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Formal Geopolitics and the Indo-Pacific: the Revival of Classical Theories

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Summary

This paper explores the resurgence of classical geopolitics in analyzing the Indo-Pacific amid the context of US-China rivalry. With its roots in German and Anglo-Saxon traditions, classical geopolitics remains central to contemporary formal discourses shaping the Indo-Pacific as a site of conflict. Despite critiques from critical geopolitics, realist frameworks and balance-of-power narratives continue to dominate, influenced by the historical legacy of classical geopolitical thinkers. This study examines the implications of this revival for the study of Asian regional space and highlights the need for critical engagement to uncover the power dynamics embedded in Indo-Pacific scholarship.

Keywords: *Indo-Pacific, US-China Rivalry, Geopolitics, Balance-of-Power, Classical Theories*

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The concept of *geopolitics* has re-emerged as a pivotal framework for understanding contemporary global power dynamics, particularly within the context of the intensifying rivalry between the United States (US) and China (Sciutto, 2024). This competition, often theorized as anchored within the Indo-Pacific region, raises questions about the construction of the Indo-Pacific as a site of conflict and the historical roots and evolution of geopolitics as an explanatory model. The Indo-Pacific, defined by the merging of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, first gained prominence in the early 2000s with Shinzo Abe's notable "Confluence of the Two Seas" speech. Its strategic significance was further reinforced in 2018 with the renaming of the US Pacific Command to the Indo-Pacific Command (Abe, 2007). To better understand the implications of this geopolitical framework for the study of the Indo-Pacific, or Asian regional space, it is essential to explore how geopolitics has historically shaped the study geographical space. This commentary provides a brief overview of classical geopolitics, examines its relevance to the study of the Indo-Pacific, and concludes with reflections on the theoretical implications of the Indo-Pacific's emergence as an analytical category.

German geopolitics: state, space, and sovereignty

The origins of geopolitics as an intellectual tradition can be traced to late 19th-century German geography. Friedrich Ratzel, a foundational figure in this tradition, was among the first to investigate the relationship between states and geography. Drawing inspiration from Darwin's theory of survival of the fittest, Ratzel proposed the "organic theory of the state," which argued that thriving states require sufficient *Lebensraum* (living space) to meet their needs, most often at the expense of weaker states (Ratzel, 1897). Rudolf Kjellen, a student of Ratzel, further developed this concept in 1899, thereby coining the term *geopolitics*. Kjellen's work linked geography to the exercise of state power emphasizing the interdependence of state and society (Kjellén, 1899). German geopolitics also highlighted the provisional nature of borders, stressing fluctuating over static definitions of sovereignty.

Anglo-Saxon geopolitics: history, technology, and power

In contrast to the state-centric approach of German geopolitics, Anglo-Saxon geopolitical thought focused on historical patterns and the role of technology in shaping international relations (IR). Thinkers like Alfred Thayer Mahan and Halford Mackinder highlighted the strategic significance of geographical features in the context of warfare—Mahan highlighting sea power and steamships, while Mackinder underscored railroads and land power (Mackinder, 1904; Mahan, 1987).

Legacies of classical geopolitics

Both schools of thought viewed geography as an active force in shaping politics, where landscapes and seascapes exert power over human affairs. Despite their differences, there were points of convergence between the German and Anglo-Saxon traditions, facilitated by scholars such as Ellen Churchill Semple, who translated Ratzel's ideas to the American context (Semple, 1911). Collectively, these contributions laid the foundation for what is now referred to as traditional *or classical geopolitics*.

However, geopolitics and the above-mentioned ideas fell out of favor after World War II due to their association with Nazi ideologies (Dittmer & Sharp, 2014). While some scholars, like Colin Gray, continued to draw on classical geopolitical ideas, the field largely moved away from the unacceptable legacies of geopolitics toward political geography (Gray, 2004).

Critical geopolitics: challenging classical paradigms

The 1980s and 1990s witnessed the emergence of critical geopolitics, a field that questioned the foundational assumptions of classical geopolitics, such as the "territorial trap" (Agnew, 1994). Influenced by the cultural turn in geography and international relations and earlier critical works (e.g., Said, 1979), critical geopolitics investigated the discursive construction of geographical knowledge. Instead of treating geography as an objective reality, it examined how representations of space and place were diffused and used to justify policy. Critical geopolitics posited that the world is shaped by discourses that render it intelligible to policymakers and the public (Ó Tuathail, 1996). For instance, representations of a binary world divided between land and sea powers can be instrumentalized to rationalize strategies of containment. By unpacking these assumptions, critical geopolitics seeks to reveal the power dynamics and inequalities embedded in such narratives. This critical approach also emphasized the spatialization of politics, challenging traditional state-centric models by exploring the politics unfolding beyond the boundaries of the state system.

Formal geopolitics and the revival of classical theories

A leader of critical geopolitics, Gearóid Ó Tuathail has identified three key forms of geopolitical discourse within this framework (Ó Tuathail, 1996): (1) Formal Geopolitics, produced by academics and think tanks, these discourses shape and are shaped by other sites of knowledge production. (2) Practical Geopolitics, articulated by policymakers, military officials, and state actors, these narratives

often draw on formal geopolitics to inform decision-making. (3) Popular Geopolitics, disseminated through media and cultural representations, these discourses contribute to the common-sense understanding of geopolitics. In the case of the Indo-Pacific, an investigation of the theories and assumptions mobilized by formal geopolitical discourses is particularly relevant, as its emergence has primarily unfolded as a top-down phenomenon. In fact, this process has been heavily popularized through think tank research following its early policy manifestations.

US-China rivalry and impact for the study of Asian regional space

Despite the substantial body of critical theories on geopolitics and international relations that has emerged over the past several decades, conceptualizations of the Indo-Pacific have largely been shaped by the dominance of classical geopolitical and IR theories (Doyle & Rumley, 2019). This predominance can be attributed to a broader revival of classical geopolitical thought, particularly in the realm of what Ó Tuathail identifies as formal geopolitics. This revival has been significantly influenced by the framing of the Indo-Pacific within the context of the intensifying geopolitical competition commonly referred to as the “US-China rivalry.” The latter has become the primary lens through which the emergence of the Indo-Pacific as an analytical category is understood. These analyses often define the Indo-Pacific as a novel site of global conflict for control over seascapes which leave the production of knowledge on the Indo-Pacific largely unquestioned (Rossiter & Cannon, 2020).

In that regard, the study of the Indo-Pacific, is characterized by the proliferation of other novel conceptualizations such as that of the “New Cold War” (Woodward, 2017); and return of classical geopolitical reading grids (Khurana, 2019). This trend underscores the enduring influence of geopolitical thought in shaping realist contemporary understandings of international relations (Wu, 2018). Given that the Indo-Pacific’s intellectual origins are rooted in the work of classical geopolitical thinker Karl Haushofer (Li, 2022), its emergence as a spatial category will have significant implications for Asian regionalism and the study of Asian regional space in the future.

What happened to critical approaches in the study of the Indo-Pacific?

Despite sustained critiques of the epistemological limitations of classical and realist approaches to the production of space, the dominance of classical geopolitics in the recently emerging Indo-Pacific scholarship remains largely unchallenged (Dirlik, 2021). On a theoretical level, the solidification of

classical readings of the Indo-Pacific raises important questions: Why has classical geopolitics regained prominence, and what are its implications for the study of the Indo-Pacific?

This dominance can be attributed to several factors. First, the intellectual history of the term stems directly from the work of Karl Haushofer, a classical geopolitical thinker, student of Ratzel often associated with Nazi ideology. Haushofer's ideas on the Indo-Pacific emerged at the intersection of German spatial theories and pan-Asianist ideas. Concerned about Germany's landlocked geography, he conceptualized the Indo-Pacific as a strategic solution to overcome this limitation (Li, 2022).

Second, through its usage, the conceptualization of the Indo-Pacific has been profoundly shaped by the discourse of US-China competition, which has predominantly been analyzed through balance-of-power frameworks (Fong, 2024). This framing, which securitizes the "rise of China" as a threat to the American unipolar order, entails significant implications for the study of the Indo-Pacific (Kassab, 2023). In fact, some have denounced its instrumentalization as a political loaded construct to balance against China, therefore, for proposing a Western-centric regional project exclusive of China and detrimental to Southeast Asia (Alatas, 2021).

Finally, paradoxically, broader debates in critical IR scholarship may have partly contributed to this revival of classical geopolitics. Howell and Richter-Montpetit, for example, argue that "disciplinary whiteness in international relations has been upheld not despite, but in part through, the 'critical turn'" (Howell & Richter-Montpetit, 2023). Therefore, extending such an analysis to classical geopolitics and investigating the possibility of sustained relevance of classical theories through the emergence of critical ones constitutes a very significant avenue for further research.

Conclusion: moving forward with the study of the Indo-Pacific

As Indo-Pacific scholarship continues to evolve, greater attention must be paid to the production of knowledge surrounding key elements of Indo-Pacific discourses (geopolitics, competition, geographical space). Geopolitics, when understood as a product of intellectual history in theory and practice, offers valuable insights into the (re)production of power dynamics. However, it must be approached critically, with an awareness of its historical baggage and potential to perpetuate material and discursive violence. By situating contemporary geopolitical discourses within their historical contexts, we can better understand the challenges and opportunities they present for regional studies—this will be particularly necessary in the study of conflict-prone areas such as the Indo-Pacific.

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