Ernest Wyciszkiewicz
THE IRRESISTIBLE APPEAL OF PLAYING ON A GLOBAL CHESSBOARD

ABSTRACT

International relations suffer from a plethora of pseudo-theoretical approaches. Some of these approaches claim the right not only to explain but also to shape the international reality. These will quite often become instrumental in the legitimization of a given state's policies. Nuances, caveats, and an awareness of limitations give way to simplicity, unambiguity and self-confidence. The aim of this article is to critically deconstruct certain ways of thinking about inter-state relations and international policy that are usually attributed to advocates of geopolitics and naïve realism. What makes vague but attractive geopolitical jargon, belief in determinism, enchantment with maps and admiration for the 'concert of powers' so popular, and what consequences might the adoption of geopolitical assumptions have for contemporary political practice? The popular mono-causal approaches that are full of hasty but firm generalizations about the laws of history have the upper hand over pluralist ones that look for a multitude of usually inconclusive explanations. The reason for this might not simply be analytical laziness; the fact is that the aforementioned popular, simplistic, even trivial observations dressed in quasi-scientific costume serve as a convenient source of legitimacy for revisionist leaders who wish to be seen as defenders of the status quo.

KEYWORDS:
geopolitics, determinism, concert of powers, maps, legitimization

ERNEST WYCISZKIEWICZ
PhD in political science, Director of Mieroszewski Centre for Dialogue, formerly senior research fellow at the Polish Institute of International Affairs. Research interests: foreign policy analysis, the political effects of interdependence, Russian foreign policy, international sanctions, energy policy, energy security, EU-Russian relations.
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7750-6152

> Polish politicians underestimate the power of words as an instrument for political influence. Homegrown 'realists' constantly warn us that only facts matter in politics. But they forget that the origin from which facts appear and grow is always words.1
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> Juliusz Mieroszewski, *Kultura*, no. 10/252, Paris 1968, p. 84

Prisoners of Geography: Ten Maps that Tell You Everything You Need to Know about Global Politics – this international bestseller argues that geographical concerns are the key to understanding the past, the contemporary and the future world, and that conflicts arise mainly from ignoring the laws of geopolitics, which are determined by topography, geology, hydrology, climate, and resource abundance.[2] Here is an example of the author's reflections on Russia. 'Vladimir Putin says he is a religious man [...]. If so, he may well go to bed each night, say his prayers, and ask God: "Why didn't you put any mountains in Ukraine?"'.[3] If there were, the author reasons, the North European Plain would not have invited repeated attacks from Russia. 'As it is, Putin has no choice: he must at least attempt to control the flatlands to the west'.[4] Since the dawn of time, all states, large and small, have had to cope with awkward situations that restrict their freedom to manoeuvre. The land we live on has always shaped us – playing a decisive role in wars, power, politics and social development.

To carelessly follow this line of reasoning – to grasp the essence of international relations – one might conclude that it would be enough to simply consult an atlas or climb to the top of a nearby hill and look around. This peculiar picture of international politics is rather popular. It was not by chance that the aforementioned book became a bestseller in many countries of the world. Why would this be the case? Of course, one might shrug and say it is simply an easy, pleasant read using tired tropes to confirm its readers' common-sense judgements. Yet, an ironic comment is not enough. It would be unwise to play down views that have significant social resonance and thus also a certain level of influence on the elites. It seems more reasonable to consider what makes the school of thought commonly referred to as geopolitics so readily lauded, and, more

1 Juliusz Mieroszewski, 'Kronika angielska', *Kultura*, 10.252 (1968), 84.
2 Tim Marshall, *Prisoners of Geography: Ten Maps that Tell You Everything You Need to Know about Global Politics* (London: Elliott & Thompson, 2015). I will take the liberty to include a comment here from one of the reviewers of the article. Instead of weaving the thought into the main text, I thought that it would be worthwhile to quote it at length as it provides a good illustration of one characteristic geopolitical argument – forming generalizations based on anecdotal evidence: 'The mere uncritical repetition of the theory that a former KGB colonel is a religious person ought to lead us to treat the author's other conclusions with caution, including those based on absolutization of the geopolitical element. The argument about "repeated attacks on Russia" should lead to a similar conclusion (about the need for caution). If their number were compared with the number of Russian aggressions, the picture would be entirely different, and the call to take away the "Smolensk gate" (the strip between the Dvina and Dnieper rivers) from Russia would be, as a justified geopolitical necessity, a natural goal of the politics of the nations threatened by the Kremlin's expansion'.
3 Ibid., p. ix.
4 Ibid.

importantly, what are the practical consequences of adopting geopolitical premises and interpretations of international relations?

As a rule, theoretical considerations expand the cognitive horizon, even when they are ultimately proven wrong. The proposing, challenging and rejecting of a paradigm is always a positive step towards the development of science and the understanding of reality. Most representatives of various schools of thought about international relations are aware of the natural limitations of their models. There are also some, however, who steadfastly claim the right to a universalism clad in catchy maxims, which often also triggers a process of self-fulfilling prophecy.[5] Research hypotheses then become political axioms. To a great extent, this problem concerns what is known as geopolitical thinking.[6]

As far as possible, the starting point for a reliable assessment of any school of thought should be the accuracy of its description. In this case, that means an answer to the question of what geopolitics is and what its characteristics are. Even this first step entails venturing into hazy and muddy territory.

Hans Morgenthau, an important figure of the realist school, in his opus magnum, *Politics among Nations* from 1948, called geopolitics 'pseudo--science erecting the factor of geography into an absolute that is supposed to determine the power, and hence the fate, of nations'. Morgenthau classed geopolitical analysis, along with militarism and nationalism, as 'the single factor fallacy'.[7] In 1954, the American geographer Richard Hartshorne wrote that the origin of geopolitics is steeped in error, exaggeration, and intellectual poison. In his view, thanks to Haushofer, geopolitics supplied a pseudo-scientific rationalization for the Nazi policy of expansion.[8]

Advocates of geopolitics paint a different picture. Colin S. Gray writes:

> The claim that *all* politics is geopolitics, though perhaps perilously imperial, on reflection is little more than a necessary truth [...] *all* international political life is played out on a game board displaying spatial relationships which lend themselves to assertion and argument concerning alleged patterns. [...] *all* political matters occur within a particular geographical context; in short, they have a geopolitical dimension.[9]

5 For more on this phenomenon, see Stefano Guzzini, '"Self-fulfilling geopolitics?" Or: the social production of foreign policy expertise in Europe', *Danish Institute of International Studies Working Paper*, 23 (2003), 4–22.

6 The term 'geopolitics' is often used in literature and journalistic commentary as a synonym of international policy or international relations. This understanding is not the subject of this analysis, for which the starting point is the views of people consciously and intentionally referring to the tradition of geopolitical thought.

7 Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations. The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), p. 116.

8 Richard Hartshorne, 'Political Geography' in *American Geography: Inventory and Prospect*, ed. by Preston E. James, Clarence F. Jones (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1954), pp. 211–14.

9 Colin S. Gray, 'Inescapable Geography', in *Geopolitics, Geography and Strategy*, ed. by Colin S. Gray, Geoffrey Sloan (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 163–64.

The underlined universal quantifiers show that we are dealing with axioms, not research hypotheses.

The Polish author Jacek Bartosiak frames the problem as follows:

> Geopolitics is the everyday reality in which those exercising power in a specific geographical space move. It allows one to more accurately analyse and conceptualize a state's chances for development, evaluate the effectiveness of a system of alliances and be aware of the systemic changes occurring, which are determined by geopolitical phenomena. These conceptual methods form the basis of pursuing policies and international relations among the leadership elites of the main powers. There is therefore no escape from geopolitics if one wishes to survive.[10]

Gerard Toal, a representative of critical geopolitics, refers to a broader concept of geopolitical culture that determines a state's identity and role in the world, formed by its geographical position, historical experience, and state institutions; the character of its social relations and intellectual debates; its dominant ideas about the world; and its preferred methods of conducting foreign policy. According to Toal, a geopolitical culture comprises (1) geopolitical imaginations, i.e., the positioning of one's state in relation to others; (2) geopolitical traditions, encompassing various schools of thought that try to translate imaginations into an ideological and political program by defining such concepts as national interest or identity; (3) geopolitical discourse, meaning the debate going on within three subgenres: (a) formal geopolitics, which seeks to create a coherent model explaining foreign policy and international relations; (b) practical geopolitics, meaning political practice that applies the conclusions resulting from theory; and (c) popular geopolitics, or the narratives and ideas about world politics that are dominant in public opinion and pop culture.[11]

What, then, is geopolitics? Is it an academic discipline (lying somewhere at the intersection of geography, political science, state theory and international relations), a method for analysing international politics, an instrument for major powers to legitimize their foreign policy, an intellectual fashion, or perhaps a pop-culture version of international relations that combines the visions of members of general staff and video gamers? To paraphrase Alexander Wendt, a major figure in social constructivism, 'geopolitics is what we make of it'.[12] Every observer, whether they are

10 Jacek Bartosiak, *Rzeczpospolita między lądem a morzem. O wojnie i pokoju* (Warszawa: Zona Zero, 2018), p. 43.
11 John O'Loughlin, Gerard Toal, and Vladimir Kolossov, 'The Geopolitical Orientations of Ordinary Russians: A Public Opinion Analysis', *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 47.2 (2006), 129–52.
12 Alexander Wendt, 'Anarchy Is What States Make of It. The Social Construction of Power Politics', *International Relations*, 46.2 (1992), 391–425.

well-disposed or critical towards geopolitics, will outline their own definition which they then praise, condemn or downplay. Of course, this is the irresistible appeal of vague concepts and notions that are difficult to define and thus to prove false. If something cannot be subjected to a falsification test, then essentially it should be sent to the dustbin of science; however, unfortunately, that will not stop it becoming popular. How, for example, can one use academic arguments to disprove an attractive literary theory about the eternal conflict between Sea and Land built on a Manichean vision of the world and the forces governing it?

The aforementioned ways of looking at geopolitics need not be treated as distinct or competing. Sometimes they complement each other. Indeed, an intellectual fashion, which by definition is transient, usually has no scientific value, but it may be useful for politicians as a means of gaining support. Geopolitics that is based on motifs from pop culture may provide an attractive tool for persuasion.[13] The specific geopolitical jargon creates a sense of both accessibility and exclusivity, which makes it useful for rationalizing political actions. Moreover, the popularity of geopolitical thinking tends to grow at moments of palpable anxiety or intensity, where it directs people towards easy explanations and recipes.[14] It is therefore no surprise that popular geopolitics has gained traction in an era which has seen a dramatic increase in China's international aspirations.

To be recognized as a science, however, geopolitics must meet criteria that distinguish it from common knowledge. The starting point should be the principle of the rational recognition of convictions, which states that the degree of conviction with which a given view (theory or claim) is declared should correspond to the degree of its justification.[15] Otherwise, there is a risk of either surrendering to dogmatism or to extreme scepticism. Working hypotheses should therefore not be presented as mature theories (or worse, axioms) – just as well-founded views should not be reduced to the role of preliminary hypotheses. Caution and prudence are important, particularly in fields in which the impossibility of performing experiments makes it hard to replicate research results.[16] Postulates should derive from clear premises and should be subject to constant critical

13 An entire trend within so-called critical geopolitics that has appeared in recent years deals with 'popular geopolitics' among both elites and the people, examining the perception of international relations in popular culture in its various forms (film, comics, literature, and games).

14 On the explosion of interest in geopolitics after the turning point of 1989/1991 in Central and Eastern Europe, see Stefano Guzzini: 'Which puzzle? An expected return of geopolitical thought in Europe?', in *Return of Geopolitics in Europe*, ed. by Stefano Guzzini (Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 9–17.

15 'The rational approach towards the claims we accept demands that the firmness with which we state them, a firmness that can be measured by the size of the risk we are willing to accept regarding these claims, be proportional to the degree of their justification. That is, that the stricter and less forgiving the tests to which we subject a given claim and before which it stands, the more firmly we may accept it', Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz, *Język i poznanie*, 2 vols (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1965), ii (1965), p. 269.

16 In the words of the philosopher of science Karl Popper, 'non-reproducible single occurrences are of no significance to science', *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London–New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 66.

analysis and questioned so that they do not succumb to the appeal of common-sense metaphors proffered as the laws of science (might is always right, international politics is a great game, etc.).

However, criticism should always retain a level of moderation and caution. Critics who judge geopolitics in the absence of a coherent definition also run the risk of hasty generalizations with their use of the straw-man fallacy. In other words, they hold themselves aloft and attack a figure that they have themselves created. It is always problematic to assess an entire school of thinking. This usually involves deconstruction and reconstruction in a way that suits the critic, be that through literature review and the careful selection of quotations from major figures and commentators or from an individual angle. The former method offers certain opportunities to capture the essence of the problem, but the latter usually ends up contesting views that are twisted in such a way as to reinforce the scholar's polemical discourse. One example might be the introduction to this article, which is deliberately tinged with irony to direct the reader's attention in the desired direction. Let me repeat, however, that following this path is taking the intellectual easy way out. After all, the point is not to chastise for errors and distortions of entire schools of thought about the world, which are by definition diverse yet also full of banalities, internal contradictions and fascinating observations; it is to point to the cognitive and practical dilemmas that emerge when certain attributes of international relations are accepted as always true (i.e., independent variables).

The aim of this article is therefore not to criticize geopolitics as such but to undertake a critical deconstruction of certain ways of thinking about inter-state relations and international politics that are usually attributed to advocates of geopolitics but in reality are far more widespread. To satisfy the demands of the genre, however, I offer a brief outline of the development of geopolitical thought as seen through the eyes of its representatives and critics.[17] Geopolitics has historically taken various forms, which is worth bearing in mind when moving forwards with this analysis.

[17] This description is of course highly abbreviated, and I therefore suggest reading ones that are more exhaustive. An excellent reconstruction of geopolitical thought was given in Polish literature by Piotr Eberhardt, who devoted a separate article to each of the important figures of the movement in *Przegląd Geograficzny*. The analyses are rich in quotations from the works of major contributors to geopolitics. As a rule, these are rather kind to the writers of this school of thought, but they are also conducted in a critical, non-apologetic spirit. Together with the collection *Studia and geopolityką XX wieku* and the source texts, these articles form the basis of the author's discussion in this subchapter. 'Poglądy antropogeograficzne i geopolityczne Friedricha Ratzla', *Przegląd Geograficzny*, 87.2 (2012), 199–224; 'Podstawy teoretyczne i ideowe geopolityki według Rudolfa Kjelléna', *Przegląd Geograficzny*, 84.2 (2012), 313–32; 'Koncepcje geopolityczne Karla Haushofera', *Przegląd Geograficzny*, 81.4 (2009), 527–49; 'Koncepcja Heartlandu Halforda Mackindera', *Przegląd Geograficzny*, 83.2 (2011), 251–66.

OUTLINE OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF GEOPOLITICAL THOUGHT

Modern advocates of geopolitics tend to cite several key figures, including Friedrich Ratzel, Rudolf Kjellén, Halford Mackinder, Nicholas Spykman and Karl Haushofer. They were all united by 'geographical determinism, social Darwinism and a belief that the struggle for existence and the advantages between competing states is the engine of growth and an inescapable necessity'.[18] The success of Darwin's theory of natural selection at the turn of the twentieth century led many humanists to apply its conclusions to the social sciences. Geopolitical reflections grew from a biological-mechanistic interpretation of the world that was imposed on the international system. These reflections fell on fertile ground in places where an apotheosis of military power appeared, national egotisms flourished, and rivalry for and over colonies took place.

The German geographer Friedrich Ratzel – a firm Darwinist – saw social phenomena as being the outcome of geographical factors. He developed the concept of the state as an organism and introduced the term 'living space' or *Lebensraum*, which was deemed essential for any state struggling to survive in a time of ruthless conditions. He argued that the disappearance of nations or states was due to the laws of natural selection, i.e., how successful one is compared to another in terms of their ability to adapt to changing conditions. Ratzel's geopolitical visions were in tune with his support for Germany's claim to be an imperial power and were used to legitimize expansionist foreign policy. This geographer's predictions were therefore mixed up with the desires of a political activist, who expected the imminent emergence of two global powers: Germany and the United States. Ratzel developed a system of metaphors that fetishized space, seeing the world of inanimate and animate nature as closely linked to the social world. He compared the expansion of states to a flood, during which it was natural and inevitable for the swelling water to inundate lower-lying areas. In Ratzel's eyes, a state's power and survival were inexorably connected with larger entities absorbing smaller, less developed geopolitical units. Moreover, for him, the struggle for space was the driving force of humanity's development, and fluid borders simply reflected civilizational advancement. The views he promoted provided an ideal instrument to legitimize the elimination of states and nations as a process allegedly in accordance with the requirements of nature and science.

Rudolf Kjellén, who popularized the term 'geopolitics', saw it as 'the science which conceives of the state as a geographical organism or

18 *Studia nad geopolityką XX wieku*, ed. by Piotr Eberhardt, Series: Prace geograficzne (Warszawa: PAN, Instytut Geografii i Przestrzennego Zagospodarowania, 2013), p. 10.

as a phenomenon in space'. This Swedish scholar expanded Ratzel's ideas of state-organisms functioning in specific territories based on the law of the biological struggle for survival.[19] Kjellén used a simple analogy between the state and the human being. States, he said, had their own needs, were born, grew and died, while constantly competing for survival, dependent in particular on their location and natural conditions. Only major powers were to have a say in international politics. Other countries were patronage-seeking clients, important only as an element in the game of the great nations in the process of ensuring balance. Possessing a large territory with significant material and human resources was the foundation of the imperial powers that usually comprised the centre and periphery and which competed for buffer areas which – to use contemporary military terminology – were to be a permanent theatre of war. 'The day of small nations has long passed away. The day of Empires has come', as Kjellén wrote.[20]

Condemned for collaborating with and being an inspiration for Hitler, the German general and geographer Karl Haushofer was an important figure for the tradition of geopolitical thinking as he combined Darwinist theorizing with a political program. Haushofer called for a new world order to be built around extensive political units (pan-regions) at the cost of small and medium-sized states. He saw the absorption of smaller organisms as a natural and desirable process. He also extolled nations constituting pan-regions, especially Germany, which were to bring civilization to primitive peoples that naturally depended on them and needed help (the Slavic nations among others). Geopolitics as understood by Haushofer was a moral duty to the homeland; it offered scientific justification for the policy of consolidation of German power, which was in need of additional space to ensure its survival.

Haushofer also expanded upon the idea of eternal competition for world domination between continental and maritime powers, between 'land' and 'sea'. As Piotr Eberhardt put it: 'continental civilization, characterized by its close attachment to the land, mysticism and egalitarianism, is able to defeat maritime civilization, in which the only value is pragmatism and money'.[21] This division – elegant in its simplicity and weak in nuance – which led Haushofer to a rather convoluted theory of the geopolitical unity of the area between the Carpathians and Manchuria, has its staunch supporters even today.

19 A good indication of Kjellén's approach is provided by the very title of his classic work *The State as a Life-Form*, published in 1916, which began the development of geopolitics, tellingly dubbed the 'catechism of geopolitical knowledge'.

20 An argument formulated by the British politician Joseph Chamberlain in Birmingham in 1904 and borrowed by Kjellén in many of his works.

21 Eberhardt, 'Koncepcje geopolityczne Karla Haushofera', p. 534.

In the English-speaking world, the main role in shaping geopolitical thought was played by Halford Mackinder, the British author of perhaps the most popular geopolitical 'law': 'Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland: Who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island: Who rules the World-Island commands the World'.[22] Geopolitics in its Anglo-Saxon form abandoned biological metaphors and no longer focused on what states needed to stay alive, instead seeking patterns at the level of the international system. It suffices to look at the Mackinderian world, which consisted of the 'World-Island' (Europe, Asia and Africa combined) and its core area ('the Heartland'), including Russia and Central Asia, the inner crescent (Germany, Turkey, India and China, among others), and the outer crescent (Great Britain, southern Africa), with islands scattered around the 'Great Ocean' (North and South America, Japan). The 'World Island' was a theatre for the struggle of civilizations and was decisive for global fortunes. At this point, the language of geopolitics is drawing from Mackinder's mechanistic vision of international politics constricted around an axis, pivot or core – all metaphors which aspire to the role of fundamental analytical categories.

Mackinder anticipated the emergence of a continental power that, after capturing the Heartland, would seek to bring the inner crescent under control and reach the world ocean to achieve global hegemony over all continents. Painting the history of humanity (the conquests, invasions, rises and falls of empires) in broad brushstrokes, he considered the aforementioned hypothesis as self-evident and requiring no proof. As Eberhardt notes, Mackinder 'was convinced that this was an absolute truth confirmed by history and geography. This dogmatic and deterministic approach runs through his reasoning and his ultimate conclusions. Mackinder formulated a geopolitical doctrine that, despite its arbitrariness and subjectivity, was accepted by many geographers who had high regard for its originality and uniqueness. It was adopted and used in actual political actions, despite being an essentially abstract concept that was the product of a brilliant imagination rather than rational substantiation'.[23] Although Mackinder's views were strongly criticized by the academic community, this British strategist still managed to create a vision that was attractive enough for popular recipients and for the world of politics and that even today continues to be reproduced by both experts and politicians. It seems irrelevant, therefore, that Mackinder's theory cannot be falsified; it is sufficient that it offers a useful and colourful rationale for policies. As befitting of a geopolitical thinker, the American strategist Nicholas

22 Halford John Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality. A Study in the Politics of Reconstruction* (Washington: National Defence University Press, 1942), p. 106.
23 Eberhardt, 'Koncepcja Heartlandu', pp. 211–62.

Spykman highlighted the importance of power and imperial inclinations as being the main driving forces of great powers. He proposed the concept of Rimland (a rival to Mackinder's Heartland), i.e., the frontiers of Eurasia, as the fundamental object of confrontation for world dominion. The strategic importance of the core/heart/pivot was shifted to the periphery. Spykman emphasized the importance of geographical factors without questioning the significance of others, although he made them dependent on location and military capacities. He wrote his main work during the Second World War[24] (he died in 1943), which undoubtedly affected his fatalistic view of the international system, his profound lack of faith in institutions and his perception of war as an almost natural state. Spykman accentuated the need to search for balance between powers as the fundamental means of stabilizing the international system. The concept of defence of the Eurasian fringes against the Soviet Union became a part of America's containment strategy during the Cold War (how much actual influence Spykman's ideas had on decision makers remains a matter of dispute).

In the American approach, later developed by such strategists as Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski, geopolitics moves away from mysticism and earth-bound organic metaphors. In effect, it becomes the manifestation of a superpower's perception of international reality. The sinister term *Geopolitik* (although restored to grace in the 1970s), in fact began to refer more to 'great power politics', which was realism in a somewhat simplified version that could more easily be politically operationalized.

Kissinger and Brzezinski reintroduced certain elements of geopolitical jargon, seeing them as a useful tool for rationalizing various actions: from justifying US policy in Vietnam (a response to the domino theory), via the détente process (ensuring the geostrategic balance), to proxy wars (seeking control over buffer zones). Above all, for Kissinger, geopolitics meant aiming for systemic balance in the spirit of the Vienna concert of powers[25]; for Brzezinski, it was a 'great game on the global chessboard' in the Mackinderian spirit of competition for the Heartland.

The collapse of the Soviet empire, the fall of communist ideology and the pace of transformations in the world contributed to increased interest in geopolitical thinking.[26] Uncertainty about the consequences of the collapse of the USSR and the growing complexity of the international system made analyses compiled from geopolitical components increasingly popular. The discourse on oil and natural gas resources in the Caspian Sea basin was seen to be in the spirit of the new 'great game', for

24 Nicholas J. Spykman, *America's Strategy in World Politics: The United States and the Balance of Power* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1942).
25 Collin S. Gray, Geoffrey Sloan, *Geopolitics, Geography and Strategy* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 1.
26 *Return of Geopolitics in Europe*, ed. by Stefano Guzzini (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

example. A similar process is now taking place on the back of the increasing popularity of views about already perceptible or imminent 'tectonic shocks', 'the geopolitical reconfiguration of powers', or the inevitability of the Thucydides Trap concerning escalating US-Chinese rivalry. The high degree of uncertainty accompanying the international situation today has led many observers to cite the supposedly invariable laws of geopolitics once again as determinants for the future course of events.

However, the popularity of referencing geopolitical jargon, with its captivating simplicity, leads to the reinforcement of a rather peculiar approach both to analysis of international relations and to the formulation of practical conclusions. In particular, it is worthwhile to reflect on the consequences of overemphasizing the map as well as the use of geopolitical metaphors for forming a specific, strictly hierarchical image of the world in which only a few have agency and responsibility rests on history.

'JUST LOOK AT THE MAP...'

The above phrase appears in international commentary quite often, serving as the final and indisputable explanation for various phenomena. The authors using it are not necessarily proponents of geopolitics, yet they unwittingly reach for methods of analysis developed in the field, eschewing nuances and context in favour of rather abstract but visually attractive explanations.

Space and its representation in the form of a map are, of course, important for the analysis of international politics but only as one of many explanatory tools and strongly dependent on the socio-political context. Yet, there is no end to the love the 'geopolitical' commentator has for maps. This is, of course, not surprising, as the groundwork for this school of thought was laid by geographers. In his article 'Inescapable geography', the important geopolitical researcher Colin S. Gray notes: 'The principal tool of geopolitics is the political map, and its methodological approach consists in the examination of its characteristics with a view to understanding the phenomena which it reveals and the processes which have produced its morphology'.[27] a geophysical map offers a sense of permanence to the structures that are decisive for periodical fluctuations on the political map. Rivers, seas, lowlands, highlands, and mountains are the most important elements of the theatre of war, which, according to geopolitical thinkers, is played out incessantly in various forms. Peace, after all, is just a dream from which the powers occasionally awaken the world.

27 Gray, Sloan, *Geopolitics*, p. 165.

Mackinder, Spykman and their contemporary followers, such as George Friedman and Robert Kaplan, tirelessly treat maps as a source of knowledge about reality. Yet a map proves nothing on its own. One merely has to look at the Mercator projection, which was born out of navigational needs and leads to major deformations the further one gets from the equator. A map is never an objective reflection of reality; especially a political map, which is a projection of the authors' ideas and knowledge about political divisions at a given historical moment. The first decades of the Cold War, for example, saw an increase in the popularity of maps depicting the world from the perspective of the North Pole; these were used by American strategists to make the threat caused by the geographical proximity of the Soviet Union – which is hard to visualize using traditional maps showing the USA as an island surrounded by oceans – more visible to the public. Today, meanwhile, China's increasing importance is moving the centre of gravity of popular maps to the Pacific Ocean. A map, then, is simply one of the methods of expressing analytical judgements or political aspirations. It is an extremely evocative and very powerful means, thus it is a convenient starting point for conducting a superficial geopolitical analysis.

Apart from its evocativeness, of course, a map also carries operational--strategic value in the military sense of the word. Foreign policy in the 'geopolitical world' concentrates on the question of war, almost in the spirit of the recommendations of Machiavelli, who thought that 'a prince ought to have no other aim or thought, nor select anything else for his study, than war and its rules and discipline; for this is the sole art that belongs to him who rules [...]'.[28] The natural consequence of this approach is the use of language and metaphors that refer to the topography of the battlefield. Yves Lacoste, the French representative of geopolitical thought, noted that geography speaks above all to military strategists and planners, who – as a rule by sheer inertia – interpret the political environment from the perspective of bygone or past wars.[29] In its extreme version, this premise goes: 'the life of a state is governed by the law of force, just as the law of gravity governs physical bodies'.[30]

In the late 1940s, Hans Morgenthau, a key figure for realism in international relations, criticized the tendency to view international politics solely in military terms, arguing that sometimes the proverbial big stick is better left at home as it might get in the way of political goals.[31] He considered the identification of foreign policy strategy with military aims, which was quite characteristic of geopolitics at the time, to be erroneous. Raymond

28 Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. by William K. Marriott, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1232/1232-h/1232-h.htm> [accessed 17 January 2022].
29 Yves Lacoste, *La géographie, ça sert, d'abord, à faire la guerre* (Paris: La Découverte, 2012).
30 Bartosiak, *Rzeczpospolita między lądem a morzem*, pp. 35–36.
31 Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, p. 121.

Aron, meanwhile, warned against the reductionism of turning Clausewitz's theory about 'war as a continuation of politics by other means' (meaning an instrument subordinated to politics) into the conviction that 'peace is a continuation of war by other means'.[32] He noted that the adage 'if you want peace, prepare for war' is only apt in a situation in which the strategist thinks first about the conditions of peace, and only then concentrates on military planning. To do otherwise would be to put the cart before the horse. Here we see an important difference between various forms of realism, which are far from supporting militarism in foreign policy, and geopolitics, which sees military capabilities as a fundamental tool of geostrategy and foreign policy.

A map appeals to staff officers, as it is essential for planning and the effective execution of topography-dependent manoeuvres. From a military perspective, maps and wars complement each other. During the Vietnam War, when commenting on American bombing raids, Lacoste wrote:

> It is important that we gain (or regain) an awareness of the fact that the map, perhaps the central referent of geography, is, and has been, fundamentally an instrument of power. A map is an abstraction from concrete reality which was designed and motivated by practical (political and military) concerns; it is a way of representing space which facilitates its domination and control. [...] it actually transposes a little-known piece of concrete reality into an abstraction which serves the practical interests of the State machine.[33]

Although this may appear to be a trivial observation, it is still worth citing in view of the fascination with maps as a supposedly objective tool that can be to explain international politics.

In addition to the book *Prisoners of Geography*, which was mentioned in the introduction, another book published in the past decade by the American author Robert Kaplan places the map as its central character to demonstrate what maps reveal about forthcoming conflicts. Kaplan claims that without maps world politics cannot be understood, that 'geography is the backdrop to human history itself', 'at root, realism is about the recognition of the most blunt, uncomfortable, and deterministic of truths: those of geography', and 'a state's position on the map is the first thing that defines it, more than its governing philosophy even'.[34] He quotes Mackinder, who argued that one glance at a map was enough to convey 'a whole series of generalizations'.[35]

32 Raymond Aron, 'Reason, Passion, and Power in the Thought of Clausewitz', *Social Research*, 39.4 (1972), 599–621.
33 Yves Lacoste, 'An Illustration of Geographical Warfare: Bombing the Dikes on the Red River, North Vietnam', *Antipode*, 5 (1973), 1–13.
34 Robert Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography. What the Map Tells Us about Coming Conflicts and the Battle against Fate* (New York: Random House, 2012), pp. 27–28.
35 Ibid., p. 28.

For a map supposedly strips the world of its apparent equality, recalling its natural inequalities that lead to conflicts.

Let us take a look at the history of Central Europe from the perspective of Kaplan's map and his undisguised fascination with Mackinder. In Kaplan's view, Central Europe's geographical position made it into something of a tragic land, non-existent, in fact, on the geopolitical map, characterized by the 'fatal geographical flaw' (Mackinder) of being located in the 'crush zone' between maritime Europe and continental Eurasia. The agency secured by Central Europe is little more than a brief respite from geopolitics.[36]

This brings to mind another key figure in academic geopolitics, Saul Bernard Cohen, who claimed that the border between West and East Germany established after the Second World War was in fact natural as it corresponded to one of the oldest historical borders, separating the Frankish and Slavonic tribes.[37] This view was also prefaced with the Mackinderian conviction that West Germany was a reflection of 'maritime Europe', and East Germany of 'the Continent'. The division of Germany was thus seen as a geopolitical and strategic necessity since it stabilized the eternal struggle between Sea and Land. In fact, this line of reasoning came from an error of retrospective determinism. Since Germany had been divided, this meant that there must be profound geopolitical reasons, and it was therefore sufficient to move backwards methodically to discover the true source of the current situation. What happened had to happen. The seeds of division sown for almost a millennium had borne fruit in the guise of the post-Yalta division of Germany.

Echoing Metternich's view of Italy from the mid-nineteenth century, Cohen wrote that Central Europe was simply a 'geopolitical expression without geopolitical content', arguing that the unification of Germany would not lead to the rebirth of Europe as an entity but would only usher in a new rivalry over it.[38]

Kaplan was aware of the risk of exaggerating the importance of geography, couching his conclusions with such warnings as 'geography, history, and ethnic characteristics influence but do not *determine* future events'.[39] Very often, however, popular geopolitical literature repeats such caveats solely in order to reject the anticipated stigmatizing accusations of determinism, despite at the same time giving credence to the geographical logic of history. Taking the example of Kaplan again, in spite of said caveats he also writes: 'You do not have to be a geographical determinist to realize that geography is vitally important. The more we remain preoccupied with

36 Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography*, p. 9.
37 Saul Bernard Cohen, *Geography and Politics in a World Divided* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 79–83.
38 Ibid., p. 222.
39 Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography*, p. 36 (emphasis in the original).

current events, the more that individuals and their choices matter; but the more we look out over the span of the centuries, the more that geography plays a role'.[40] Geographical determinism, deriving from a profound fascination with the map, is a constitutive feature of geopolitical thinking, whose denial is in effect tantamount to rejection of this school of thought.

BRIDGES, GATEWAYS, PIVOTS

In geopolitical writings, fascination with maps comes with references to numerous spatial metaphors as analytical categories. The most common of these include the bridge, pivot, gateway, buffer, crush zone, core, and tectonic shifts. These very general terms defy precise definition and lead to confusion, but they also embellish geopolitical interpretations. Here is an example: Regarding Ukraine after the Russian aggression in 2014, the aforementioned representative of academic geopolitics Saul Bernard Cohen advised:

> A far better solution would be for Ukraine to remain unified, serving as a bridge between the two geostrategic realms. This would require a guarantee from Europe and the United States that there would be no further attempts to include the Ukraine within the EU and NATO. In addition, establishment of a federal structure of government would provide the Russian-speaking region with linguistic autonomy. Were such a Ukraine to have access to a customs-free agreement with Russia and a trade partnership with the EU, the interests of the country would be best served. This would enable it to become a gateway between the heartlandic and maritime realms.[41]

This extract displays several characteristics of geopolitical orthodoxy. First, the belief in meta-laws that provides states with the best possible strategies for survival: Ukraine does not exist here as an entity with agency but solely as a geopolitical unit situated 'in between' that must choose a strategy resulting from this position in its own well-understood interest. Second, there is a penchant for figurative spatial metaphors, which are supposed to explain something but in fact only create confusion. Apparently, Ukraine should serve as a 'bridge' and a 'gateway' at the same time. One can, of course, conclude that Cohen was thinking of a bridge as a passage from one shore to another. Yet, more likely, it is simply a lack of discipline in the use of concepts, which is quite characteristic of analyses that are overly rich in metaphors. Finally, this quotation is a good illustration of the trap of theory-based reasoning: the need to fit an actual situation to

40 Ibid., p. xix.
41 Saul Bernard Cohen, *Geopolitics: Geography of International Relations* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), pp. 253–54.

a theoretical model that results in factual errors caused by an attempt to save the hypothesis; for example, the idea of a traditional deep division of Ukraine into two hostile camps, deliberately stoked by the West and Russia.[42]

Geopolitical preoccupation with space is illustrated well by passages from Jacek Bartosiak's book *Rzeczpospolita między lądem a morzem* [The Commonwealth of Poland between Land and Sea]: 'Space – the main protagonist of geopolitical stories told from the perspective of the geopolitical suspension between Land and Sea powers. This extremely demanding position represents the primary geopolitical feature of the entire Baltic-Black Sea bridge, culminating in an overwhelming pressure from external forces on Poland. This bridge is a "grey area" on the geopolitical crossroads of important places in Eurasia'. Further on comes a reference to the idea of *Lebensraum*: 'From the perspective of power relations, he who does not have space does not have power. In other words, to give up space and its use is to give up life'. Furthermore, 'geography determines the distribution of power and gives advantages to specific places and regions compared to others'. 'Other variables followed the climate: the arrangement of seas and the coastline, the location of islands, length of rivers and their navigability, the relief and shape of continents, in part serve to explain laws of history and inflection points in the course of world history (in the language of geopolitics – pivotal). In geopolitics, therefore, pivotal places are decisive for the balance of power or lack thereof'. Rather trivial questions are thus elevated to the status of historical laws, which testifies to the determinism inherent in (yet denied by) geopolitical thinking. The simple claim that geographical factors have always had an impact on states' actions (military strategies, alliances, conflicts, trade) is self-evident. No international relations school of thought disregards geography, yet only geopolitics seeks to turn it into the main driving force. As a result, geopolitical analyses are ahistorical, almost entirely lacking any political, social, economic or cultural context of a given era.

In geopolitics, to use Marxist terminology, states are only the superstructures, as determined by the base, which is not the total of the factors of production but geopolitical properties shaped by geography. States are seen as geopolitical entities affected by practically unchanging geographical circumstances and are therefore forced to pursue interests dictated by those circumstances(if they are to survive). A separate geopolitical conceptual apparatus has thus developed that is rich in axes, pivots, cores and shatterbelts – very vivid categories that appeal to the spatial imagination yet are essentially

[42] Cohen introduced the notion of the 'shatterbelt' to the geopolitical debate, meaning lands that lie on the borderlands of regions and are the subject of continual rivalry between powers. He included Ukraine among them, which influenced his analysis of the situation and his recommendations.

undefinable, allowing the semantic scope to be sketched at one's discretion. A reliance on ephemeral concepts has deepened the chasm separating geopolitics from the most important research program in international relations and foreign policy. Pushed into the margins, geopolitics began to seek legitimization through increased verbal proximity to realism, especially by underlining the importance of power and rivalry for hegemony as an independent variable. Essentially, what this amounts to is an alliance between geopolitics and naive realism that is useful in seeking social resonance among a broad audience who prefer colourful stories to solid, often ambiguous analyses.

INTERNATIONAL CONCERTS

Mechanistic and spatial metaphors and a preoccupation with maps would be just a journalistic curiosity were it not for the practical consequences of adopting this perspective for analysis and policy-making. The mechanisms for explaining relations between the states cited here serve, in essence, to protect a specific status quo. They create the belief that certain forms of relations between states are natural, and thus opposition to them is irrational. Certain properties of international reality are said to have remained unchanged for centuries; phenomena that break away from the entrenched image are seen as merely temporary aberrations. This allegedly indisputable state of affairs is the strictly hierarchical structure of the international system. The conviction persists – common also to some schools of realism – that international relations should be viewed exclusively from the perspective of the great powers' struggle for hegemony based on the distribution of power within the system. In such an order, the interests of all other entities are just derivatives of the plans and actions of more powerful actors. A model interpretation looks like this: the primary objective is a stable international system, the prerequisite of which is a strategic balance between responsible powers whose task is to discipline other actors when their actions threaten to upset this balance. Taking the specific nomenclature out of this language, we are left with a picture of powers concerned with maintaining and consolidating their privileged position in the international system, a cause very much furthered by the supposedly objective geopolitical description of the world. In this perspective, the 'concert of powers' constitutes a natural modus operandi and an optimal method of stabilizing the international system. This view makes sense when expressed by politicians of states with aspirations to be great powers (or those experiencing post-imperial trauma), as it offers

an excellent tool to legitimize their policies. However, it becomes problematic when it is portrayed as a meta-principle of international relations.

This vision of a world controlled by concerts/directorates is attractive because of the popularity of the perception of diplomacy as a game played out behind closed doors among just a few leaders of great powers. It echoes the era of traditional empires, the last act of which was the collapse of the USSR. As a rule, the system that emerged after the Congress of Vienna serves as an unrivalled model for an optimal method of managing world affairs. Occasionally, the Yalta Conference is cited – mainly by Russian politicians and experts[43] – which symbolizes the aspirations of the US, the UK and the USSR to decide on the fate of other smaller states and nations. Both approaches stem from the erroneous belief that decisions dictated by a specific political and strategic context can be treated as universal solutions. The changes that have taken place in international relations since the days of behind-closed-doors diplomacy in the nineteenth century leave such ambitions detached from modern realities.

Additionally, these systemic generalizations stem from a very modest data sample. To notice the superficial roots from which the idea of the great powers' battle for domination stem, one merely has to recall the political landscape of the post-Westphalian Europe of the seventeenth or eighteenth century, with a Germany fragmented into dozens of states and cities, dynastic wars, and a scarcely nascent concept of sovereignty. It was not until the nineteenth century that the consolidation of nation-states in the continent and competition for colonies put this issue into the mainstream of political and then academic discussions. It was then that the tendency to assign universal value to the characteristics of that specific era arose.

The concert of powers established at the Congress of Vienna was therefore a political answer to the consequences of the Napoleonic Wars, which were clad in the quasi-religious guise of a Holy Alliance for a purpose of legitimization. Austria, Russia, Prussia and Great Britain saw this – and the principle of the balance of power upon which it was based – above all as a tool for looking after long-term interests and buying time for reconstruction after the conflict. This meant a kind of 'freezing' of the political context. At the level of inter-power relations, the Vienna system endured without too much upheaval up to the Crimean War, but it was at breaking point owing to simmering internal and international tensions. Nevertheless, even today, many continue to cite it as a model. Perhaps one of its leading advocates was Henry Kissinger, who, incidentally, devoted

43 Fyodor Lukyanov, 'What the World Needs is "19th-Century Behavior"', *Russia in Global Affairs* <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/what-the-world-needs-is-19th-century-behavior/> [accessed 22 March 2014]; Sergei Karaganov, 'Russia's Victory and a New Concert of Nations', *Russia in Global Affairs* <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/russias-victory-and-a-new-concert-of-nations/> [accessed 31 March 2017].

his doctorate – completed before he began to work for the government – to the diplomacy of this period.[44]

In the twentieth century, the idea of the concert of powers began to be transformed from an instrument for regulating the relations between the states of Europe states into a supposedly scientifically valid model solution. Advocates of geopolitics played a significant role in this process, as we saw when discussing their views. The Yalta pact and the Cold War helped to reinforce this conviction, which essentially served to legitimize the position of the largest actors. Being for only two voices, this was a different sort of concert – with two scores and untuned instruments – that did not have the flexibility inherent in a multilateral system; however, the performers preserved a unique status quo and sought to prevent 'mutual assured destruction', while at the same time competing through proxy wars. The price for stability at the macro level (preventing nuclear war) was dozens of conflicts – between states and within them – in various parts of the world. Yet over time, this system also failed to withstand exposure to an increasingly complex international reality, the appearance of new state actors, the increasing emancipatory aspirations of the communist satellites, and internal tensions within the Soviet empire.

The view of international policy as absolutely subordinate to the ambitions of great powers can be discerned in many arguments that continue to surface today: be it the need for a new grand bargain, or a new architecture of global security – to be determined, it is assumed, by states that see themselves as regulators of the international order. Such a vision, however, is difficult to reconcile with decades-long processes of democratization of the international system and an increased influence of medium and small states, greater significance of international law and institutions, and the role of non-state actors (corporations, NGOs, terrorist organizations), social media, financial markets or identity disputes. The major powers continue to flex their muscles, despite having much less room for manoeuvre.

Even within the consensus-based European Union, the larger member states often demonstrate, with varying degrees of subtlety, their desire to steer the community, whether this is by shaping treaties in the right way or by ignoring inconvenient procedures. Yet, the possibilities of achieving quasi-imperial aspirations today are incomparably smaller than they were in the nineteenth century, owing to the complex network of political, economic and social interdependencies as well as the dense system of legal and procedural restrictions that apply. Therefore, some want to and indeed can do more than others can, but usually not as much as they would

44 Henry Kissinger, *a World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh and the Problems of Peace*, 1812–22 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1957).

like to, and they certainly need to put much more effort into selling their ideas than was previously the case.

Geopolitical thinkers steer well clear of the problem of the growing complexity of the international system, treating all these variables as the results of the great powers' battle for domination. Yet even adopting such a problematic premise demands constant attention to ever-evolving circumstances. The current growth in China's power, after all, is taking place in different conditions than was the case of the rise of Great Britain, the United States or the Soviet Union. One should therefore be cautious with analyses and forecasts drawn from the reservoir of historical analogies, especially those suggesting the existence of enduring models of the actions of states in what may only seem to be a similar situation. Would Metternich or Bismarck, often held up as models of diplomatic realism, today be guided by similar motivations and look for similar recipes to the challenges they faced? Rather than from a belief in the laws of history, their craft resulted from the ability to exploit the conditions of the time in order to pursue effective foreign policies.

In this light, therefore, the 'concert of powers' can hardly be seen as the overriding rule regulating international relations; rather, it is an instrument in the pursuit of political objectives by states that hold an advantage over others at any given historical moment. Thinking in geopolitical terms is therefore understandable among American, Russian, French and Chinese commentators (frequently involved in promoting the interests of their states), as it gives the appearance of a panoramic view to a rather narrow viewpoint. It also offers supposedly objective arguments for talks with other actors to make them accept this 'natural state of affairs'. This approach, however, is contrary to a fundamental characteristic of every social system: change, which occurs at various speeds, with varying intensiveness, but incessantly. While the debate over the evolution of the role of the state and non-state actors, globalization, interdependence, international law, and international organizations might therefore be unending, it would be difficult to debunk the general idea of the increasing complexity of the international system. This conclusion, however, demonstrates that recipes from a century or several decades ago should be subject to continual critical analysis and adaptation to changing conditions.

The important consequences of attaching excessive weight to historical laws and placing faith in the impersonal forces that determine global politics were discussed by Isaiah Berlin in his essay *Historical Inevitability*. He pointed to the risk of eliminating individual responsibility for any action that would be seen to have been following the rhythm of history. Referring to the logic of history gives political leaders the opportunity to legitimize their actions while reducing personal risk, since historical forces are not brought before a tribunal. Indeed, it would be hard to find a better

way of rationalizing expansion or aggression. Taking away responsibility for their deeds may encourage states to violate custom and the law in the name of historically justified interests. It might also lead to fatalistic attitudes among weaker countries out of a sense of their inability to shape policy independently. Such states are left to struggle between the role of a satellite orbiting around the 'core' and a victim of the 'crush zone'.

One illustration of this abdication of responsibility is the debate on the causes and culprits of Russian aggression against Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea. At the time, President Putin referred to being forced into reacting to alleged attempts by the West to encircle Russia.[45] Interestingly, he was not short of supporters in the West for this point of view, headed by the well-known theoretician John Mearsheimer, who blamed NATO for the crisis.[46] What both men had in common was their faith in determinism, but with one difference: for Putin, as head of state, determinism served as a convenient instrument to legitimize his actions; on the other hand, for the academic Mearsheimer it served as the legitimization of a research approach that had lost salience after the end of the Cold War.

Additionally, the passage from the book *Prisoners of Geography* cited at the beginning of this article cast Putin as a helpless executor of the will of higher forces, which might lead to the conclusion that the takeover of Crimea was inevitable. Following this line of thought, Russia has never been aggressive towards its neighbours of its own accord; it simply creates the impression among those who do not understand that it must act in this way to survive. This interpretation is very reminiscent of Stalin's argument from the late 1940s, which used an excuse of self-defence to rationalize the USSR's aggression against Poland of 17 September 1939. In this understanding of reality, there are no perpetrators or victims, only correct or false geopolitical instincts.

CONCLUSIONS – REFLECTIONS ON THE UTILITY OF THEORY

Appreciating the political significance of space need not mean succumbing to determinism; acknowledging conflict as the driving force of international relations need not mean disregarding institutions of cooperation and integration; and recognizing powers as the main actors need not mean overlooking the importance of secondary and tertiary ones. Classical geopolitics and popular realism reduce the political reality to a handful of truisms ('large ones

45 President of Russia, Address by President of the Russian Federation, the Kremlin, Moscow, 18 March 2014 <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603> [accessed 18 December 2021].
46 John Mearsheimer, 'Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin', *Foreign Affairs*, 93.5 (2014), 77–89.

can, small ones must'), which are then enveloped in a network of colourful but unclear metaphors lacking descriptive, explanatory and predictive value.

In a cognitive sense, Geopolitics is simply a certain interpretation of the world that is rooted in an organic theory of the state and a tradition of strategic thinking of the world as a theatre of war, treated as a constitutive element of the international system. State policy thus essentially oscillates between preparations for war, waging war and gathering strength afterwards. Yet this is just one of many possible interpretations, and it is a marginal one in the most important international debates. Every social theory, in a certain sense, strives for universalism while being just a story about the world at a specific historical moment. However, there are theories that have more precisely expressed premises, better-defined concepts, and carefully caveated conclusions; and there are theories that construct a picture of the world formed from dogmas rather than observations, based on ambiguities and malleable but empty metaphors. Geopolitics and naive realism are in the latter category.

As a rule, however, when making reference to any theory, a certain caution is required in order to avoid twisting an auxiliary tool into dogma. Reasoning through the prism of a theory is the result of excessive attachment to a single approach, an attempt to find the one key to reality.

In his essay *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, Isaiah Berlin cites a passage from a work by the Greek poet Archilochus to create a parabola showing two model types of mentality. The titular hedgehogs have the tendency to reduce things to one central, organizing idea, seeking to create around it as coherent a system as possible that is capable of explaining a wide range of phenomena. They are characterized by an attachment to one intellectual tradition and high self-confidence, often leading to dogmatism and a disregard for the natural limits of the applicability of any theory. In political science, something resembling a system of beliefs emerges that is equipped with its own criteria of evaluation, useful historical analogies, its own pantheon of heroes and villains, which essentially serve to confirm their belief in the supremacy of the guiding principle. This is a kind of escape into simplicity from the complexity of social systems.

On the other side are foxes, which aim for multiple goals via various paths without choosing one, invariable, all-encompassing perspective. They profess research pluralism and accept uncertainty and complexity. Rejecting reductionism, they assume that reality is caused by the incessant interaction of many different factors and forces whose importance varies over time, with a degree of luck added in. Foxes are uncertain and sceptical, but they retain cognitive flexibility unless they fall into the trap of another kind of dogmatism: the belief that, essentially, you cannot reduce

social processes to patterns – they are simply the fruit of chance. This is, in turn, an intellectual resignation from trying to understand complex reality.

A continuum stretches between the two approaches, with numerous schools of thought and scholars in between that incorporate characteristics of both in different proportions. Therefore, rather than evaluating certain intellectual trends which are by definition impermanent and temporary, it seems more worthwhile to analyse the assumptions underlying certain approaches to the world and international politics, in particular paying attention to the need to beware of dogmatism, reductionism, and belief in historical laws. Rather than searching for universal truths, it is worth focusing on a more practical and definitely more achievable objective: to reflect on why, in specific historical, political and cultural circumstances, a certain way of thinking about international politics becomes popular. The response will often say much more about the condition of society and its elites than it will about the essence of relations between states.

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