

Geopolitical Theory and its Application to East Asia

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In this paper, I will attempt to provide a brief analysis about the basic assumptions of Classical Geopolitics, and its application to East Asian strategic conditions.

“Geopolitics” in general, and especially as an academic practice, has a bad name. It has been accused of being one of the main sources of the Nazi’s theories and being “deterministic.”ⁱ It has, however, gradually revived during the 1970s in the English-speaking world as a crucial factor in great power strategies and for a security analysis in the current globalized era. In fact, recent publications on this area, both in academic and policy-oriented papers, are modest but still impressive.ⁱⁱ

Based on this trend, this paper will focus on geopolitics, or more precisely Classical Geopolitics, and discuss it broadly. First, what is geopolitics? Second, what is Classical Geopolitics, and is there a general theory about this body of knowledge? Finally, what is the overall picture drawn from its application to the East Asian strategic situation?

The first question we have to deal is about the “nature” of geopolitics: “what is geopolitics?”. From the beginning, geopolitics and its practice has been always present throughout human history. One of the earliest examples of this is Kautilya’s *Arthashastra*, an instruction for a king to survive and conquer the world, written more than two thousand years ago in India. In this book, there is something that is called now alliance theory, based on a given geographic constellation of a certain states.ⁱⁱⁱ During the classical Greek era, Aristotle had developed his geopolitical analysis of city-states in *Law*,^{iv} and in the modern era, Kant and Montesquieu have discussed the relationships between geography and the state politics.^v The academic development of geopolitics, however, had to wait until the German (or Prussian) study of geography in the mid-19th century, and this approach did resonate in modern academics in the major European powers at that time. The study had its peak of influence at the height of Nazi power in Germany in the early 1940s.^{vi}

Soon after the end of the World War II, geopolitics (or *Geopolitik* to be precise) was once heavily criticized by Hans J. Morgenthau as a “Pseudo-science,”^{vii} thus it never surfaced as one of the main topics of security studies in the English speaking academic world. The tide, however, has gradually changed as the so-called “Realist” school of scholars of International Relations (IR) have begun to adopt geographical elements, such as distance and proximity, into their theories.^{viii} As a result, this led to the academics’ rediscovery of the utility of geopolitical concepts, and so did geopolitical arguments in academic arenas.

In the meantime, “Critical Geopolitics,” which is a branch of critical theories, was emerged among the scholars of political geography and philosophy in the 1980s, largely due to the intellectual influence of Michel Foucault. This branch of school later turned to the current main academic arena to discuss (and mainly criticize) about geopolitics.^{ix} This presentation, however, is not based on the analysis of the self-conscious objectivism of Critical Geopolitics, because it is not useful for a traditional analysis of security matters for its left-wing partisan position.^x Therefore, the main analytical tool is still Classical Geopolitics, and the definition of “geopolitics” used here is borrowed from Mackubin T. Owens who wrote a decade ago: geopolitics is “the study and practice of the political and strategic relevance of geography to the pursuit of international power.”^{xi}

The second question asked in this presentation is, “what is Classical Geopolitics, and is there a general theory about this body of knowledge?” Geopolitics as a body of practical knowledge can be traced back thousand years in history, but no one ever attempted to summerise its theory in a brief, accessible manner. Classical Geopolitics is one of academic studies as mentioned earlier, but at the same time, it can be argued that it is a theory about International Relations. Then, the question that arise here is what is the composition of an IR theory? One possible answer should be “assumptions,” which they are based upon.^{xii} In other words, we can just call it as “hypothesis” in mathematics or the other social sciences, and when we examine the authentic writings of Classical Geopolitics, we can find some (obvious or latent) assumptions or ordinary hypotheses.^{xiii} Based on this premissis, this presentation will define Classical Geopolitics as a theory of grand strategy as IR scholars do for their own theories,^{xiv} and will attempt to present seven notable “assumptions” of Classical Geopolitics.

The first assumption is “visualization.” Geopolitics is about geography and politics, and in its core, there are always maps to be used to explain any given “geopolitical condition.” Based on these maps, which are created to reflect the map makers’ certain worldviews selectively and subjectively, statesmen and elites “visualize” a nation’s geographical conditions.^{xv} In other words, objective maps, such as satellite images or photos, are really used in statesmanship, and as a result, maps, which are a simplified and subjective form of reality, will be used to describe the chaotic and complex world. As young students, we learned that the world consists of five continent and seven seas, and this is technically true in a practical sense. In the world of Classical Geopolitics, however, this type of “truth” does not apply. Here, the world is assumed simply as a place with one big sea and one island.^{xvi} This process of simplification, along with visualization, seems to be a fundamental requirement for geopolitical thinking to understand the complex phenomenon in real world politics.

The second assumption is “demarcation/simplification.” In addition to a simplified, visualized image of the world, the scholars and practitioners of Classical Geopolitics generally divide the globe

into some strategic areas, for example, such as Heartland, Rimland, and Sea (or Offshore Islands), and it describes that world history is a continuous power struggle between these three areas. For example, the typical dichotomy presented in the literature of Classical Geopolitics is “the contest between sea power and land power,” and this means the power struggle between great powers which possesses land assets, such as great armies, and great powers with sea assets, big fleets. For instance, the main sea power proponent was Alfred T. Mahan of the US Navy at the end of the nineteenth century, who argued advantage of having a large navy for any state (his native country, the US) to rise to a global power status by gaining benefit from commerce trade.^{xvii} On the other hand, it was Halford J. Mackinder who held the belief that the age of land power (mainly by development of railway network) would soon to be emerged, in a famous statement written in 1904.^{xviii}

The third assumption is “lines of communications and chokepoints.” Since geography is one of the main concerns in Classical Geopolitics, it can easily be misunderstood that it focuses too much on territorial struggles on land among nations. This is not far off from the truth, but a fact rediscovered in Anglo-American literature on Classical Geopolitics, for example, is that the importance of the location of available natural resources and their access routes to great powers in the past, and the present.^{xix} It is obvious that one of the main resource centers of the world is located in the Persia Gulf and the Middle Eastern region. Any East Asian industrialized nation, such as Japan, has to procure a large amount of crude oil from this region mainly on oil tankers. And this becomes problematic for Japan, because those tankers never have a freedom to choose any routes for minimum distance (and cost). The routes are defined by the natural geography of sea, and this leads to shaping of certain passages and narrows, namely SLOCs (sea lines of communications) and chokepoints, such as the Strait of Malacca and the Lombok Strait. Considering these facts, the key question for a powerful state for its (energy) security has become who control these routes and points.

The fourth assumption is the idea of “balance of power.” Classical Geopolitics is closely related with the view of the school of Realism in International Relations, and it generally assumes that nations naturally compete against each other for trying to gain international power.^{xx} For example, Arnold Wolfers pointed out that it was Nicholas Spykman, one of the “wise-man” of Classical Geopolitics, who incorporated the idea of power politics into American IR academic debates.^{xxi} While the logic of balance of power is the core tenet of its theory,^{xxii} Classical Geopolitics also views this concept as an important component. Mahan argues, for example, that East Asian power balance on the one side of the Eurasian Continent affects the power balance of the other side, European powers.^{xxiii} Both IR Realism and Classical Realism calculate and try to predict future acts

and dynamics based on the relative power balance among them.

The fifth assumption is “bases/bridgeheads.” These concepts are especially evident in Spykman’s works. For example, his theory predicts that Rimland, where land power and sea power collide with each other, tends to become a zone of conflict.^{xxiv} Scaling down our scope from the global level to a regional one, these areas are now called “bases” or “bridgeheads.” They are effectively become stepping stones for both states when they attempt to exert their influence onto, or from, the Eurasian Continent. In a time of war, these points become ideal places for power projection against enemy territory. For the British, this place is technically implied the Low Countries such as the Netherlands and Belgium, and it is not surprising that when Germany invaded Belgium twice in the World Wars; since the first invasion became the decisive reason for the British to enter the World War I. In the case for the US, these places are the Korean Peninsula during the Korean War, and Indochina in the Vietnam War.

Finally, the sixth assumption is an idea of “control.” As mentioned above, Classical Geopolitics deals with a level of grand strategy and not that of military strategy. On this level, the main factors to be considered are threats to national security or distribution of national resources for war preparations. On the military strategic level, the aim of course should be “victory” over the enemy. This victory in the time of war, however, becomes in vein especially when one cannot win peace after the war. In other words, it is possible to turn out to be the one who “wins the battle, but lost the war.” So what is the aim of Classical Geopolitics? As mentioned above, Classical Geopolitics is referred as a theory of grand strategy, therefore it could be argue as “a plan for attaining continuing advantage,” as Everett Dolman define it.^{xxv} But there is a better way to put the ultimate aim that the nation has to achieve on the level of grand strategy. It is about “control” and this word is more accurate since it describes grand strategy’s long view.^{xxvi} As a result, Classical Geopolitics consists of six assumptions mentioned above and these provide a complete theoretical picture.

The third and final question this presentation asks is, “what is the overall picture drawn from Classical Geopolitics’ theoretical application to the East Asian strategic situation?” Based on these six assumptions as stated above, what kind of strategic pictures can be drawn for the one of the crucial regions in the world? In general, there are three points worth mentioning below regarding to a view from classical geopolitics.

The first point is concerned with physical geography. One of the most notable strategic features of this region is large body water surrounding the Eurasian continent. According to Till, the sea has four attributes in history, which more or less determined a state’s naval functions; the sea as a resource, the sea as a medium of transportation and exchange, the sea as and a medium for

information and the spread of ideas, and the sea as a medium for dominion.^{xxvii} The problem, however, is that physical geography, such as the sea around the Eurasian mainland, is largely ignored in the discourse of the international relations, largely due to the rising popularity of sociological approaches. This is perhaps because of geography is too important to be ignored.^{xxviii} In fact, strategic key point, such as “choke point” and “Bases/Bridges” are nothing but physical geography.

In terms of this struggle for physical geography in the East Asian seas, the key factor is the China’s naval expansion. As Robert Kaplan pointed out, China has settled its land border disputes with its neighboring countries in the recent years. This is an unprecedented opportunity for China to expand to the sea without worrying threat to its main land border.^{xxix}

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Another example of the importance of physical geography is the significance of specific strategic points, such chokepoints, especially those on sea. As the region’s economy has grown rapidly in the recent decades, it is obvious that at the end of the day, it is heading for fierce competition for natural resources, and so does the control of SLOCs and chokepoints. The Taiwan Strait, the Lombok Strait, Hainan Island and the surrounding ocean, the Malacca Strait which is crucial for the Chinese “the Malacca Dilemma,” and Sri Lanka just south of the Indian Subcontinent, Diego Garcia in the middle of Indian Ocean, and Gwadar on the shore of the Arabian Sea are all strategically important places. The importance of these strategic places will increase in the foreseeable future.

The second point is concerned with the role of technology. Technological development affects the shift in balance of power among states, and this development is largely affected by asymmetric economic growth among nations. In fact, the rapid economic growth in this region led to the intensive arms race in the last thirty years, except for the Philippines.

Technological development affects geopolitics in terms of the reach and speed of weapons/transportation systems. The most pressing matter from this perspective is the issues of nuclear missiles and missile defense system in the region, especially those related to China and India.

Opening of new land routes is another example of the fact that technology to help shift the regional power balance. Construction of the Thai's giant canals, the network of the roads extended from the Indian Ocean to Burma/Pakistan would all contribute to the elimination of the so-called "Maraca Dilemma" for the Beijing government. At the same time, these networks would create fear of encirclement for New Deli. As Grygiel's case studies of sixteen century great powers suggests, a dramatic shift of trade routes by technological development (shift to a new natural source of energy, etc) cause the fate of great powers.

The third point is the shared "worldview" in a state's politico/military elites. Worldview can be divided to two types; the first is the state's perception of the outside world, and the other is the perception of its self-identity. The both of these types of worldview are affected by the economic level and technological standard that the state poses. For example, Japan has gained national power during the last half of the twentieth century largely through the unprecedented level of economic and technological growth, and this coincide with its expansion of the military's (the Self Defense Force) geographical scope. This led to a revision of its national history and identities and this phenomenon certainly not exclusive for Japan. In fact, China and India are among the most enthusiastic players to revisiting the historical ties with the sea, and this is one of the evidence of technological/economic development directly affect to change a state's foreign policy behavior.

In addition, there are another analytical tool available which is deeply related to the element of worldview. Thucydides said that the motivation for a state's diplomacy (and war) are fear, honor, interest. Based on this assumption, Richar Ned Lebow add another motivation to summaries fear, spirit, appetite, reason.

By using this set of motivations as an analytical tool, one can argue that the reason Japan, Korea, and the U.S. are anxious about keeping the "freedom of the sea," it is largely based on their motivation of "appetite" and "reason," whereas for China and India, their fundamental motivations for the entering competition is the matter of "honor."

From this analysis, it can be argued that the current prominent trend is the emergence of a multipolar world, and this may inevitably lead to conflicts between some powers. These conflicts, according to the theory of Classical Geopolitics, will be caused mainly by a clash of geopolitical worldviews, or *Weltanschauung*. Because of the lack of spaces, I cannot describe details of the core logic now, but to mention briefly, there are trinity-like dynamic in the theory. The three elements are: physical geography, technology, and worldview.

Physical geography is almost permanent and unchangeable. Many of geographers were fully aware of this fact. But some scholars, such as Mackinder and others, notice that such permanent elements can be altered by technological development in the area of weapons and transportations. This means that they aware that technological development, in effect, can “shrink” physical geography in the minds of a country’s diplomats and statesmen alike. Spykman, for example, plainly states that “geographic fact will not change but their meaning will,” and this change of “their meaning” will be derived from technological changes in society, especially when the pace of the development is rapid. This argument clearly states the nature of dynamics of Classical Geopolitics.^{xxx} One of the critical tasks for academic scholars like us, is to focus on technological developments to overcome physical geography and to analyze how these technological developments will shape and influence the elites and statesmen’s (geopolitical) worldviews, because the behavior of states is always inspired by a specific worldview held by a specific group of people, and they plan to operate their Leviathan accordance to their worldview. The recent rise of “constructivism” in IR or “strategic culture” in strategic studies is another indication of the emphasis of importance of worldview, but the problem of their approach is that they exaggerate these soft element too much. A better way to do this is, first, to focus on a semi-permanent element of physical geography, second, on the medium element of technological development, and third, worldview as the final product of the previous two. Moreover, the importance lies in the fact that we should analyze the dynamics and interaction of these three elements.

In conclusion, the history and a series of assumptions of Classical Geopolitics, as well as their application and implications for the East Asian strategic constellation were mentioned above. Of course, from the viewpoint of Critical Geopolitics, this presentation’s analysis is just one perspective among them. But when we recognize that the future world will be chaotic or liquid,^{xxxii} a new (and old) paradigm that something based on some concrete elements, such as geography, will be critical in order to grasp the dynamics of strategic changes and diplomatic/security relations among the East Asian region, and its study about the future of Japan’s grand strategy. I hope this paper can be one of critical hints to be reckoned with when we examine these areas. Now, I am humbly welcome any

comment or suggestion on the content of this paper.

(3,386 words)

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- ⁱ Arnold Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration : Essays on International Politics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1962), p.38.
- ⁱⁱ For a summary of recent publications, see Jeremy Black, *Geopolitics* (London: Social Affairs Unit, 2009).
- ⁱⁱⁱ Kautilya and L. N. Rangarajan, *The Arthashastra*, Penguin Classics (New Delhi and New York: Penguin Books India, 1992), especially chap.12; Rashed Uz Zaman, "Kautilya: The Indian Strategic Thinker and Indian Strategic Culture," *Comparative Strategy* 25, no. 3 (2006).
- ^{iv} Aristotle, *The Politics*, ed. Stephen Everson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).
- ^v Charles de Secondat Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, ed. Anne M. Cohler, et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), especially part.3; Stuart Elden and Eduardo Mendieta, eds., *Reading Kant's Geography* (New York: SUNY Press, 2011).
- ^{vi} Holger Herwig, "Geopolitik: Haushofer, Hitler and Lebensraum," in *Geopolitics, Geography, and Strategy*, ed. Colin S. Gray and Geoffrey R. Sloan (London: Frank Cass, 1999).
- ^{vii} Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, ed. Kenneth W. Thompson, Brief Edition ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993), p.174.
- ^{viii} Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, Cornell Studies in Security Affairs (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1987), pp.21-26.
- ^{ix} Gearóid Ó Tuathail, "Understanding Critical Geopolitics: Geopolitics and Risk Society," in *Geopolitics, Geography, and Strategy*, ed. Colin S. Gray and G. R. Sloan (London: Frank Cass, 1999).
- ^x Black, *Geopolitics*, pp.2-10.
- ^{xi} Mackubin T. Owens, "In Defence of Classical Geopolitics," *Naval War College Review* 52, no. 4 (Autumn 1999).
- ^{xii} For a discussion that used this idea rather effectively, see, John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), pp.30-32.
- ^{xiii} Holger Herwig, a professor of the University of Calgary, used this summary of the German School of Classical Geopolitics, *Geopolitik*. He pointed out that the theory of *Geopolitik* based on five conceptual assumptions: Lebensraum, Autarky, Pan-region, Land Power vs. Sea Power, and Frontier. Herwig, "Geopolitik: Haushofer, Hitler and Lebensraum," pp.226-229.
- ^{xiv} For a discussion specified geopolitics as grand strategy, see Halford J. Mackinder, "The Round World and the Winning of the Peace," *Foreign Affairs* 21, no. 4 (July 1943), p.603. For an argument to analyze the concept of grand strategy itself, see Robert J. Art, *A Grand Strategy for America*, Cornell Studies in Security Affairs (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2003), pp.1-2; Paul M. Kennedy, ed. *Grand Strategies in War and Peace* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1991), especially chap.1.
- ^{xv} Derek Gregory, *Geographical Imaginations* (Cambridge, Mass ; Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), pp.6-7; Jeremy Black, *Maps and Politics, Picturing History* (London: Reaktion, 1997).
- ^{xvi} For "simplification" by Mackinder and Spykman, see Nicholas J. Spykman, *The Geography of the Peace*, ed. Helen R. Nicholl (New York: Harcourt, Yale University Institute of International Studies, 1944), chap.4.
- ^{xvii} Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660-1783* (London: S. Low, 1890), especially chap.1.
- ^{xviii} Halford John Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, Norton Library (New York: W.W. Norton, 1962).
- ^{xix} Jakub J. Grygiel, *Great Powers and Geopolitical Change* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University

Press, 2006).

^{xx} As renowned “realist” literature, see for example, Edward Hallett Carr, *Thetwenty Years' Crisis, 1919-1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations*, ed. Michael Cox (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001); Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*; Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979); Robert G. Gilpin, "The Richness of Tradition of Political Realism," in *Neorealism and Its Critics*, ed. Robert O. Keohane (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp.301-321; Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*.

^{xxi} Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration*, p.85.

^{xxii} For a notable discussions on balance of power theories by realist scholars, see, Richard Little, *The Balance of Power in International Relations: Metaphors, Myths, and Models* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Stuart J. Kaufman *et al.*, eds., *The Balance of Power in World History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); T. V. Paul *et al.*, eds., *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2004). For a critical view on this concept, see, Jonathan Haslam, *No Virtue Like Necessity: Realist Thought in International Relations since Machiavelli* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2002), chap.2.

^{xxiii} Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Problem of Asia: Its Effect Upon International Politics*, ed. Francis P. Sempa (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2003), p.67.

^{xxiv} Spykman, *The Geography of the Peace*, pp.49-55.

^{xxv} For Dolman's definition, see, Everett Carl Dolman, *Pure Strategy: Power and Principle in the Space and Information Age*, ed. Colin Gray and Williamson Murray, Cass Series--Strategy and History (London; New York: Frank Cass, 2005), p.6.

^{xxvi} Colin S. Gray, *National Security Dilemmas: Challenges & Opportunities*, 1st ed. (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2009), p.1.

^{xxvii} Geoffrey Till, *Seapower: A Guide for the Twenty-First Century*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2009), chap.2.

^{xxviii} その一例として、Colin S. Gray, "Inescapable Geography," in *Geopolitics, Geography, and Strategy*, ed. Colin S. Gray and G. R. Sloan (London: Frank Cass, 1999).を参照のこと。

^{xxix} Roobert Kaplan, *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power* (New York: Random House, 2010).

^{xxx} Spykman, *The Geography of the Peace*, p.7.

^{xxxi} As an example, see Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Times : Living in an Age of Uncertainty* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007).