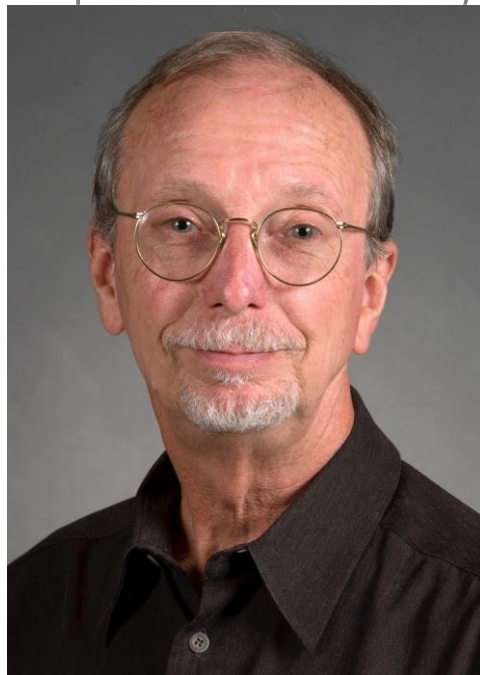


Contrasting Two Versions of Geopolitics, The Critical and The Classical

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Classical geopolitics defines as the study of locations and positions of states, regions, and resources that affect a state's foreign actions and policies. It arrives with two functions: first, it displays a spatial setting or platform for states persons and students to examine and to act upon international relations from a geographical perspective. Second, accompanying this setting is an assortment of theories that adhere to the classical definition, the author having located more than sixty (Kelly 2016, 83-135). For instance, applying the "shatterbelt" thesis, of two levels of conflict coming together in a region, the local with the strategic, offers platform and theory for presenting a deeper understanding into the Ukraine civil war. The utility of this spatial model rests simply on common sense, we as humans being naturally impacted by our environments, and nations impacted similarly.

Let me state my respect for critical geopolitics, and in particular, for its focus upon the normative and upon the de-constructing of elites' motivations. I would prefer attaching these attributes more strongly to the classical as well. But, alas, I cannot, for the two geopolitical versions point to distinctive approaches and levels-of-analyses that cannot meld, at least, until some sophisticated mathematical model can somehow be devised that rests well-beyond my skill.

I fault the critical version in three ways: 1) it's rejecting of the common-sense impact of environment upon human and state behavior; 2) it's promoting of "emancipation" of allegedly suffering peoples and thus of trusting a radical elite in bringing forth a utopian future; and 3) it's attacking the tenets of the classical version.

This difficulty in tying the two versions together lends itself to contrasting the two in the several paragraphs that follow, reflective of my earlier article (Kelly 2006): First, the critical pertains to elites' decision-making, albeit, directing to the alleged corruption of their leadership via a de-constructing of intentions within a close reading of policies and actions. I honor these endeavors, but the classical does not evaluate individuals' intentions in decision making. Instead, its activities are reflective of long-held traditions found in geographical places that eventually form into policies and actions of states within this spatial foundation (Kelly in Morgado 2021). Monroe's Doctrine, of preventing Eurasian bases in Middle America, has held central for centuries to United States security doctrine. Likewise, the "forward presence" of the US military encircling Eurasian rimlands for American protection tends in this direction, too. The Panama Canal's "choke point" pivot has guided North American activities in the Caribbean. All link to immediate policies of nations by forming around such traditions, for we do not generally see "Monroe Doctrine" or "forward presence"

or “Panama Canal” premises, but we glance more to immediate policies and actions limited to these spatial points. In sum, states as international actors and not specific individuals characterize the classical.

Second, theories do not appear at all in the critical, whereas they crop up ubiquitously in the classical, these being the mainstay of the traditional and a prime variation from the critical. I have come to respect Halford Mackinder’s “heartland thesis,” the initial and core theory to the geo-strategic portrayal of the classical. His thesis revealed four parts: a central and isolated continental location that provided protection against maritime invaders, substantial resources and unity such that the area’s possessor could eventually grow outwardly in territory and in leverage onto ocean shores. Once a mighty navy could be constructed, a global “empire would be in sight.” That vision has not proven attainable for central Eurasia, Mackinder’s original construct, but it has, to this author (Kelly 2017) and with his revisions, closely fit North America in its four parts. In this, I ignore the context of Mackinder’s alleged racism (see O Tuathail 1992 who differs), but I honor his theoretical contribution.

In addition to policy and theory, a third difference turns to ideological and ethical perspectives, to repeat from the above, the critical emerged in the normative, and further, in the post-modern by accusing a powerful cadre of elites of causing foreign-affairs wrongs. The classical is mostly neutral to values and to individuals, its theories timeless, logical, sometimes cyclical, and state centered. Its generalizations apply universally, they do not focus on power, conflict, and war, and they can conform to the dynamics of technology.

Geopolitics appears as a “model” or an assortment of like generalizations, for geopolitical theories themselves do not exist. This structure rests on assumptions of geographical determinism because “geography counts!” It relies on a gathering of theories that guide students and states persons toward an understanding of and predictions for international political outcomes (Kelly, Barrera, and Jewett 2020).

Weaknesses in the traditional should be admitted as well, with solutions questionable. For example, classical geopolitics lacks an ethical and a policy critique, again, to be so admired with the critical. Its definition and theories occasionally lack clarity and consistency, and the application of its generalizations to historical and contemporary events is sometimes imprecise or even mistaken. While in some cases, such as in distance, demography, immigration, global warming, and resources, whose numbers can render to statistical testing, a quantifiable methodology is absent to most social-sciences calculations including classical geopolitics.

These parameters announced, the author still blames the media, and in some cases, the critical, for accusing classical geopolitics of being “fascist,” “militarist,” and a “tool of capitalist exploitation” and under the authority of “Great-Power politics.” It frequently and wrongly is placed under the aegis of the realist model and of not being kept separate to its own uniqueness (Kelly 2019). These blames are unwarranted, unfair, and certainly detract from the value of the classical. One research mission of my own is to correct these misleading characterizations.

In conclusion, and to reflect comments in my initial paragraphs, I cannot fathom a firm theoretical joining of our two geopolitical versions. They stand alone in their own distinctive traditions and approaches. But that variance need not spell a necessary conflict between classical and critical, as both can be utilized toward bringing further insights into foreign affairs, albeit, from contrasting starting points in assumptions, values, and methodologies. That conclusion signals my interest in authoring this piece, that the critical and the classical hold strong merit. They should join in partnership and in cross-fertilization wherever possible. That game is multiple-sum, and I encourage that role.

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