

Geography, Geopolitics, and Geostrategy

Any study of the influence of geography on politics must begin with the definition of the former. But to define *geography* is both difficult and dangerous. The difficulty lies in the fact that if geography must have explanatory power, it has to allow a degree of variation: a constant reality, such as the geological features of the world, cannot explain the often dramatic changes in foreign policy or in the political fate of states. The danger lies in the fact that unclear definitions of *geography* make it either deterministic or irrelevant.

It is imperative, therefore, to clarify the concepts used and identify the geographic variables. My argument revolves around three concepts: geography, geopolitics, and geostrategy. These concepts are determined by three geographic variables: trade routes, centers of resources, and state borders. The first two affect geopolitics, and the third influences geostrategy.

Three Concepts: Geography, Geopolitics, Geostrategy

States must reflect the underlying geopolitics in their foreign policy or geostrategy. When they fail to do so, the state's political success and even political survival are at risk. Only states that pursue a geostrategy reflective of geopolitics gain and maintain an advantage in their relative power. My argument, therefore, hinges on the relationship between geography, geopolitics, and geostrategy.

Geography is the physical reality, composed of mountains, rivers, seas, wind patterns, and so on. It describes the geological features of the earth, the physical attributes of the land, sea, and air environments.¹ With a few exceptions, such as natural disasters (seismic activities, climatic changes, etc.), which change the geological features of a place,² or dramatic political changes (imperial expansion, boundary adjustments), which alter the geographic setting of a state,³ geography is a constant. Consequently, by itself it is not a useful variable to explain variation in foreign policy.

Geopolitics is the human factor within geography.⁴ It is the geographic distribution of centers of resources and lines of communication, assigning value to locations according to their strategic importance.⁵ The geopolitical situation is the result of the interaction of technology broadly defined and geography, which alters the economic, political, and strategic importance of locations. For instance, new routes are discovered or, literally, carved out in mountains thanks to the development and implementation of new communications technologies. Similarly, differentials in economic growth alter the distribution of power in the world, while the introduction of new production technologies changes the need for natural resources. Geopolitics therefore is not a constant but a variable that describes the changing geographic distribution of routes and of economic and natural resources.

Geostrategy is the geographic direction of a state's foreign policy. More precisely, geostrategy describes where a state concentrates its efforts by projecting military power and directing diplomatic activity. The underlying assumption is that states have limited resources and are unable, even if they are willing, to conduct a *tous azimuths* foreign policy. Instead they must focus politically and militarily on specific areas of the world. Geostrategy describes this foreign-policy thrust of a state and does not deal with motivations or decision-making processes. The geostrategy of a state, therefore, is not necessarily motivated by geographic or geopolitical factors. A state may project power to a location because of ideological reasons, interest groups, or simply the whim of its leader.

One way to conceptualize geography, geopolitics, and geostrategy is by examining their patterns of change. There are three different levels of change, ranging from tectonic (no change) in the case of geography to potentially rapid change in the case of geostrategy. Geographic changes are measured in geological ages of thousands of years, while geostrategic changes are measured in days, months, and years. As mentioned above, geography is by and large constant, with the exception of catastrophic events that are rare and unpredictable. Geopolitics changes with the rise and decline of centers of resources and shifts in routes. It is a change that occurs slowly, often imperceptibly, and usually spans decades and centuries. The late-fifteenth-century discoveries of new routes around Africa, linking Atlantic Europe directly with Asia, are an example of a geopolitical change that over the course of a few decades altered the map of the world. The current economic growth of East Asia, and China in particular, in a few years may represent a geopolitical change of similar proportions.⁶

Finally, geostrategy is the most flexible of the three concepts. It can change quickly, in weeks or months, following bureaucratic processes or changes in

TABLE I
Geography, Geopolitics, and Geostrategy

		Change	
	Level	Type and Cause	Effect
Geography		Tectonic—de facto constant	
Geopolitics	Systemic	Slow—rise and decline of empires; new transportation and production technologies	Changes in strategic value of locations, trade routes
Geostrategy	State	Varied—dependent on situation on state borders	Success—reflective of geopolitics; failure—nonreflective of geopolitics

leadership. For example, the decision of Ming rulers in the mid-fifteenth century to end maritime expeditions to the Indian Ocean and East Africa represents such a dramatic and sudden geostrategic reorientation. Similarly, the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 is another example of a dramatic change in the geographic focus of U.S. foreign policy; a theater that for decades was considered irrelevant by the United States suddenly became the focus of attention.

Geography, geopolitics, and geostrategy constitute in a sense three layers of the international arena that move at different speeds and for different reasons. They are related to, but do not determine, one another. Geostrategy is not a mere reflection of the underlying geopolitics, which in turn is not a copy of geography. Conversely, geography does not determine the geopolitical situation, which in turn does not determine the geostrategies of states. Geopolitics describes the geographic distribution of centers of resources and routes, which, however, is determined by a combination of technology and geography, and not by geography alone. Similarly, geostrategy is an interpretation and a response to geopolitics and is not determined by it.

Because of the different patterns and sources of changes, geography, geopolitics, and geostrategy are not always “aligned.” The study of this “alignment,” and of its importance for the relative power of states, is the crux of my project. In particular, I am interested in the relationship between geopolitics and geostrategy: How can a geostrategy reflect the underlying geopolitics? What are the consequences when it fails to do so?

The challenge for strategists is that geostrategy does not automatically reflect geopolitics. This is made evident especially in moments of great geopolitical changes, when those changes are not followed by appropriate changes in geostrategy. That is, geostrategy often does not adjust to geopolitical change, either because of a leadership failure or because of the location of the state in question.

Statesmen may fail to read geopolitics and geopolitical change correctly and thus do not formulate and implement an appropriate response to changes. The decision of Venetian strategists to expand on the Italian *terraferma* in the fifteenth century and the withdrawal from the sea ordered by Ming emperors roughly in the same period are examples of such failure.

Furthermore, strategists are often hindered by the geographic position of the state. The location of a state, for instance, makes it difficult, if not impossible, to devise a geostrategy that reflects a dramatic geopolitical change. The sixteenth-century reorientation of trade routes following the discovery of America and the Cape of Good Hope passage made the Mediterranean, and Venice in particular, strategically less pivotal. Arguably, there was probably little that Venice could do to change such a situation. Although I do not argue that geography determines the fate of states, it certainly limits their strategic choices and their ability to adapt to a new distribution of power in the world.

When there is a disconnect between the geostrategy of a state and the underlying geopolitics, that state begins its decline. The state loses control over centers of resources and lines of communication and consequently relinquishes much of its influence over other states. This is not unavoidable, for states can and do change their foreign policy to reflect more adequately the geopolitical situation. But as illustrated in the case studies, diplomatic, technological, and bureaucratic challenges often make it difficult to reorient geostrategies.

Geopolitics

Simply stated, geopolitics is the world faced by each state. It is what is “outside” the state, the environment within which, and in response to which, the state must act. More precisely, geopolitics, or the geopolitical reality, is defined by lines of communication and by the disposition of centers of economic and natural resources. These two variables, in turn determined by the interaction of geological features and human actions, create a set of objective and geographically specific constraints to the foreign policy of states. In brief, geopolitics is an objective reality, independent of state wishes and interests, that is determined by routes and centers of resources.

The Objectivity of Geopolitics

The first characteristic of geopolitics is its objectivity. By this I mean that geopolitics, or the geopolitical situation, exists independently of the motivations

and power of states and is not contingent on the perceptions of strategists and politicians.

States cannot alter geopolitics to match their interests, or at best they are very limited in their capacity to do so. A change in geopolitics involves a change in routes or in the location of resources, and a state cannot single-handedly effect such a change. Geopolitical shifts follow changes in production and transportation technology, which occur over the course of decades and are rarely controlled by a single country.

Geopolitics is distinct from and independent of the perceptions of strategists. Such perceptions, and the resulting decisions and actions, do not shape the geopolitical reality but only respond to it. They are interpretations of it. As Harold and Margaret Sprout observed in a paper on the relationship between man and milieu, "The limitations, like opportunities, are latent in the milieu, but inoperative until some decision is taken and implemented. These limits vary from place to place, and from one historical period to another. But limits there indubitably are, limits which will affect the outcome of any course of action undertaken, irrespective of whether or how perceived and reacted to by the actor in question."⁷

It is very difficult to "discover" geopolitics and consequently to formulate the most appropriate geostrategy. The difficulties are twofold. First, there is no perfect geopolitician, someone who can see the geopolitical situation without any other interests or ideas clouding his vision. All these factors mediate between geopolitics and geostrategy.⁸

This is not to say that the perceptions of individual strategists are irrelevant. In fact, such perceptions shape the foreign policy of a state, directing its attention and power toward areas that are deemed strategically important. As Nicholas Spykman observes, "Every Foreign Office, whatever may be the atlas it uses, operates mentally with a different map of the world."⁹ The challenge is that when these mental maps, vitiated by ideological principles, domestic political concerns, or mere incompetence, do not mirror the underlying reality, they lead to a bad foreign policy, projecting power to areas that are perceived as important but are in reality strategically irrelevant. In other words, these subjective maps shape the foreign policy of a state but not the geopolitical reality faced by it.

The second difficulty of reflecting geopolitics in the formulation of geostrategy lies in the nature of geopolitical change. Unlike geography, geopolitics is in constant flux, with some routes becoming more important than others, while old centers of resources are being replaced by new ones.¹⁰ These changes occur at tectonic speeds and are better categorized as long-term trends rather than one-time catastrophic events. As a result, they are extremely difficult to gauge while

happening and become clear only after they have occurred.¹¹ Strategists might be able to determine the principal lines of communication and the regions richest in strategic resources at any given point in time, but concerning the direction of geopolitical changes they are forced to rely at best on forecasts derived from history. For instance, the technological switch from a coal to a diesel engine not only did not happen overnight but also did not bring an immediately corresponding change in the strategic importance of regions rich in coal and oil. It took decades before the Caucasus, the Caspian Sea, and the Middle East supplanted Wales and Silesia, and it can be argued that this switch has never been complete because coal continues to be an important source of energy. The passage from one period to another, from one geopolitical situation to another, is not marked by well-defined moments that unavoidably alter the world; it is often difficult to establish when one ends and the other begins. These periods are visible in a broad historical sweep or in a study of “macrohistory.”¹²

Geopolitics

If it is so difficult to “read” geopolitics, then what is the relevance of studying it? Or, more practically, how can one discover the underlying geopolitics and trace its change? If historians can identify specific periods, for instance, the “Vasco da Gama” era, which led to the rise of the Atlantic and the decline of the Mediterranean, then can a strategist do the same and act upon it? I argue that in order to discover the geopolitical reality it is necessary to look at the location of resources (distribution of power) and the lines of communication linking them.¹³ The configuration of these two variables assigns strategic value to locations, privileging some over others.

LINES OF COMMUNICATION

Lines of communication or routes link states with one another.¹⁴ Relations between states consist of commercial exchanges, military clashes, and information exchanges, all of which flow through well-defined channels determined by geography and technology. Lines of communication in a sense constitute the nerve system of the world, through which international relations occur. Most international exchanges, from the oil trade to information flows, are linked to geography. For example, one-third of total U.S. trade by value with the G-7 countries is sea based. Moreover, global maritime trade is growing at a steady annual rate of 3–4 percent, making sea lanes increasingly important.¹⁵

Furthermore, lines of communication are important because through them states project power and access centers of resources. The bulk of military power is still projected via land or sea, while over the past century the amount of logistical support needed by armies has increased exponentially, increasing further the strategic value of routes.¹⁶ In 1914 an infantry division used about one hundred tons of supplies a day; in 1940 a German armored division needed three hundred tons a day, and just a few years later a similar American division consumed twice as much. Currently estimates range from one thousand to fifteen hundred tons of supplies per day.¹⁷ These supplies are shipped via sea, land, and air routes, underscoring the importance of safe lines of communication.¹⁸

A state that controls lines of communication has full strategic independence. It does not have to rely on the goodwill and protection of other states to access the resources it needs, project power where it wants, and maintain commercial relations with whom it wants. When a state does not have control over the routes linking it with the source of resources and other strategic locations, it falls under the influence of the power in charge of those lines of communication. This is why control of routes has always been an objective of states.¹⁹

An illustrative example of the weakness caused by the lack of control over routes is the Russo-Japanese War, in 1904–5. At the time Russia was locked in a struggle with Japan, which by May 1904 had succeeded in encircling the Russia's farthest Asian outpost, in Port Arthur. In an attempt to lift the siege, Russia hastened reinforcements across her territory, but because the Trans-Siberian Railroad was not yet finished, troops could not be sent in sufficient quantities to repel the Japanese onslaught. Hence the only way of relieving Port Arthur was by sea. Thus Russia sent her Baltic Fleet to the Pacific theater to help the beleaguered army and navy in Korea.²⁰ The twenty-thousand-mile voyage required several coaling and resupplying stops for the ships, and Russia did not control the sea lanes around Africa and was forced to rely on German and French colliers and colonial ports. The Baltic Fleet, therefore, was at the logistical mercy of the German Hamburg-America Line colliers (coaling the Russian ships at neutral ports but outside of the territorial waters) and of the French bases in Africa (Dakar, Gabon, Libreville, Madagascar) and Indochina (Camranh).²¹ While the technically and tactically inferior Russian navy was soundly defeated by the Japanese, the need to use the bases of other powers put Russia at their mercy. Germany and France used this opportunity to pursue their own diplomatic games, aimed mainly at increasing the Anglo-Russian enmity, already made volatile by the Russian threat to India and by an Anglo-Japanese alliance, and at creating some

form of Continental entente with the British power.²² As observers commented after that war, Russia's geography and lack of an adequate network of bases prevented her from being a great power.²³

It is important to clarify that sea lanes are not the only routes that are vital to states. Historically, especially since the sixteenth century, sea lanes have been the principal channels of the world economy because of the relatively small costs of long-haul shipping. Because of the cost-effectiveness of sea shipping, A. T. Mahan could assert that sea powers, those states that controlled sea lanes, were naturally superior to land ones.²⁴ Mahan's point cannot be taken to the extreme, however, because despite the importance of maritime routes, there were and continue to be vital lines of communication on land. The Silk Road, which during the Middle Ages linked Europe with East Asia through Central Asia, is a good historical example of the importance of a continental route. More recently, oil pipelines, railroads, and highways represent important continental routes and must be taken into consideration when examining the geopolitical reality.

Moreover, focusing on sea lanes tends to minimize the importance of controlling lines of communication in general. Most sea lanes are not under the sovereign control of a state, and as a result it has often been assumed that they were free and equally accessible to all states, especially during periods characterized by the maritime hegemony of one power (e.g., Great Britain or the United States). However, maritime powers have the ability to control the sea lanes and to deny or threaten the free passage of ships of other powers. The fact that sea powers tend to exercise such capability of denial only in cases of conflict leaves the illusion of a free maritime space. The current global situation is a good example of a maritime hegemon, the United States, guaranteeing the free flow of goods on the seas. Like past maritime powers, such as Venice or Great Britain, the United States can deny other states access to key sea lanes as well as safeguard a sea lane in case it is threatened by political instability or an enemy.²⁵ Freedom of passage does not mean absence of control.

Finally, the configuration of routes changes on the basis of three variables: the discovery and creation of new routes, changes in transportation technology, and changes in the location of resources. These three variables are analytically distinct but are also intertwined because, for instance, new transportation technologies make possible the discovery of new routes, which in turn can alter the distribution of power in the world. The main point is that routes are determined not only by geography but also by human actions; consequently they are not constant and have shifted throughout history.²⁶

The discovery and creation of new routes lead to the most spectacular and

quick changes in the configuration of routes. Probably the most momentous shift of routes, one that continues to define the modern era, was the late-fifteenth-century discovery of the Atlantic sea lanes connecting western Europe with America and, by circumnavigating Africa, with Asia. Such discovery undermined the importance of land routes crossing Central Asia because it offered a cheaper and, with the rapid technological improvements in shipping, more reliable means of transport.

Although the age of geographic discoveries is over, new routes continue to be established. For instance, the excavation of canals, such as the Panama and Suez canals, can unite bodies of water that otherwise would be separated, altering their importance.²⁷ Similarly, the construction of tunnels or internal waterways extends the transportation system to new locations by shortening shipping routes and decreasing their costs.

Routes can also change through the invention and implementation of new transportation technologies. New technologies make the utilization of new routes possible.²⁸ The invention of the airplane, for instance, heralded the advent of a new medium of transport, establishing previously unknown air routes. But such inventions are akin to geographic discoveries in their momentous implications as well as their rarity. Most often, technological changes affect the configuration of existing routes. For example, the switch from coastal, oar-rigged galleys to ocean-worthy sailing ships in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and, in particular, to coal-fueled vessels in the nineteenth century, with corresponding advances in navigation instruments and skills, changed the logistical requirements of fleets, altering the configuration of maritime routes. Ships no longer had to hug the coast but could hop from port to port along the route, shortening the navigation time and costs. Longer routes, such as those circumnavigating Africa, became feasible and cost effective.²⁹

A similar change in the configuration of routes occurred with the development of railroads in the nineteenth century. Before the advent of railroads in Europe it was cheaper to send goods from northwestern to southern Germany “by ship from the northern ports, through the English Channel, around Gibraltar, through the Dardanelles, and up the Danube to their destination.”³⁰ The undeveloped Continental transportation network gave a strategic advantage to Great Britain, which controlled the sea lanes around Europe and could blockade Continental economic exchanges. In the second half of the nineteenth century the growing rail system shifted internal European trade, in particular German trade, from the sea to the Continent, curtailing British influence over Berlin’s domestic market.³¹

Finally, routes are strategically important insofar as they grant access to

resource-rich regions.³² When a resource-rich area, whether a coal-mining region or an industrial zone, declines in importance, the routes connecting it with the markets and other states become obsolete because there is no need to ship goods from the region or to project power to it. Similarly, the rise of a new resource-rich area leads to the search for new routes. For instance, the collapse of the Soviet Union opened the Caspian Sea region to investment in new oil fields, increasing its oil-producing potential. The post-cold war rediscovery of the strategic importance of this area led to the search for new routes that could guarantee access to it. For the past decade several states, including Russia, the United States, and Turkey, have been engaging in a new “great game,” vying for the construction of pipelines that would give them control over access to the Caspian natural resources.³³ Lines of communication therefore must be adapted to link new centers of resources with the rest of the world because routes that connect two irrelevant regions are themselves irrelevant.

CENTERS OF RESOURCES

The importance of resources for the state has been noted by innumerable theorists.³⁴ Resources are the best proxy for power because not only are they easy to quantify but their abundance correlates with a powerful state. Natural and economic resources fuel a state’s industrial and military capacity and consequently are strategic goods the control over which bestows influence and power.³⁵ Moreover, because they are distributed unevenly, resources make some regions strategically more valuable than others. For instance, thanks to their economic and natural resources, Hong Kong and Kuwait are geopolitically more relevant than Crete or Mongolia. What happens in and to such regions has an impact on the lives of other states, which consequently will pay more attention, militarily or diplomatically, to them.

Niccolò Machiavelli succinctly summed up the importance of resources when he wrote that “it is necessary in the founding of a city to avoid a sterile country. On the contrary, a city should be placed in a region where the fertility of the soil affords the means of becoming great, and of acquiring strength to repel all who might attempt to attack it, or oppose the development of its power.”³⁶ The intuition behind Machiavelli’s statement (shared by other political theorists, from Plato to Morgenthau) is that a state is secure and powerful when it can achieve autarky. As one of the fathers of Realism, Hans Morgenthau, put it, “A country that is self-sufficient, or nearly self-sufficient, has a great advantage over a nation that is not” because it does not depend on the will or power of other states. As an illustration he mentions that during both world wars one of Germany’s main

goals was to destroy British sea power, which threatened to close sea lanes supplying Berlin with foodstuffs.³⁷ It is important not only to own resources but also to have free access to them.

There is a growing debate on the political and economic benefits of exercising direct control over resources, in particular economic ones. While there is no disagreement on the strategic importance of both natural and economic resources, many argue that it is not necessary, and perhaps even not possible, to control directly such resources in order to extract political, economic, and military benefits. The argument is grounded in the belief that an increasingly globalized economy allows states to buy the necessary goods, and consequently free trade decreases the need and the incentive to extend direct political control over them. Moreover, especially with regard to modern industrial capacity, direct (or imperial) control over economic resources does not result in the accumulation of wealth and power. It simply might be impossible to accumulate industrial capacity through conquest because of certain characteristics, such as the geographic dispersion of production and the knowledge-based sector, of the modern global economy.³⁸ Even some Realists argue that military conquest in the modern era no longer brings an accumulation of power.³⁹ As Robert Gilpin writes, "In the modern era, expansion by means of the world market economy and extension of political influence have largely displaced empire and territorial expansion as a means of acquiring wealth."⁴⁰ The goal of modern empires, therefore, is to establish and enforce rules, which in turn create regional or global markets through which resources are obtained.⁴¹

Although important, asking whether conquest is profitable misses the point. The conquest of resources may or may not pay, but the denial of access to them is still a source of power and is still sought by states. That is, a state might be unable to obtain sizeable benefits from owning a resource-rich territory, but by simply preventing other states' access to it, it can exercise enormous political leverage. As Klaus Knorr observes, "Economic power is used coercively by threatening to deny some sort of economic advantage to another state, often but by no means necessarily for the purpose of gaining an economic benefit." He adds that "the ability to shut off valuable markets, to preempt sources of supply, to stop investments, or to reduce economic aid constitutes bases of national economic strength."⁴² The possession of wealth, broadly defined, or the denial of access to it is a source of power when it is used to deliberately change the behavior of others. For example, the U.S. policy of containment, especially in George Kennan's formulation, was based on the premise that resource-rich regions were strategically vital. Kennan argued that if the United States protected the vital power centers from Soviet

aggression, it could not only contain but also defeat Moscow.⁴³ The United States did not have to conquer these centers; it was sufficient to deny them to the Soviet Union. Denial of access to resources can be more powerful than their conquest.

There are two types of resources: natural and economic. Natural resources are goods like timber, coal, oil, or water, to mention those that historically have been the most important. They are the geological wealth that comes with the territory. Economic resources are industrial goods, such as steel, machines, and other manufactured products. They are the wealth that is created by people. Economic resources are not necessarily associated with natural resources. A state with limited natural resources can be an industrial power (e.g., Hong Kong), just as a state rich in natural resources can remain economically underdeveloped (e.g., Iran or Russia).

It is important to distinguish between these two types of resources because they change in different ways. How they change affects how, and how fast, geopolitics changes. The rise and decline in importance of a specific resource, such as oil or coal, alters the value of the regions where that resource is located. For instance, the Persian Gulf region was not always a vital source of natural resources, while Europe's Atlantic states became economically important only in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Changes in the importance of resources have the double effect of altering the strategic value of locations and consequently of the routes connecting them.⁴⁴ A route linking locations that are rich in resources that are not in high demand is strategically irrelevant.

In the case of natural resources, it is relatively easy to explain changes in their geographic distribution but not so easy to predict those changes. They occur because of either discoveries or technological changes. Unlike routes, which by the beginning of the twentieth century had all been mapped, the discovery and exploitation of natural resources continues to be a key source of geopolitical change. The discovery of a new oil field, for instance, can quickly transform an irrelevant region at the margins of geopolitics into an area of utmost strategic importance. The ongoing debate over sovereignty over the Spratly Islands, in the South China Sea, which are reported to have oil, is an example of a geopolitical change that would alter the value of a region.

Improvements in production technologies can also change the geographic distribution of natural resources. Technological inventions, such as the diesel engine, create the demand for new resources and consequently increase interest in the regions rich in those resources. As the economists Eric Jones, Lionel Frost, and Colin White aptly put it, "There are no resources as such, only the possibilities of resources provided by nature in the context of the technology of a given

society at a certain moment in its evolution."⁴⁵ Strategic locations lose their importance because new technologies require new natural resources (e.g., coal, oil, or water).⁴⁶

An example of the impact of technological advances on geopolitics is the introduction of the diesel engine in the nineteenth century. The result was a shift from coal to oil as the principal source of energy. This shift was gradual; only in the second decade of the twentieth century did the adoption of oil-fueled ships make oil an indispensable strategic resource.⁴⁷ By the end of World War I, oil was required to run the military machines of the belligerents.⁴⁸ The geopolitical shift was gradual because coal continued to play an important role in providing energy. It was only after World War II that oil became the strategic resource par excellence. In the United States oil consumption increased gradually until it surpassed the use of coal in 1950.⁴⁹ Great Britain was a bit slower in switching to oil because of heavy government subsidies to the coal industry and a low-wage mining labor force, but in 1971 oil surpassed coal as the main source of energy for the British economy.⁵⁰ As the global consumption of oil steadily surpassed that of coal, new regions of the world became important. The Caspian Sea region at the turn of the century and later the Middle East became strategically more important than the coal-rich Ruhr, Silesia, and Wales.⁵¹

The rise and decline of centers of economic resources is a complex subject that encompasses a vast area of human activity and by necessity spans centuries and introduces multiple causes. To explain these macrotrends in the geographic shifts of power it is sometimes necessary to simplify the causation in history, often reducing it to often a highly abstract concept such as "culture" (e.g., Max Weber's Protestant ethic) or "geography" (e.g., Mackinder or, even more recently, Jared Diamond).⁵² Changes in economic centers are visible only in what the historian Fernand Braudel termed *la longue durée*, that is, a timespan of centuries. As a result, the questions asked are very broad: Why do some regions become more prosperous than others? Why, for instance, did the Atlantic rim of Europe attain higher economic growth than Central Europe starting in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries? Or, a question that has stirred several debates recently, why did Europe develop faster than Asia?⁵³ These questions try to determine the reasons behind a particular geographic distribution of economic power.

The answers to these questions are diverse. They focus either on the conditions that favored economic growth or on the obstacles that hindered it. Broadly speaking, there are four categories of explanations: geographic, cultural, state-centric or institutional, and, for lack of a better term, fatalistic.

The economic growth (or decline) of a region or state is associated with the

presence of certain geographic conditions. For instance, the possession and exploitation of natural resources facilitates growth. The United States, for example, built its industrial base largely on its superior geological endowment.⁵⁴ Conversely, tropical climates accompanied by highly infectious diseases and landlocked locations hinder economic development.⁵⁵

A nation's or region's culture, broadly and often vaguely defined, can be more or less conducive to economic development. For instance, following Weber's argument, some have found the Protestant ethic a source of western European economic growth since the sixteenth century. Along similar lines, some argue that Confucian values, which privilege obedience to a rigid social hierarchy and isolation from the outside world, stifled innovation and commerce, eventually leading to the economic decline of China.⁵⁶

The role of the state, in particular the interaction between state institutions and the market, is the principal factor behind the economic growth of states. A vibrant market develops when states create institutions, or more generally conditions, that allow a middle class to prosper through innovation, production, and commerce. However, when states are overbearing, forcing societies to focus on the interests of the political center, they are unlikely to be economically competitive in the long run.⁵⁷

"Fatalistic" explanations constitute a world-view that tinges the abovementioned explanations more than explanations in and of themselves. They are characterized by a structural fatalism, often leading to a cyclical view of change. A variety of domestic and international structural variables, independent of the actions of individuals, determine the rise and decline of power. On the international level, diffusion of technology, overextension of the state or empire, and the imperial burden of defense are some of the variables adduced to explain growth or decline.⁵⁸ On the domestic level, the internal structure of resource extraction and the moral fabric of society influence the power of the state. These variables carry a certain inevitability that forces states, in particular those that are economically powerful, into a cycle of rise and decline. As a result of such cycles, the geographic locus of power is constantly and inevitably changing.

These four broad categories explaining geographic changes of economic resources are by no means exhaustive. The rise and decline of states and the geographic migration of power have generated prolific studies that often do not fit into one of the above categories. The complexity of the change in the distribution of economic resources is probably best explained by a multicausal argument that can indicate the conditions that favored or hindered economic growth.

It is not my goal, however, to debate the merits of these explanations or to offer

a more comprehensive account of the rise and decline of economic powers. I limit my argument to an acknowledgment of the fact that economic resources shift geographically and that it is very difficult to predict the geographic direction of such shifts. For whatever reason, whether the decline of the national character or the costs of the defense apparatus, the location of the current economic power might be different from that of the past or future. For instance, the core of the world's economic power was located in the Mediterranean region until the fifteenth or sixteenth century, when it shifted toward western or Atlantic Europe. Similarly, over the past half-century East Asia has become an important center of economic power, dramatically altering the distribution of wealth and power in the world. As Jones, Frost, and White observed, "The rise of the Asia Pacific economy is the dominating fact of modern economic geography, the most striking event in the economic history of the late twentieth geography. On the face of things, this is a virtual break in the trends of history—the first achievement of sustained growth by a major cultural area outside Europe or regions of European settlement."⁵⁹

Thus, the geopolitical situation is defined by lines of communication and centers of natural and economic resources. Their geographic distribution determines the strategic importance of regions, the control of which bestows economic power and political leverage. Geopolitics is the map within which states, whether they perceive it correctly or not, act.

While geopolitics is defined by two variables, trade routes and the location of resources, only one of them is necessary to change the geopolitical situation. For instance, a shift in trade routes without a corresponding change in the geographic configuration of resources is enough to create a new geopolitical situation. The state that controlled the old routes loses leverage because of competing lines of communication. But as I pointed out earlier, often such changes are interconnected because, for example, a change in resources also alters trade routes, and vice versa.

There is no clear trend in geopolitical changes. Geopolitically inclined theorists often fall into the trap of wanting to find, and claiming to have found, a discernible direction of geopolitical change. Some have argued that the strategic advantage has been shifting historically from land to sea power. (This is Mahan's overarching argument.) Others have claimed that the locus of power has moved inexorably from east to west or from the heartland to the rimland of Eurasia. I do not see any linear progression of geopolitical change. The development of new communications technologies does not necessarily lead to a greater advantage of sea powers over land powers, or vice versa. Similarly, new production technologies do not progressively favor certain regions over others.

Finally, I want to stress again that geopolitics does not determine foreign policy. Geopolitics simply limits the spectrum of strategic options available to a state. In fact, we cannot predict the course of a state's foreign policy by simply looking at the geopolitical variables of trade routes and centers of resources. The full range of human motivations lies behind foreign policy, and they must be taken into consideration when attempting to determine the direction of a state's geostrategy. This means that often states pursue goals that are not consistent with or informed by the geopolitical reality but are the result of ideological principles, interest-groups pressures, or other variables. In fact, states often ignore geopolitics and do not pursue control of resources and lines of communication, focusing for a variety of reasons on other, less strategic regions. Geopolitics, therefore, does not offer the motivation or the capacity to pursue a geostrategy that can reflect it.

But geopolitics constrains the spectrum of possible geostrategies. Every state, no matter how ideologically motivated, acts within a setting determined by routes and the location of resources. Control over these objectives bestows power, and even if a state is motivated by ideological concerns, it cannot ignore this cold fact. A foreign policy that does not reflect the underlying geopolitics cannot increase or maintain the power of a state.

Geostrategy

If geopolitics is the setting in which states act, what is geostrategy? And more importantly, what is the relation between geostrategy and geopolitics? Geostrategy describes the geographic focus of a state's foreign policy, or where a state directs its power. It is a descriptive and not a normative concept because it does not propose where a state ought to direct its attention and project power.

The main variable influencing geostrategy is state borders. States seek above all else to protect their territory from invasions and attacks, and state borders are a good measure of territorial security. When state borders are threatened or unstable, the state must concentrate its efforts on the preservation of its territorial security and is unable to pursue an effective foreign policy far from its territory. Diplomatic, economic, and military resources must be diverted to the protection of borders, limiting the state's ability to project power to strategically important but distant places.

Territorial security is not the same as security. In fact, because territorial integrity is only one aspect of a state's security, it can be argued that the defense of the security of a state begins far from its borders. For instance, the protection of distant resource-rich regions, such as Europe and the Middle East, or, more

generally, the maintenance of a balance of power in Eurasia, has guaranteed, and continues to guarantee, the economic and political security of the United States. My argument does not contradict this idea but simply stresses the primary security importance of national borders; the protection of trade routes and resource-rich regions is an important source of power and security, but it is useless if it is accomplished at the expense of territorial security. In fact, geographically distant military commitments can deprive a state of the strength necessary to defend its home territory.⁶⁰ Consequently the defense of state borders comes before the pursuit of a geopolitically sound strategy that defends and controls trade routes and centers of resources.⁶¹

The stability and security of state borders are influenced by both geography—differences between land and sea borders and between the characteristics of land borders—and politics—the underlying balance of power.

The most basic differentiation is between land and sea borders. Historically, land borders have been more dangerous than maritime ones. A contiguous land power is more threatening than one separated by sea because a land invasion is operationally easier and hence more likely than an amphibious or airborne one. As a result, “border pressure” is greater on land than on sea. As Harold Sprout observed, “Science and technology have made huge strides toward the conquest of time and space. But it is still axiomatic that sea frontiers can be, and are, defended more securely, with less outlay and effort, than land frontiers. A country thus removed from other centers of military power and ambition enjoys a measure of security and a freedom of action and choice denied to less favored countries with powerful and dangerous neighbors and vulnerable land frontiers.”⁶²

Land borders can be differentiated by their geographic characteristics. Land borders marked by impervious areas such as high mountain ranges or heavily forested areas are difficult to cross and consequently more stable than a plain that is neither forested nor crossed by deep rivers, offering no natural barriers to invasions.

The validity of the differentiation between land and sea borders is difficult to test and is based mostly on an intuitive empirical analysis. But throughout history the success of sea-launched invasions has been mixed at best. For instance, in World War II the Normandy invasion by the Allies was a success, whereas the Nazis had previously failed to even begin a comparable invasion of Great Britain, and their airborne assault on Crete had been so costly that it was never repeated.⁶³

The ambiguous historical record leads some theorists to abandon completely the distinction between sea and land borders and resort to distance as a variable influencing threat or the projection of power. This simplification has some value.

The difference between land and sea borders can be explained in part by using only distance as a variable. A land border corresponds to geographic proximity (and a greater likelihood of instability), while a sea border corresponds to geographic distance (and a greater likelihood of stability).⁶⁴ But such simplification has a limited explanatory power because, as I mentioned above, land borders do not fit neatly into one category (proximity and the resulting instability or a higher level of threat). Despite representing a smaller distance than a body of water, a mountain range might provide more security than a sea. Similarly, at the outset of World War II the English Channel provided greater security to England than the Low Countries did to France even though the distance over the sea was shorter. It is simply difficult to cross a body of water. Hence, the distinction between sea and land borders continues to be an important variable explaining the likelihood of conflict and the direction and outcome of foreign policy.

Geographically similar land borders are not all equally dangerous or stable. In fact, land borders that are easy to cross might be very stable because there is no political reason for them to be a zone of tension. Similarly, apparently impassable borders have served as conduits for invasions. As Spykman observed, "Nature alone has almost nowhere created impassable barriers" that would explain a long period of border stability.⁶⁵

We must consider therefore a complicating factor: the politics between the states separated by the borders. The stability of the borders is a factor of the underlying political relationship between the states in question rather than vice versa.⁶⁶ The more conflictual the relationship, the more unstable the border. For instance, the U.S. home territory has been and is safe not only because it has sea borders but also because it has politically stable relationships with its neighbors and thus secure land borders.⁶⁷ Had its land borders become a source of threat, the United States would have been unable to devote resources, for instance, to the defense of Europe since World War I.⁶⁸

From this categorization it is evident that there is a spectrum of danger to territorial security of which the borders are a manifestation. Such a spectrum, or the situation on the borders, influences the geostrategy of states by prioritizing its objectives. The first priority is the protection of territorial security. If the borders are threatened, the state will have to concentrate its efforts on the preservation of territorial security and limit the pursuit of control over resources and trade routes.

However, it is necessary to nuance this argument. Often, in fact, the protection of territorial security coincides with and does not hinder the pursuit of access to resources and routes. Unstable land borders are not a serious strategic handicap if they lie on the path to resources and routes. That is, if resources and routes are

beyond those borders, their instability conflates the two goals of the state: the protection of its borders and the extension of control over routes and resources. By extending state influence to those resources and routes, the state can at the same time push the dangerous border farther from its territorial core.

The logical consequence of this argument is that a state that has long land borders is not automatically prevented from controlling important routes and resources. Contrary to what Mahan argued, not all trade routes are maritime, and consequently a sea power does not have an automatic advantage over a continental one.⁶⁹ There have been and continue to be strategic routes on land. For instance, the caravan routes through Central Asia, not the sea lanes of the Pacific and Indian oceans, were the main channels of trade between Europe and Asia through the Middle Ages until the seventeenth or eighteenth century. Today, oil pipelines are strategic routes that cross continents and are as important as the sea lanes used by tankers.

Furthermore, Mahan's argument is that the easiest way to reach resource-rich regions is by sea. Again, this depends on the location of the state in relation to the geographic distribution of resources. For instance, for the Ottoman Empire the main center of resources, Europe, was across its land borders along the Danube, not across the Mediterranean Sea. Thus, the Ottoman Empire expanded along two fronts that also coincided with its most problematic land borders: toward the main center of economic resources (Europe) and toward trade routes (along the Danube and in Persia). Similarly, more recently the strategic Persian Gulf region was within continental, not maritime, reach of the Soviet Union. Thus, some states, because of their location relative to resources and routes, do not need to become maritime powers in order to conduct a geostrategy reflective of geopolitics.

Finally, it is important to stress again that stable borders (or the coincidence of land borders and the locale of resources and routes) do not necessarily mean that the state will increase its influence over routes and resources. In other words, the stability of borders (i.e., territorial security) is a necessary but insufficient condition for a foreign policy that pursues the control of routes and resources. It creates the condition, but not the motivation, for expansion. For instance, the fact that the United States has had stable land borders since the early twentieth century has meant that it could, but not necessarily that it would, project its power to protect Europe and control the main sealanes of the world. Theoretically, therefore, a state might be satisfied with its territorial security and choose not to extend its influence and control over strategic regions outside its borders.⁷⁰ There are many reasons why a state does or does not expand, and they are not always based on a sound understanding of geopolitics.