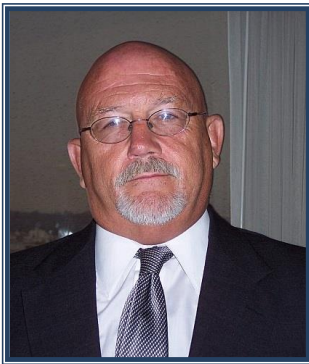




## GEOPOLITICS, CON AND PRO

By Mackubin Thomas Owens



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*Orbis* is the quarterly journal of the Foreign Policy Research Institute, which was founded six decades ago this year by Robert Strausz-Hupé. He was a teacher of geopolitics, and FPRI has reflected his viewpoint since its creation. It could seem strange, therefore, for us to publish the article by Chris Fettweis, which constitutes a frontal assault on the very utility of geopolitics. For

instance, he writes that geopolitics

...fails—sometimes spectacularly —along all three dimensions [of theory: description, prediction, and prescription]. While it is not at all clear that classical geopolitics has ever contained any insights of much importance to scholarship or strategy, there can be no doubt that it has nothing to say to twenty-first century international politics. Geopolitics has always been descriptively absurd and pre-scriptively pathological, attributes that have been only magnified during the current intellectual resurrection.

Strausz-Hupé would dissent from this view.

It should be noted that *all* theories in the various social sciences, including international relations, are and will remain—despite the aspirations and best efforts of Mr. Fettweis and others in the field—in a pre-Newtonian, pre-scientific, and non-formal stage. Fettweis stipulates as much when he writes that “one of the oft-articulated weaknesses of international relations is its inability to settle questions, or to advance research questions to anyone’s satisfaction. Despite multiple productive research lines and fruitful decades of debate, rarely are minds changed or knowledge advanced.”

But in his telling, geopolitics is unique in its failure “either to articulate a coherent agenda, to provide empirical support for its ideas, to advance our understanding of international politics, or to generate sagacious policy recommendations...” Perhaps the trouble lies not so much with geopolitics itself as with Fettweis’ predisposition to conflate geopolitics and geographic determinism and to treat geopolitical thought as static, as if it never takes into account changes in technology and the global distribution of capital.

But much of the problem with Fettweis’s essay is attributable to the methodology of international relations itself. The study of international relations, like most of the other social sciences, is dominated by positivism, which by emphasizing quantification and measurement, tends toward a reductivism that ignores if it does not exclude much of value. After all, to paraphrase an adage attributed to Einstein, not everything that is important can be quantified, and not everything that can be quantified is important.

Many of the mis-understandings associated with “geopolitics” arise from the fact that the term itself is heterogeneous: it has been used to mean everything from geographic determinism, to the spatial dimension of political inquiry, to merely an analytical way of thinking. Properly understood, however, it means a normative-strategic doctrine: geopolitics is *descriptive* in that it helps us understand the world as a whole, and *prescriptive* in that it suggests strategic courses of action.

Geopolitics is very much a part of the Realist tradition. Indeed, it can be understood as the description of the spatial aspects of power politics, *as modified by technology and economics*, and their strategic implications—realpolitik manifest in geographic space. Geopolitics does indeed make certain claims: there is an international pecking order, determined by who has power and who does not; power is rooted in the physical nature of the world itself; the power of the modern state has some relation to the territory that it occupies, controls, or influences; resources and strategic potential, the sources of state power, are unequally distributed worldwide; and power is ephemeral—possession is no guarantee of its permanent retention, and therefore states must take steps to ensure its retention.

*Pace* Fettweis, technology and economics are not extraneous to geopolitical analysis. Indeed, they are integral to geopolitics. The shift in ship propulsion from sail to coal to oil to nuclear power significantly changed the geopolitical landscape, as did the railroad and the development of air power. Some analysts suggested that nuclear weapons spelled the end of geopolitics; some make that claim now on behalf of information technology and cyberspace. However, while technological advances can alter the importance of the geographic determinants of policy and strategy, they do not negate it. The same is true of economic development; the infusion of capital may modify but not negate the importance of a particular geographic space.

Napoleon defined strategy as the art of using time and space. His focus was the operational level of war, but his definition applies as well to the level of grand strategy. Geopolitics provides the link between geography and strategy. Geopolitics is based on the undeniable fact that all international politics, running the gamut from peace to war, takes place in time and space, in particular geographical settings and environments. It then seeks to establish the links and causal relationships between geographical space and international political power, for the purpose of devising specific strategic prescriptions.

Geopolitics is not geographic determinism, but it is based on the assumption that geography defines limits and opportunities in international politics: states can realize their geopolitical opportunities or become the victims of their geopolitical situation. One purpose of grand strategy is to exploit one’s own geographical attributes and an adversary’s geographical vulnerabilities.

Geopolitics is dynamic, not static. It reflects international realities and the global constellation of power arising from the interaction of geography on the one hand and technology and economic development on the other. Technology and the infusion of capital can modify, though not negate, the strategic importance of a particular geographic space.

Finally, geopolitics clarifies the range of strategic choices, providing a guide for achieving strategic efficiency. While it places particular stress on geographic space as a critically important strategic factor and source of power, it recognizes that geography is only a part of the totality of global phenomena.

Our publishing Mr. Fettweis’ essay serves an important purpose for FPRI, by reminding us of what the debate is all about and by setting the stage for our fall issue, which, in honor of FPRI’s 60th anniversary, will be dedicated to...geopolitics!

### *The 2015 National Security Strategy*

The Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 mandated that the president issue a national security strategy (NSS) report. According to the legislation, the purpose of this document is to provide the president with the means to communicate his strategic vision to the Congress, foreign leaders, and domestic constituencies. Although some of the early NSS documents were worthwhile, recent ones have fallen far short of providing any real discussion of a true grand strategy, outlining how the United States plans to apply all of the instruments of national power to achieve the goals of national policy, while assessing risk. Instead, they have degenerated into platitudinous expressions of aspirations.

President Obama’s 2015 *National Security Strategy* is almost a parody of the worst previous NSS documents. Its catch phrase is “strategic patience,” presumably an attempt to replace “leading from behind.” It seems to be a crystallization of Obama’s campaign slogan, “hope and change.” But as the old saying goes, “hope is not a strategy.”

Much of the document is given over to puffed-up self-congratulation, touting the administration's purported achievements. The rest is filler that does not fulfill the document's promise to provide "a vision and strategy for advancing the nation's interests, universal values, and a rules-based international order through strong and sustainable American leadership."

The 2015 *NSS* demonstrates beyond the shadow of a doubt that the Obama Administration categorically rejects the US grand strategy that nearly all presidents, whether Democrat or Republican, have embraced since the end of World War II: a grand strategy of primacy, intended to underwrite the security of a liberal world order that enables political and economic freedom and prosperity (the exception was Jimmy Carter, and his straying from the path illustrates the cost of deviating from a grand strategy of primacy). Primacy is an approach in keeping with the liberal political traditions of the United States but which also recognizes the world as a dangerous place in which a just peace is maintained only by the strong.

The grand strategy of primacy that American presidents have pursued since World War II is based on the assumption that U.S. power is good not only for the United States itself but also for the rest of the world. The argument is that the United States can be fully secure only in a world where everyone else is also secure. The existence of liberal institutions is not sufficient. As Donald Kagan has observed, "what seems to work best . . . is the possession by those states who wish to preserve peace of the preponderant power and of the will to accept the burdens of an responsibilities required to achieve that power." Such a liberal world order is possible only if the United States is willing and able to maintain it. The Obama Administration has made it clear that it is not willing to maintain a liberal world order.