom mythology, geopolitics, geohistory, geophilosophy, to the emergence of geopolitics, geoeconomics and geoculture.

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In its search for advanced knowledge about itself and the world, humanity progressed laboriously and slowly, increasing its cognitive power through a series of attempts and errors, rises and falls and renewed rises. This phenomenon of the journey/ascent of the human spirit was depicted a kind of Iliad and Odyssey – from relative to absolute truth – by Helel in his study *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (*Phänomenologie des Geistes*). The great ancient thinker shows the dialectical rise of the human mind through a series of evolutionary and revolutionary forms and changes, while he presents history as a complex process which is manifested alternately in the form of tragedy and in the form of farce (Hegel, 1979, p. 367).^[2] In it, a specific form of cunning of the historical mind takes place, with the power of playing with the destiny of individual nations, civilizations and territories. Hegel also indicated that people often did not distinguish between the apparent and the essential in that complex process, and that is why they belatedly learnt about its true essence. At the same time, he also warns and instructs us about how “the truth is revealed at the end of the road” and that repeaters in history often pay a high price for their bad choices and consequences.

The history of human knowledge, social and political thought, has left us with various traces of

both the Eros of creation and the conflicts and forces of destruction that have accompanied the human race in its ascent through history, space and time, always through the interrelationship of politics and space. They are found in different texts of both religious writers and of poets and philosophers, historians and scholars, from Confucius, through Heraclitus, Homer, Herodotus, Thucydides, to Plato and Aristotle and, later, T. Aquinas, J. Bodin, Ch. Montesquieu, N. Machiavelli and T. Hobbes.

This paper will give a brief overview of the period of the birth and development of geopolitical ideas about the relationship of politics, space and preservation of state sovereignty and the expansion of geostrategic powers. In the pre-modern era of traditional communities, there is a range of these ideas from antiquity to the 19th century. Their common denominator could be summarized under the syntagm of pre-modern ideas and theories of predestination, i.e., the fateful deterministic connection of a state with its geographical location (the location of its geographical territory, soil morphology, climate and water, demographic substrate and other natural resources). Based on these characteristics of the territory and blood, political/military elites (ruling structures) built the geostrategy of the state and its political action in international relations.^[3] Certainly, the choice of the strategy and concept of

[2] Here, Hegel considers the possible development of all forms of consciousness, up to the point when it becomes a reality in itself, i.e., when the spirit knows itself through the mediation of sociality. Hegel's basic thesis is that only through action does man establish unity with the world in which he exists. Therefore, he states: “Action is nothing other than the realization of an inner moral purpose, nothing other than the production of a reality determined by purpose.”

[3] For more details about the development of the idea and concept of geopolitics, see the studies of foreign and domestic authors: Lacoste, 1993; Thual, 1995; Tial, 2007; Panarin, 1996; 2004; Dugin, 2004; Despotović, Jevtović, 2019; Brzeziński, 1997; Vidal, 1999; Vidal, 2004; Nye, 2006; Toffler & Toffler, 1993; 1998; Pavić, 1973; Stepić, 2004; 2016; Petrović Piroćanac, 2004; 2010; Mitrović, 2008; 2014.

warfare always included ideological legitimization. In traditional communities it was often immersed in idealistic, religious and racial “arguments”. The formation of this strategy and concept of warfare in every epoch was affected by the level of the development of weapons technology. However, it was not until the 19th and the 20th centuries that geopolitics saw its university establishment as a separate scientific discipline. First it was done at military academies and then at universities as scientific and educational institutions. From a brief overview of geopolitics in the studies of political science, international relations and within military strategies one can see that they developed primarily in the west of Europe (in Germany, France, England, Sweden) and in the USA, particularly in the era of the rise of imperialist powers and the spread of the practice of colonialism. Although the term *geopolitics* (γῆ, Ancient Greek for Gea (Earth) + πολιτική, Ancient Greek for politics) was first introduced by Swedish Professor Rudolf Kjellén (1864–1922) in his work *The State as a Living Organism* (1916), determining with it the “science of the state as a geographic organism or phenomenon in space”, it should be noted that the term *political geography* was coined by German Professor Friedrich Ratzel (1844–1904) in the eponymous work from 1897.^[4] In his works *Anthropogeographie* (1882), *Politische Geographie* (1897) and *Lebensraum* (1901) Ratzel laid the foundations of geopolitics as a determinist theory about the relationship between politics and space. In fact, this author believes that successful politics relies

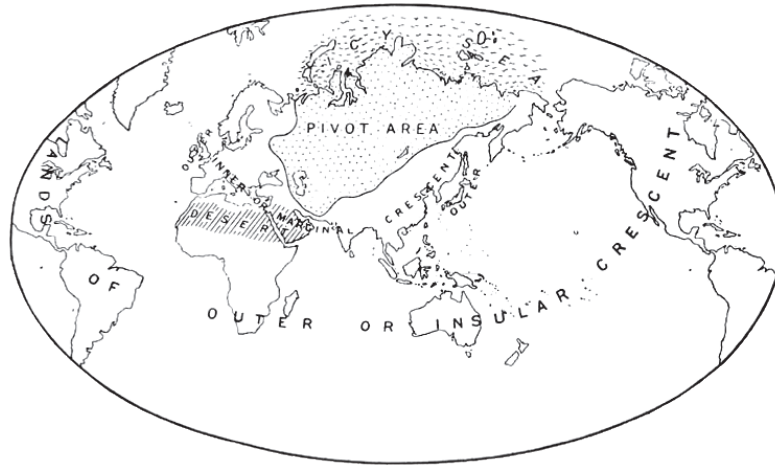
on understanding space as destiny, from which derives the establishment of geostrategy “about the right of the stronger to expand their space at the expense of the weak”, which was openly proposed later by the ideologists of German Nazism, connecting this theory with the socio-Darwinist theory and Hobbes’ theory that “man is a wolf to man”, from which different versions of the racist theory derived. Building on Ratzel’s work, Kjellén established his understanding of the importance of the land base in the space without which no state can exist, emphasizing its aspiration to expand in large territories. In that context, he stressed the necessity of political unification of Central Europe as a counterweight to the USA, England and Russia.

US Navy officer and professor Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840–1914) developed a geopolitical view about the importance of distinguishing and contradicting main naval and continental countries of Eurasia – England and Russia. Starting from the same premises, British geographer Sir Halford John Mackinder (1861–1947) gave advantage to “heartland” – the Eurasian continent in geopolitics, which he expressed in his famous syllogism in 1904: “Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; Who rules the Heartland commands the World Island (Eurasia); Who rules the World Island commands the World!”^[5]

Defining geopolitics as “a science about the dependence of political events on living space”, German general, geographer and sociologist Karl Ernst Haushofer (1869–1946) saw it as an instru-

[4] For more details see: Matic, 1993, pp. 341–345, as well as: Stepić, 2016, pp. 153–273

[5] It is surprising how this geopolitical syllogism was operationalized many years later by Zbigniew Brzezinski in his work *The Grand Chessboard* – as a project of struggle for superiority/domination and hegemony of the USA in the 21st century.



Map of the world showing the regions defined by Halford John Mackinder in his 1904 work "The Geographical Pivot of History"

Photo: Wikipedia

ment of "reviving the German state with the aid of geography", turning it into a mere ideological and propaganda instrument of German national socialism in its aspiration to rule Europe and the world. Here it should be emphasized that this idea was accepted by Adolf Hitler who used it in his book *Mein Kampf* even before coming to power. It is well-known how many victims the world suffered in the Second World War as the price for the achievement of such geopolitics. The highest price of the fascist war in terms of the number of victims was paid by Russians, Jews and Serbs.

II. Metamorphosis of geopolitics in modernity – form and essence

After two world wars caused by Germany's expansionist politics, geopolitics underwent stigmatization and was long discredited as a racist "bourgeois"

science deriving from workshops of ideologists of "blood and soil" who proclaimed the Aryan race as superior to other races and civilizations. For almost 40 years after the Second World War, mankind lived in a bipolar balance between great powers of the East and the West as global actors in the world. Peace was secured through a culture of fear, arms control, and interdependence and responsibility in preserving the world order under the auspices of the UN. This political climate in international relations enabled the competition of great actors, but also of the entire humanity in innovative-developmental terms within the third and fourth scientific-technological revolutions. In the context of civilizational development, geopolitics was suppressed and replaced by *geoeconomics* (liberalization and globalization of the international market, growth and expansion of transnational companies) worldwide. In those terms, detente and great progress were achieved, as well as the affirmation of socio-dem-

ocratic ideals and values in the world in the form of a social welfare state in the West and mono-party socialism in the East, but also the convergence of different models of development, management and preservation of peace in the world. It is the age of relative peace accompanied by local regional wars, but also the period of combating colonialism in the so-called third-world countries and of the expansion of the non-alignment and peaceful coexistence movement. Unfortunately, due to the implosion of socialism at the end of the 1980s and the disappearance of the bipolar order, i.e., its replacement by the unipolar order, the platform of the rise of the forces of neoliberal globalism geopolitics was “revamped” in the form of restoration of capitalism, renewal of imperialism and re-colonization. In that context, the NATO expanded to the East, the international order and world peace were undermined and destroyed under the motto of expanding the ideology of human rights and colonial democracy in new territories, particularly in the countries undergoing post-socialist transition. A key geopolitical change was the fall of the Berlin Wall whose direct and long-lasting consequences are visible even nowadays. geopolitical researchers point out that the biggest direct consequence of the Berlin Wall fall was “the creation of a united German state in the centre of Europe. United Germany immediately began playing the key role on the old continent and assume leadership within the EU institutions, gradually directing it towards the achievement of its own priority interests” (Gajić, 2025, p. 60). Political, military and security changes, along with the destruction of the real socialist bloc, made it possible for the USA to use economic influences and Euro-integrations to bring geopolitically closer

former socialist countries and to spread the NATO eastwards in practice, to the very borders of Russia. The cunning strategic plan concealed the intention to bring these transformed states into the EU overnight, with the task of opposing German hegemony and thus quietly controlling its spreading influence, but also to become a new “sanitary cordon”, thus preventing any future economic closeness between Germany and Russia.



Zbigniew Brzezinski

Photo: Wikipedia

The claws of this predatory-devised deployment of forces by the global West were first shown by the intervention of the NATO alliance against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in spring 1999 without the approval of the UN Security Council. The essence and geostrategic guidelines of this predatory, neo-imperialist geopolitics of the USA and its satellites were presented in Zbigniew Brzezinski's geostrategic study *The Grand Chessboard* (1997), as well as in George Friedman's geopolitical forecasts *The Next 100 Years*

(Brzeziński, 1999). They explained the project of the predatory Odyssey and the NATO: from Serbia and the Balkans – to the Eurasian Balkans, the war in Ukraine and a highly likely long march of the USA to the East (with the aim of disintegrating Russia and subordinating China). Unfortunately, this platform of geostrategic vision and geopolitics of the distribution of world resources began its brutal realization throughout the world. The rise and consolidation of Russia under Putin and of China under Xi Jinping have become a barrier to its realization and are hopefully leading to its collapse. The rise of the forces of the third and fourth technological-development waves, which is associated with the discoveries in the field of information technologies, intellectual capital, symbolic power, communications and *geoculture of development*, was optimistically welcomed by humanity. The Internet as an invention was formerly declared “the person of the year” in the USA, just as in 2025 it was done with artificial intelligence. Sadly, the power of new technologies is largely used nowadays in the sphere of armament, military industry (robots, killer drones) and the strengthening of hybrid warfare in the form of using so-called soft power and symbolic violence, the role of global media in spinning and manipulations, spreading the patterns of controlled colonial democracy. Their role was previously written about by Noam Chomsky in his studies *Hegemony or Survival: America's Quest for Global Dominance* and *Detering Democracy*, by French authors Pierre Bourdieu in *The Mirror of Narcissus* and *Signals of Lights 1* and *2*, and Guy Debord in *The Society of the Spectacle*, by American authors Edward Herman and Robert McChesney in *Global Media*, as well as by Russian author Sergey Kara-Murza in *Mind Manipulations*.

However, it is certain that the future technological, economic and general social development of humanity will increasingly depend on the role of human intellectual and cultural capital and its use in the service of humanity. That capital will be the key element of the development of new production forces of the future and general social progress. Its innovative-creative role in social changes as the elite of the cognitariat is today written about by eminent sociologists and futurologists, such as Alvin Toffler (*The Third Wave*), Jacques Attali (*A Brief History of the Future*), Antonio Negri (*Empire*), Paul Kurtz (*How to Reorder the World*), Edgar Morin (*Global Thinking*), Johan Roos (*Intellectual Capital*), Daniel Goleman (*Social Intelligence* and *A Force for Good*), John Naisbitt (*Megatrends* and *Megatrends 2000*) and Lester Brown (*World Without Borders*). All these outstanding scholars optimistically look at the future in their studies and send us a message in the spirit of megatrends which are shaped by new actors of social change – protagonists of the cognitariat, i.e., intellectual capital, that a new era is coming. In his *Megatrends*, John Naisbitt writes the following: “just as in the past geopolitics and geohistory determined our preset, new megatrends in the future will determine the present and chances for new generations”. In the context of these scientific and futurological prospects, we might wonder whether by the end of the 21st century geopolitics will survive political turbulences of modern humanity. Will geoculture and peace culture in the future win the deterministic power of the geographical position of the state that in the past determined, like fate, the life of the people and the role of the state in international relations? (Naisbitt, 1995). Unfortunately, the revival and spread of American

interventionism in today's world (as proved by the current aggression of the USA and Israel against Iran) primarily indicates that we are entering the age of a long wave of geopolitical chaos and instability with unforeseeable consequences for humanity.

III. Crisis, rise of new global powers and culture of peace

In the first two decades of the 21st century, exactly in terms of liberalization and globalization in the world market and in international relations, a huge financial crisis took place in 2008, but also the accelerat-

ed rise of China, whose economy, technology and comparative competence came to the fore. Its rise has been written about by Zbigniew Brzezinski in his study *Strategic Vision* ("Chinese influence and rise in the world is a reality to which America must adjust"), Arnold Toynbee ("the future unifier of the world will not be a Western or a pro-Western country, but China"), as well as Jeffrey Sachs and Joseph Stiglitz (the story about China is the most successful story about development in the history of the world).

In his world system analysis of international relations, American sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein predicts the collapse of the capitalist system and its replacement by a multipolar socio-democratic



Photo: Freepik

system in the middle of the 21st century. In this respect, there is a large movement growing today – BRICS with a new development philosophy, the project of the just, democratic and multipolar world order in which equality, independence of every nation and country in the modern world will be respected. Chinese President Xi Jinping writes the following about this movement and its platform in the study *On Building a Community with a Shared Future for Humanity* (2023): “We should build the Belt and Road into a road for peace. The ancient silk routes thrived in times of peace, but lost vigour in times of war. The pursuit of the Belt and Road Initiative requires a peaceful and stable environment. We should foster a new type of international relations featuring win-win cooperation; and we should forge partnerships of dialogue with no confrontation and of friendship rather than alliance. All countries should respect each other’s sovereignty, dignity and territorial integrity, each other’s development paths and social systems, and each other’s core interests and major concerns. The Chinese Dream is not only about pursuing strength of the country, rejuvenation of the nation and happiness of the people. It is a dream about peace, development, cooperation and win-win. The Chinese people have always believed that China will only be well when the world is well, and that the world will only be well when China is well” (Jinping, 2024). The essence of multilateralism is not only in the innovative direction of the global concept development but also in the creative transformation of the essence of the exceptional culture of China which is creating a theoretical system rich in thought, deep in connotations and logically rigorous. The core principles distinguished by Chen Bo are as follows: “upholding fairness and justice is the

primary criterion, openness and inclusiveness are essential, adherence to the purposes and principles of the United Nations Charter is the fundamental guideline, practicing extensive consultation, joint contribution, and shared benefits is the necessary path, and keeping pace with the times is an inevitable choice” (Bo, 2025, pp. 10–11).

Today’s crisis of global neoliberal capitalism has revealed deep internal and external roots of the conflict (the growing public debt burden of large countries – the USA, Germany and Japan) and attempts to use war to disguise internal contradictions and redirect to external conflicts with migrants and other countries. In his study *Europe and Global Geopolitical Changes* Siniša Lepojević writes, *inter alia*: “The first two decades of the 21st century brought epochal geopolitical changes, which carry with them historical fractures, and on the historical ruins a completely different and new world will emerge. A new world order is being created in which future generations will live”. He says that in modernity, “unfortunately, everything has become geopolitics, from football and sport, through Eurovision Song, to high-level politics. Nothing has been spared”. In the end, he points out that “geopolitics has become a universal excuse for rescuing something that can no longer be rescued, and that is where all hope is lost” (Lepojević, 2024, p. 41).

Donald Trump has given a cynical excuse that “globalization is guilty of today’s crisis”, and equally cynical was the first move of the Nobel Prize candidate immediately after winning the new mandate to rename the US Department of Defense into the Department of War. In practice, he encouraged the politics of armament and interventionism disguised as the revival of the Monroe Doctrine. The revamping and rise of the forces of globalism (from the NATO’s

intervention in Kosovo and Metohija to the proxy war in Ukraine and the war in the Middle East and in Gaza, with the use of new technologies, e.g., drones and so on) have evidently revealed the predatory imperialist nature of these conflicts. In line with the old saying, “The wolf changes its coat but never its mood.”

After the COVID-19 pandemic, the world seems to be immersed in a new fugue of death: ethnic and military conflicts have been revived, urbanocides and ecocides are rapidly spreading, epidemics, diseases and famine are increasing, the contradiction between the rich north and the south is growing. Modern wars show their real nature just as Bertolt Brecht said: “Wars increase the wealth of the rich and the poverty of the poor”. In his study *War as the US Foreign Policy*, Noam Chomsky analyzed all conflicts after the Second World War and showed that in more than 95% cases Americans were involved either directly or indirectly.

French sociologist Raymond Aron also reveals the predatory essence of war in his study *Peace and War*, pointing to its Machiavellian nature ranging from Clausewitz to modernity: “War is not just the implementation of politics by other means, but also that politics can be that too”. Raymond Aron believes that nowadays humanity is living in the childhood period in terms of the culture of peace and that it will take many centuries and wars before humanity learns its lesson and adopts the Gandhian politics – that peace is development and that politics of non-violence and dialogue is the politics of peace.

Final considerations

Geopolitics as a synthetic science unites the corpuses of modern knowledge that in the era of arti-

ficial intelligence becomes even more available and comprehensible to all nations on the planet. The hypertrophied interests of hegemonic states are thus becoming more accessible and visible, and it can be argued that the world is at a great crossroads – in a mission of achieving peace or on the road towards new wars that will mark the forthcoming epoch. The task of democracy is to permanently tame politics by developing different forms of unity of representative and directive democracy, to control it and harness by the activity of social actors so as to prevent its alienation from the interests of citizens and, just the opposite – to be in the service of their interests and preservation of original national sovereignty. Many critical thinkers have warned about this since antiquity to date. During the golden age of ancient democracy, wise Pericles emphasized that rights belonged to those who are awake, that *democracy was an act of courage* and that it was defended by the polis citizens’ active participation in social life. In the second half of the 20th century, French President de Gaulle warned that “politics must not be left only to politicians” because it might be deformed into a party democracy, i.e., “a democracy without people”. That is why democracy through its different direct forms (local and regional self-government, referendums and other civil society institutions) must be strengthened and constantly kept under the watchful eye of the citizens so as to prevent the emergence of any form of political pathology. The development of participatory democracy and legal state is the best path towards socialization of political power and the conquest of freedom by citizens, promotion of national sovereignty and building a fairer and more progressive society.

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