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A brief intellectual history of geopolitical thought and its relevance to the Baltic Sea region

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ABSTRACT
This article outlines a general history of the intellectual origins and development of geopolitical thought. It provides categories for assessing contemporary expressions of this phenomenon, and then discusses the applicability of these tools to the Baltic Sea region. The article focuses on eliciting and juxtaposing contrasts between the three classical bodies of literature that evolved largely in parallel, and ends up briefly commenting on a fourth, partly “critical” approach. The main takeaway is that considering all four geopolitical approaches before applying any of them to the Baltic Sea realm encourages analysts to embrace a more holistic and dynamic viewpoint than each of the alternatives individually can offer. Such a conceptualization promises to forge analytical linkages between a series of relevant, geographically contingent circumstances including resources, arenas and communities that represent prerequisites and opportunities in crisis, conflict, or war.

Introduction

Geopolitics and the Baltic Sea region are historically intertwined due to a deep legacy of rivalry and recurrent warfare among riparian states in this part of Europe (see Åselius, 2018), as well as the coining of the very term – geopolitics – in Swedish academic institutions at the previous turn of the century. It has long been an economically, culturally and politically vibrant region of diverse neighbours, a fact which the relative stability of the cold war period partly obscured. But it is also a region in which geopolitical thought has flourished over the past one hundred plus years, not least in policymaking circles.

This article outlines a general history of the intellectual origins and development of geopolitical thought. It provides categories for assessing contemporary expressions of this phenomenon, and then discusses the applicability of these tools to the Baltic Sea region. Simply put, classical geopolitical thought is made up of three loosely interconnected bodies of literature with distinctive thematic orientations, methodological approaches and intellectual sensibilities, to which we can add a contemporary fourth strand of thinking. What they have in common is that they are all historically shaped in the Western
hemisphere, and that they remain associated with an era of competing national projects and imperialist aspirations, above all in Great Britain, France, the Habsburg Empire, and Germany. The fact that the term geopolitics first was used in Sweden had primarily to do with the country being fairly well integrated in the German-speaking academic universe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Studies in intellectual history in political and military affairs tend to stress the importance of the specific context in which certain ideas arise and are cultivated both by individual authors but also in the broader intellectual and political environments to which they belong (Dunn, 1969; Gat, 2011; Grafton, 2006; Pocock, 1975; Skinner, 1969). At the risk of oversimplification, this article focuses on eliciting and juxtaposing contrasts between the three classical bodies of literature that evolved largely in parallel, and ends up briefly commenting on a fourth, partly “critical” approach. All three classical schools were stimulated by the paradigm established by Alexander von Humboldt in Berlin – following breakthroughs in mathematical geodesy by Carl Friedrich Gauss and others – successively entrenched in the academic discipline of geography during the course of the first half of the nineteenth century (Botting, 1994).

The review of the four branches of the “disciplinary tree” of geopolitical studies conducted below focuses on conceptual, thematic and methodological coherence and interrelated heritage, starting with land-oriented and sea-oriented geopolitical studies, then moving on to ecology-oriented geopolitical studies and finishing with what can be described as a polity-oriented approach. Because of its origins in Central Europe, land-oriented geopolitics is arguably the body of thought best known in the Baltic Sea region proper. Though evolving after its sea- and ecology-oriented counterparts as a systematic set of research problems, it subsequently overshadowed the previous two as analysts retrospectively linked Nazi and Fascist expansionist ambitions in the 1930s and 1940s to land-oriented geopolitical theorizing. The polity-oriented approach, rooted in social constructivist epistemology, has in recent years made modest inroads at university departments in the region.

**Land-oriented geopolitics**

In 1897, *Politische Geographie* was published by Friedrich Ratzel, a professor of geography at the Ludwig-Maximilian-Universität in Munich. Ratzel’s approach built on that of Humboldt and his influential successor, Carl Ritter, but was narrower, more systematic and driven by recent advances in statistical methods and surveyor technology (such as the development of high-precision theodolites). The model and frame for this emerging academic field of study was indisputably the state: the first three chapter titles out of nine feature the term “state”. As an intellectual project *Politische Geographie* was apparently intended to solidify the integrity of post-1871 Germany in the minds of readers. Ratzel had many followers, but besides Munich also Berlin became an influential centre of this rapidly expanding subdiscipline of “political geography”. Among the contributions of the land-oriented approach to geopolitics were a novel focus on properties of physical space and topography, issues associated with the exploitation of natural resources, border delineation as well as the allocation and distribution of public goods, transport infrastructure, fortifications and aspects of “civil protection”. The authors within this body of literature also examined, in considerable detail, the necessary prerequisites for
the mobility of military forces as an essential factor for the survival of the state within its territorial borders.

There are a number of deficiencies in this rather narrowly focused, land-oriented approach to geopolitics that evolved in Central Europe. One is that this approach tends to build on a static understanding of the control and utilization of natural resources and that it underestimates trade and commerce for economic prosperity. It further builds on the questionable assumption that the vast majority of inhabitants are permanently settled and a determinism with regard to geographic location and contingent conditions, which is – to say the least, problematic when applied to different geographic locations. It should be noted that the frequent use of biological-organic metaphors in the land-oriented geopolitical tradition is typically associated with ethnocentrism and eurocentrism, which means that when we apply it to the Baltic Sea region we risk ending up with an introvert, myopic form of nationalism and an emphasis on border control, a narrow focus on natural resources and an appetite for territorial conquest by military means.

In the works of the prominent Swedish pioneer and proponent of geopolitics as a concept and a methodological approach, Rudolf Kjellén (1914), but also among followers of Ratzel (1897), this bias is especially evident. Some of the most sophisticated early writings in this tradition subsequently came together in Ratzel’s successor in Munich, professor and Major General Karl Haushofer, who also was an avid reader of Kjellén’s works. Munich was a politically dynamic city in the late 1920s and early 1930s, and Haushofer (1934; Haushofer, Obst, Lautensach, Maull, & Vowinckel, 1928) nevertheless made a couple of acquaintances that would successively contaminate his wider intellectual project. He not only met with and discussed his academic programme with Adolf Hitler, at the time when the latter was imprisoned and in the process of writing Mein Kampf, but employed Rudolf Hess as his research assistant. The precise effects of this connection between Haushofer’s brand of geopolitics and the National Socialist project for Europe and beyond cannot be known, but certainly undermined the academic field post-1945.

**Sea-oriented geopolitics**

The relation to the academic discipline of geography as developed by Humboldt and Ritter is more indirect in the second approach, emphasizing the naval and maritime dimension of this phenomenon. The first important work by US naval historian and Admiral Alfred Mahan (1890) predated Ratzel’s *opus magnum* by some seven years, but it would take until the turn of the century before sea-oriented geopolitical ideas were formulated coherently and programmatically. Already Mahan’s exposition of the sea-oriented approach highlighted a dynamic understanding of control and use of natural resources through the deployment of naval resources. An analysis that took into account the rapid progress in technologies of propulsion, radio communications, armour and ordnance clearly helped render Mahan’s work mandatory reading in naval academies around the world by the turn of the century, as military planners were coming to grips with the changing character of warfare.

In a similar vein British geographer Harold Mackinder made especially significant contributions in the early twentieth century (1904a, 1904b, 1917), followed by his Dutch-American counterpart Nicholas Spykman (1942, 1944), who at that point sought to
draw lessons from and articulate West European and American maritime experiences during the two world wars, the latter of which was still ongoing. In the richer, expanded variants offered by Mackinder and Spykman, propositions were included that theorized factors such as the unequal distribution of advantageous strategic locations between different nations, for instance with respect to access to ports and sea lanes, sea/land as a critical logistical distinction, and opportunities for power projection provided by naval (and later air) platforms. In acknowledging and theorizing that the deployment of military capabilities was shifting toward the maritime environment, partly so as to protect the growing value of international and colonial trade at sea, the sea-oriented approach of geopolitics contributed toward a clearer understanding of coercive power of its time. This understanding also had relevance for the Baltic Sea region, where contestation between Germany, the United Kingdom and the Russian Empire was growing from the 1890s onwards (see Åselius, 2018).

The sea-oriented approaches to geopolitics are however – similar to the land-oriented approaches – biased in a number of ways. Above all, Mackinder’s original vision appears to have been grounded in the foreign and defence priorities of the early twentieth century, more preoccupied with Russia than with Germany as an emerging contender on the world stage (Venier, 2004). This may help explain why his version of a sea-oriented approach heavily emphasizes the Eurasian landmass, the so-called “Heartland”, and draws on a largely inflexible, spatialized understanding of (sea as well as land) territory. Mackinder’s sea-oriented approach also assumes that power projection can only be met by proportionate countervailing power and that technological advantage virtually always is decisive in military combat. In addition, this understanding assumes that regional distributions of power are irrelevant under global hegemony, and that democratic rule is much less important than “heroic leadership”.

The air arena dimension is often simply added to the sea-oriented approach without further adjustment of the approach. As long as the firepower and reach of aircraft was fairly limited, this oversimplification may not have distorted the strategic perspective in a significant way. But the effectiveness of modern aircraft and the munitions they carry, along with the centrality of this branch of the armed forces, arguably requires more distinctive theorizing that incorporates a better understanding of the air arena. In the Baltic Sea region, not least given the vast air space existing above the large water basin at its centre, this necessitates for elaborate tactical, operational and strategic thinking about air power.

Ecology-oriented geopolitics

Even if you were to add up the previous two approaches, one land-oriented and the other sea-oriented, you would not end up with a perspective that encompasses all aspects of the third approach. The ecology-oriented approach supersedes the previous two in that it places man and other living organisms, as well as the complex ways in which human society and the environment interact, at its core. The ecology-oriented approach in fact evolved prior to the land-oriented and sea-oriented approaches. Its first proponent, Élisée Reclus, took a course in general comparative geography with Carl Ritter already in the early 1850s in Berlin. Reclus, an anarchist and political activist, first gathered practical experiences by working in Great Britain, North and South America. Back in France in
the late 1860s, he began editing, writing and publishing an ambitious, 19 volume strong study of universal geography in which he set out his vision for this new science (Reclus 1875–1897).

By the late 1870s Reclus had managed to gather a significant following in France, but also some influential detractors. There were also those who learned from him but repackaged his insights into a Ratzelian programme on French soil, stressing natural resources locked within territorial boundaries and assuming that there will always be rivalry over who would take control over them. Most prominent among the latter was Paul Vidal de la Blache, who subsequently developed strategic and military applications of the approach and situated them within the academic study of geography (Vidal de la Blache, 1883, 1917; Vidal de la Blache & Gallois, 1927–1948).

In contrast to the narrower studies focused on land, sea and local and regional contingencies related to natural resources, topographic properties, economic geography and state of technology, the ecological approach broadens the perspective significantly. The ecological approach – as already mentioned – pays particular attention to the mutual interaction between human society and the environment, and consequently plays down the singular significance of natural resources and characteristics of a given topographical or maritime milieu. The approach also underlines the importance of trade and transportation routes, and strives to connect a geographic “meso-level” to an “oceanic” or planetary perspective. The work of Reclus brought a transformative understanding of the environment to geopolitical analysis, but one which also acknowledged that human societies always have relied on a significant level of mobility, exchange and rivalry.

Even though the ecological approach is empirically driven and rejects deductive propositions as an a priori point of departure, it is also based on a set of normative assumptions. Reclus, in particular, operated on premises of class struggle and socioeconomic exploitation that he ultimately borrowed from Jean-Jacques Proudhon and Karl Marx. However, Yves Lacoste (1986, 1993), a late follower of Reclus, and especially of Vidal de la Blache, seems largely oblivious to such premises embedded in this school of thought. From within his mainly empirical and technocratic outlook, Lacoste also neglects ethical issues associated with employing geography for strategic and military purposes. What this means for the study of the Baltic Sea region in particular is less obvious than to note that also this approach comes with a distinctive legacy. Since that legacy encompasses fewer questionable sociological or ideological underpinnings and is more heterogeneous than that of the previous two approaches, however, applying it may evoke a variety of connotations depending on which aspect of that legacy today’s analysts choose to highlight.

**Polity-oriented geopolitics**

The contemporary study of geopolitics, or political geography, has over the past 30 plus years experienced a renewal that in various ways rely on the intellectual and policy traditions of previous generations but from two distinctive points of departure. One is that of social constructivism, the notion that our perceptions of the world do not stem from material and objective realities “on the ground” (Wendt, 1999) The study of geography in general, and political geography in particular, is in other words understood to be
socially constructing, reiterating and transmitting images and narratives of what is purport- toed to be a “physical environment” (Ashley, 1987; Deudney, 2000; Fouberg, Murphy, & de Blij, 2012). All who contribute to the cultural reproduction of society partake in this endeavour, irrespective of whether they realize it or not, perhaps primarily as political leaders, journalists or members of the academic profession.

The second point of departure is theoretically less cohesive except for the label used to band together a vast number of researchers as proponents of “critical geopolitics” (or “critical political geography”). Looking at the social sciences more broadly, this label is normally applied to the politically conscious research closely associated with the left or centre-left social philosophy developed at the “Frankfurt School” during the peak of its influence in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. This is only partly true for the circle of scholars who forged a novel research agenda in the mid-1990s and either launched new journals, or reinvented old ones, in geography and social science more widely. One of the key protagonists of this approach was Gerard Ó Tuathail, in work that paid special attention to the heavily loaded concepts of space and border (1996, 1999).

The term is nevertheless misleading when we today assess the bulk of the work that has been published in the past two-three decades, in that the social constructivist inclination has clearly dominated the contemporary body of work. In that respect there are more numerous connections to the human geography perspective introduced by Reclus than to the left-leaning “critical” angle adopted by scholars in a variety of social science disciplines. By contrast, the social constructivist epistemology has been absorbed quite comprehensively across the board (Ó Tuathail et al., 2010). Drawing on the latter, the truly innovative feature of this new strand of thought appears to be its emphasis of issues of identity and interests of a polity – that is, a political community seeking to exert control over a demarcated territory – for the modern conception of geography (Forsberg, 1996; Sack, 1986; Vollard, 2009).

Consequently, it is the polity in relation to geography that occupies the pride of place in many contemporary strands of geopolitical research, including representatives of a “critical” persuasion. The challenges of that polity in terms of creating and sustaining social cohesion, establishing and maintaining institutions that consolidate borders and the domestic order, and further to engage in international relations, all have a bearing on the geography and politics of space (Agnew, 2007; Ferguson et al., 2000). Distance matters, as do perceptions of distance and commonality (Henrikson, 2002; Kelly, 2007). Polity-oriented geopolitics thus de-emphasize the previously strong focus on dimensions such as topography, natural resources and routes of communication and transportation, at the expense of views of amity and enmity, linguistic and cultural affinity, and basic notions of how to organize and manage the polity and its political and economic system (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Massey, 1999; Neumann, 2012).

The four schools of geopolitical thinking and the Baltic Sea region

Each of the approaches outlined above form part of geopolitical thought but many students are unaware of its multifaceted nature and tend to conflate them or, alternatively, to utilize one at the time and thereby producing a partial account. They make up, if you will, four branches of a tree that constitute distinctive analytical lenses and intellectual
legacies, lending themselves to land-, sea-, ecology- or polity-oriented research devoted to geographical settings and political processes, to speak with Cohen (2003).

The land- and sea-oriented schools of thought are limited in that their partial vantage points convey only a superficial view of arenas other than those at the centre of their respective vision. The former is for obvious reasons associated with the army viewpoint, since it concentrates on conquering and holding territory, using the advantages that the topographical landscape offers. The latter school of thought is on the other hand closely related to the navy understanding of the maritime environment and the coastal areas, on which it relies for logistical support. As alluded to above, the air arena is typically viewed as akin to its naval counterpart and therefore treated as similar in character. Because it can easily operate over land and sea, the air force is widely regarded as the critical component among military professionals in the Baltic Sea region.

In a world as interconnected and interdependent as northern Europe of the 2010s, however, there is something generically attractive about the third, ecological approach. The countries that share borders along the Baltic Sea are today highly reliant on regional and international trade, on specialization of their respective economies, on easy access to affordable natural resources, energy supply, state-of-the-art technologies and the requisite expertise needed to employ the latter. In that sense the Baltic Sea region is a microcosm of the highly developed, diversified, and cost-effective productions chains that predominate in the political economy of the early twenty-first century. Increasingly, it is also dependent on a sustainable environment in its vicinity and, in terms of the challenge of climate change, globally as well (see Haldén, 2018). Needless to say, it is quite a challenge for nine riparian states to negotiate the separate and shared use of this constrained maritime space, characterized by shallow waters, inevitably giving rise to competition and conflicts.

This brings us to the contemporary, polity-oriented approach that highlights the singular importance of mental landscapes as social constructions. Whereas the modern legacy of statehood is particularly deep only in Denmark, Sweden and Russia, the linguistic and cultural identities of contemporary nations around the Baltic Sea have existed much longer than clearly demarcated borders and other conventional trappings of political autonomy. Once established, moreover, sovereignty is constantly reproduced through cultural and political institutions that emphasize the “imagined community” of nations (Anderson, 1991). Beyond history textbooks used to teach in school, the processes of reproducing the national gaze encompass most legal and administrative systems, official documents, statistical categories, and what is conveyed via media outlets within the territory of each state.

That observation notwithstanding, a problem all four approaches share is that they fail to take into account the growing significance of the transformation of information and communication technology over the past few decades, often referred to as the realm of cyber and cyberconflict. This development has given rise to a different “spatial” arena that has a complex impact on contemporary societies (see Schmidt-Felzmann, 2018), providing opportunities and vulnerabilities for governments to exploit through investments in business sectors, public institutions, and ways to enhance capabilities in the foreign affairs and military realm.

There is also the matter of lingering ideological bias inherent to separate schools of thought, or of the entire intellectual tradition, as outlined above. In fact, the first three approaches all suffer of a certain historic bias: they are deeply influenced by a mission
What is more, in the land- and sea-based geopolitical approaches this notion seems to reside within the original conceptualization associated with ambitions of nation-state consolidation and imperialism (on the continuing relevance of this geopolitical ideology see Tyushka, 2018). Originally, the sea-oriented approach was closely wedded to the notion of a worldwide imperial power protecting commercial vessels using sea lanes and forming part of an “ecosystem” of exploitative economic practices. Neomarxist economists would say that these practices are being maintained by way of natural resource extraction and exploitation of cheap labour, yet no longer in the shape of brutal slave trade and merciless land expropriation.

Meanwhile, there is the problematic entanglement with Nazism and Fascism in the first half of the twentieth century and its lingering repercussions. Indeed, to some commentators geopolitical thought remains an intellectual project closely associated with the ideological right, or even the extreme right. To take one recent example, in 2015 the well-established geopolitical theorist Dimitris Kitsikis, who draws on Haushofer and Mackinder in particular, openly endorsed the Greek proto-fascist Golden Dawn party as the sole legitimate representation of patriotic Greeks (Kitsikis, 2015). Kitsikis has ties to Alexander Dugin, a very influential far-right geopolitical writer in today’s Russia (see both Suslov, 2018; Tyushka, 2018).

Against this background one could argue that the third and fourth approaches represent more fruitful points of departure for contemporary strategic analysis of the politics and conflicts within a specific geographic space. The polity-oriented approach is especially designed to counter the colonial view, integrating a “critical” or “self-critical” view from within the disciplines of geography and international relations in particular. It also takes seriously the precise content of official and authoritative narratives, scrutinizing them for biases, inherent assumptions of enmity and social hierarchy.

But is the polity-oriented stance strictly speaking an intellectual tradition of geopolitical thought? The Reclusian gaze could serve as an ideological corrective, too, since it is not as intimately intertwined with the notion of the nation-state, yet it sustains a clear commitment to the contingencies of geography. As a result, the ecological understanding of geopolitics offers a dynamic and interactive perspective that captures continuous technological transformation as well as the effects of environmental degradation. Moreover, it resonates with the contemporary notion of “flow security” through its distinct focus on trade, transportation and logistics and the vulnerabilities that follow from it.

As it happens, the Reclusian approach appears particularly suitable for analysing the realities of the Baltic Sea region in the second decade of the twenty-first century. Alongside conventional military and soft security issues akin to those of the Cold War period, a broader understanding related to trade and transportation flows, energy resources, environmental concerns, fish and other food industries are swiftly rising to the top of the agenda of riparian states, often in complex interaction with the former set of issues. Of course an examination of this “meso-level” also needs to take into account the “oceanic”, planetary dimension in order to avoid a myopic perspective, as posited by Reclus and his followers in their sometimes grandiose assertions.

The latter similarly opens up for examining the Baltic Sea region though not excluding contiguous areas, in the Barents’ Sea, the Arctic, and adjacent East European countries. The Murmansk naval base and its importance for Russian maritime power projection and second-strike capability comes to mind, as does the precariousness of marine life in...
the shallow waters of the Baltic Sea. And to this we need to add novel areas of business, transportation, energy infrastructure, and other aspects of contemporary maritime spatial planning. Further afield but with implications for the same region are capabilities for information warfare (see Schmidt-Felzmann, 2018) and security-related activities in space. In the age of information connectivity and diasporic community-building, nor can we ignore the transnational policies involving citizens and institutions across borders in Russia, EU member states, and beyond (see both Ekengren, 2018; Suslov, 2018).

Be that as it may, the key benefit of considering all four geopolitical approaches before applying any of them to the Baltic Sea realm comes from stimulating analysts to embrace a more holistic and dynamic viewpoint than each of the alternatives individually can offer. Such a conceptualization promises to forge analytical linkages between a series of relevant, geographically contingent circumstances including resources, arenas and communities that represent prerequisites and opportunities in crisis, conflict, or war. The analytical advantages of a “geopolitics of the neighborhood” lie, according to Hervé Couteau-Bégaire – himself working in the French tradition which originated with Reclus – in opening up our minds to “spatial phenomena that affect a number of contemporary conflicts” and thereby to a “strategic imaginary” fit for the early twenty-first century (Couteau-Bégaire, 2002). Looking at the developments over the past few years, it would appear that the Baltic Sea region has caught many by surprise by reappearing as a multi-dimensional arena for contemporary conflict that encourages such an imaginary.

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Notes on contributor
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