



# Geopolitics: Cutting-Edge Geographical Reasoning

**Béatrice Giblin**

IN **HÉRODOTE** 2012/3 No 146-147 , PAGES 3 TO 13

PUBLISHER **LA DÉCOUVERTE**

ISSN 0338-487X

ISBN 9782707174512

DOI 10.3917/her.146.0003

Uploaded: 09/10/2013

Article available online at

<https://shs.cairn.info/journal-herodote-2012-3-page-3?lang=en>



Discover the contents of this issue, follow the journal by email, subscribe...  
Scan this QR code to access the page for this issue on Cairn.info.



**Electronic distribution Cairn.info for La Découverte.**

You are authorized to reproduce this article within the limits of the terms of use of Cairn.info or, where applicable, the terms and conditions of the license subscribed to by your institution. Details and conditions can be found at [cairn.info/copyright](http://cairn.info/copyright).

Unless otherwise provided by law, the digital use of these resources for educational purposes is subject to authorization by the Publisher or, where applicable, by the collective management organization authorized for this purpose. This is particularly the case in France with the CFC, which is the approved organization in this area.

# Geopolitics: Cutting-Edge Geographical Reasoning

Béatrice Giblin<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This issue is designed as a reflection on geopolitics and addresses the concerns of the *Hérodote* team over the media success of the term “geopolitics” (which is often used indiscriminately) even if it is still viewed with suspicion in some geographical circles. In fact, this success is not restricted to the media, as shown by the popularity of the geopolitical journal *Hérodote* and the French Institute of Geopolitics (IFG). An analysis of a large number of geopolitical situations caused by power struggles over specific territories has enabled the *Hérodote* team and the IFG (since the two overlap a great deal) to develop its theoretical thinking. We are making progress on the theoretical level because we have studied all kinds of conflicts in the field. As we move forward, we carefully and wisely refrain from setting any geopolitical rules. Instead, we aim to establish a rigorous approach based on geographical reasoning. This issue therefore presents a kind of review of the long journey traveled and considers the new perspectives we wish to explore.

This issue is designed as a reflection on geopolitics and addresses the concerns of the *Hérodote* team over the media success of the term “geopolitics” (which is often used indiscriminately) and the increasing number of textbooks on geopolitics for students of business, political science, and to a lesser extent, geography, a field in which the discipline of geopolitics is still viewed with suspicion. Although conflicts may now be studied as geopolitical issues in certification programs for secondary school teachers (CAPES) through the support of geographer and school

---

1. Editor of *Hérodote*.

inspector Laurent Carroué, the use of a geopolitical approach to these conflicts is still frowned upon.<sup>2</sup>

This infatuation with geopolitics is particularly French. It is not seen elsewhere in Europe or in the rest of the world. New journals such as *Diplomatie, Carto*, and *Questions Internationales* all owe their existence to the undeniable success of *Le Dessous des Cartes*, a television program created 20 years ago – a long time ago now – by Michel Foucher and directed by Jean-Christophe Victor.

Its popularity is therefore partly due to the press, where we find repeated references to geopolitics. However, repetition can sometimes discredit a concept, which in turn indirectly affects research on the subject in universities. In fact, constant use of a term by journalists is enough to question its academic value. To describe an academic text as “journalistic” (either in content or style) is the best way to discredit and remove any scientific claim it may make. In universities, people usually write for their peers who judge them, not to be read and understood by the greatest number of readers. At best, this is seen as popularization.

### A Way of Reasoning of Interest to People

Nevertheless, we must assume that we are on the right track: witness the 36-year existence of *Hérodote*. For an academic journal, its success is undeniable even if, in the view of some academics, it may also be a sign of reduced academic significance, as witnessed by the recent issue on the Far Right in Europe, the accuracy of papers often subsequently confirmed, authors eager to write for *Hérodote* and their ready response to specific commissions for a coherent thematic issue with content that will not become outdated, its 500 subscribers abroad and 800 subscribers in France,<sup>3</sup> and more than 100,000 visitors on the CAIRN website. Added to this list is the popularity of the French Institute of Geopolitics (IFG), which every year gets 300 master’s degree applications and a large number of PhD applicants. This is of course linked to students’ interest in geopolitical issues as they seek answers to the anxieties these generate and try to understand the complex geopolitics of the contemporary world. It is also a result of the scholarly nature of the information provided and its innovative – even cutting edge – character. The 145 issues of

---

2. This was reported to me by students who were taking the CAPES course at Paris-1 and who were advised against reading the work published by the *Hérodote* team precisely on this question (Giblin 2011).

3. This is a significant number for an academic journal (most journals have fewer than 500 subscribers), particularly since it is being increasingly distributed through the CAIRN portal.

*Hérodote* to date are responsible for a great deal of this success, as are the many dissertations and research papers written by IFG students. An analysis of a large number of geopolitical situations caused by power struggles within specific territories has enabled *Hérodote* and the IFG (since the two overlap a great deal) to develop their theoretical thinking. We are making progress on the theoretical level because we have studied all kinds of conflicts in the field, from the tragic and bloody (Rwanda, Ituri Province, Somalia) to the enduring, where resolution still seems distant (the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Western Sahara), the disturbing, due to Islamist radicalization and terrorism (Afghanistan, Pakistan, Sahara/Sahel), and the democratic, with conflicts over land use, the environment, and elections. It is important of course to move forward carefully and wisely so as not to set any geopolitical rules but instead establish a rigorous approach based on geographical reasoning. That is why we pay great attention to specific intersections of spatial sets or groups, be they physical or human, and to changes in levels of analysis in order to understand how a local situation can also be determined by phenomena observable from much broader analytical perspectives, which can be regional, national, international, and sometimes planetary.

This issue therefore presents a kind of review of the long journey traveled and considers the new perspectives we wish to explore.

### *Why Has Geopolitics Had So Much Success in France?*

Yves Lacoste reminded us that it was the conflict between Cambodia and Vietnam that led André Fontaine, editor of *Le Monde* at the time, to use the term “geopolitical” at the end of his editorial. Shocked by the war between these two Third World Communist countries over the Mekong Delta and struggling to find the words to describe it, Fontaine came up with “geopolitics.” Doubtless, the situation seemed to him unprecedented and unexpected, even bizarre, and impossible to analyze using traditional factors explaining conflicts since these two countries were on the same side against the United States and at stake was territory that seemed to have no economic assets (oil resources, for example).

As we know, the term “geopolitics” had been taboo ever since the Nazis used it.<sup>4</sup> In France, however, the term was hardly used even before this particular form of censorship. In trying to establish geography as an academic discipline, the first university professors of geography rejected the inclusion of the political dimension, and this epistemological exclusion is still in effect in some academic geography

---

4. Only a few journalists used the term. One example is Éric Rouleau writing about de Gaulle’s policy in the Middle East after the 1967 war in an article in *Le Monde Diplomatique*.

circles. Lacoste (1979) revealed the regrettable consequences of such exclusion for French geography, something that did not occur in Germany (Lacoste 2006). Yet this intentional exclusion of the political dimension meant that French geographers avoided the excesses of German geopolitics. Perhaps, it also meant that it became easier to override a taboo that still weighs on German geopolitics today, both in academia and in the media.

The reasons for this interest in geopolitics in France are not obvious, and it would be extremely useful if researchers would take an interest in the subject. Could it be an indirect result of the compulsorily paired study of history and geography through high school (excluding a recent and short-lived interlude) that led the French to take an interest in world events? Is it a legacy of a time when France was a great power? Do the French feel greater anxiety about the decline of Europe than do other Europeans? Or is it due to the fairly widely felt sense that we live in an unstable world over which hang a variety of threats (religious terrorism, nuclear proliferation, the decline of the West, the rise of new powers, new dependency, etc.)? We know that the French are moderately confident about their country's future.

### *The Negative Consequences of the Hegemony of Physical Geography over Geography*

We should remember that one of the main reasons why geographers rejected the political dimension was Emmanuel de Martonne's concentration on physical geography.<sup>5</sup> The son-in-law of Paul Vidal de La Blache, de Martonne was a long-time leader among geographers. He was the very model of the academic mandarin, with a reputation for being difficult, and his prestige, ability, and celebrity helped promote physical geography and, for a long time, made people forget his role as adviser to Clemenceau during the drawing of borders at the 1919 Peace Conference (Lacoste 2006). It is probably due to him that Vidal de La Blache's book on Eastern France (*La France de l'Est*), published in 1916, in which he dealt with the question of Alsace-Lorraine's return to France, was forgotten (Lacoste 1979). How can we explain this firm determination to move away from the study of borders? Was it for academic reasons? Indeed, most of de Martonne's publications (a total of 150 works, including papers) deal with questions of physical geography. This is the great mystery in the history of geographers.

As the director of the Geographical Institute in Paris for 35 years, de Martonne therefore had ample time to impose his own conception of geography.

---

5. Emmanuel de Martonne wrote a famous treatise on physical geography first published in 1908 and reissued several times and still being recommended in the 1960s.

Geomorphology, pedology, geology, and climatology are recognized academic disciplines – I was about to write “truly academic” – since they deal with the natural sciences, which are considered exact sciences because they are regulated by “laws,” in contrast to human sciences. Teachers of physical geography had greater prestige than teachers of human geography, perhaps because they had special specific knowledge, with a vocabulary and concepts that were unfamiliar to students, unlike the readily accessible ones of human geography. This prestige was no doubt enhanced by the level of difficulty involved in earning a degree in physical geography. Some physical geographers did not consider human geography to be “real” geography but rather sociology or economics, and many still share this perspective today. This explains why the following incorrect definition of geopolitics is still to be found in a dictionary such as the *Robert*: “The study of the relationships between natural geographical data and the politics of nations.” We are familiar with the disastrous consequences of excluding the political dimension, which created a significant epistemological gap and helped make school geography a “nice” discipline (Lacoste 1976), in which what is required is essentially a good memory since there is nothing to understand. Yet, the real division between physical and human geography had equally disastrous consequences, a situation that was not improved by the fussy compartmentalization of regional geography, which was dominant until the 1980s, since human activities were only dealt with once the physical geography of the region had been studied. Certainly, no geographical reasoning was involved. Yet, there have been excellent geographers in human geography, including Albert Demangeon, whose volume on the British Isles in Vidal de la Blache’s 1927 *Géographie Universelle* is remarkable and, more particularly, his work on the British Empire, a study of colonial geography published in 1923 and translated into English in 1925 and German in 1926, a work that belongs more in the tradition of Reclus<sup>6</sup> than of Vidal de la Blache.

### The Essential Contribution of Geography to Geopolitics

Ever since its first issue, *Hérodote* has often, under Lacoste’s urgent injunction, reminded readers that geography integrates both physical aspects (relief, climate, soil, etc.) and human aspects (population distribution, level of economic development, culture, religion, language, etc.) into its reasoning. One hundred forty-four issues later, Lacoste wrote another long paper on the features of geographical reasoning and why and how it was an essential element of geopolitical analysis. To this

6. See Issue 130 of *Hérodote* (Lacoste 2008).



Added to these reflection papers on various geopolitical areas and their developments, *Hérodote* is also publishing a paper by Christophe Strassel questioning the relationship between economics and geopolitics and asking whether one mutually influences the other and, if so, how. For a long time, *Hérodote* took no serious interest in economics because the field did not seem to match Lacoste's simple and efficient definition of geopolitics. Of course, the fact that conflicts over economic resources were exacerbating – and sometimes inciting – factors should not be ignored. Yet, we cannot not go as far as to suggest that all conflicts can be explained by what is at stake economically since the spatial effects of an increasingly globalized economy are undeniable and can be understood at various analytical levels, from the most local (such as the closure or relocation of factories) to the most international (including bilateral agreements or the international monitoring of compliance with free trade).

*An Extremely Efficient Tool: Contradictory Representations of Territories in Conflict*

In his foreword to the *Dictionnaire de Géopolitique*, Lacoste (1992) stressed the importance of the contradictory representations the various protagonists in a conflict have of a territory, the emblematic example of this process being the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Most geopolitical situations are the result of problems arising over the issue of power and territory, that is, arguments between protagonists that in democratic countries remain verbal (in the form of protests, debate, and controversy in the press, dissenting votes, etc.) but in others can rapidly lead to open conflict. In nation-states built over time, armed conflict between opposing political forces can be finally and definitively settled and consigned to the past. Borders stabilize based on a relationship between opposing forces that find an equilibrium, sometimes following dreadful wars, and geopolitical disagreements about the configuration of the national territory no longer occur. Nevertheless, if we take the case of France, minority movements in the quest for independence, such as the French Overseas Departments (DOM) in the Caribbean (as in Guadeloupe) and in Corsica still exist. However, the vast majority of the population in these territories is well aware of the positive aspects of French citizenship, especially since social policies apply in full in the DOM. Yet, a geopolitical conflict can occur in mainland France itself on the subject of the nation and its unity. The electoral success of Marine Le Pen in the 2012 presidential election (6.5 million votes) is one such sign. Le Pen attracted voters on the basis of offensive language in defense of “true French people” and their sovereignty over a national territory defended by its borders. She stressed French secular values, a clever rhetorical device she used to condemn what she considers a threat

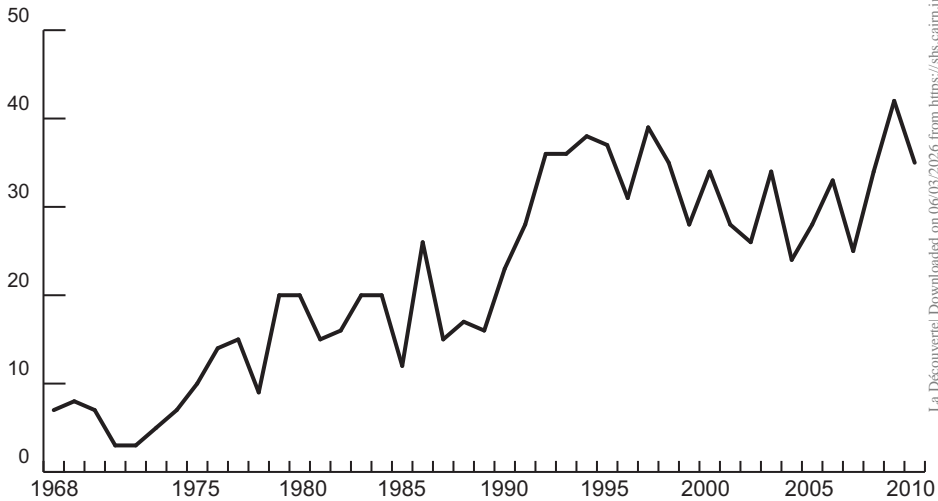
to French identity, namely the growth in the number of Muslims and the deliberate push by a minority of Islamic radicals to impose the monitoring of religious behavior in areas with large populations from Muslim backgrounds. We should also remember that Nicolas Sarkozy went down the same path, especially between electoral rounds, an electoral gambit that gave further credibility to Le Pen's discourse and deepened national divisions (Giblin 2006) by in essence rejecting the claim of French Muslims, especially if they were Arab or Black, to be part of the nation. On this subject, a voter of Maghreb origin in Hénin-Beaumont stated: "Until now, I felt French, but now, with her, I feel Arab." Here, we can legitimately talk of geopolitical conflict because specific territories are at stake in the form of places where numerous Muslim immigrants can be found in suburban ghettos, in which contradictory representations of the nation arise. Resolving this division is a major issue for the governing Left, especially in times of crisis and low economic growth conditions that are favorable to increased anxiety and social tension.

The positive response to the National Front and to far-right parties in other European countries (see the special issue of *Hérodote* 2012) can be credited to the anxiety created by Al-Qaeda-inspired foreign radical Islamist movements in the West, in particular among Muslim populations judged to be ungodly or even apostate. These movements, which are perhaps religious but undeniably political, have a geopolitical objective in that they wish to impose Islamic states governed by sharia law and eventually bring the Muslim community together into a political unit. These Islamists use as their territorial representation not the nation-state but a far larger territorial entity encompassing all the territories in which Muslims would impose sharia law. Although this is clearly a project involving innumerable numbers of Muslims, the geopolitical damage caused by a small number of determined individuals can be huge in certain situations. This is attested by the anxiety created by the actions of activists from Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQMI) in Mali. Although this is not the right forum for discussing the involvement of France and the United Kingdom (with support from the US military) in the Libyan civil war, we should mention the extent of the risk of setbacks in how these geopolitical situations unfold. These acts of war and attempts at controlling the population of these territories (as in Gao, which was surrounded and controlled by Islamists) are justified by some representations of a territory and of course opposed by others. As the Tuaregs are demanding autonomy and even independence, and this worries neighboring countries – Algeria, Niger, Mauritania – which would be affected because there are Tuaregs in their own territory. This is also a concern for the government of Mali since the territory claimed by Islamists and Tuaregs is an integral part of its national territory and therefore should remain under State control. Yet Mali's military forces are too weak for an effective response over a vast

and difficult territory, particularly as they are also contesting the legitimacy of the country's political authorities.

In view of the importance we place on territorial representations in geopolitical analysis, we devote several papers to the subject. Lacoste (2012) has dissected and critiqued Halford Mackinder's famous paper "The Geographical Pivot of History" (1904) with solid geographical and historical arguments. Though often quoted, this work is rarely read by those who refer to it and present Mackinder as the founder of geopolitics, even though he never used the word itself. His paper is especially renowned for his concepts of "heartland" and "pivot," both referring to geopolitical representations. The first has a sentimental connotation, that of the heart, the engine of life, and therefore, in this representation, the center of political life, the heart of decision making. "Pivot," on the other hand, is the axis around which other countries organize themselves and determine their policies. Although "heartland" is no longer used in geopolitical texts, "pivot nation" remains in common use. Yet, Mackinder's text remains interesting for two reasons: first because all works of geopolitics defined as "theoretical" make systematic reference to him, and second because of the remaining fame of these two representations, which was illustrated by a paper by the famous US journalist Robert D. Kaplan published in the no less prestigious journal *Foreign Affairs* (2010). We also wanted to present in this issue the geopolitical representations of some major nation-states, namely Russia, the United States, Brazil, and Japan. We selected these because geopolitics has been manipulated by the authorities in all four powerful states to determine and justify domestic policy, that is, in the context of national borders (especially in Brazil and Russia, two very large nation-states) and international borders as well. Finally, since there is no real power without military force, a geopolitical analysis of NATO also has a place here given the complexity of the actors who determine its policies and therefore the representations national leaders have of its role, of the territories that should be integrated into it, and of those where it should intervene. However, not all leaders of NATO member states share the same views. This is due to historical reasons specific to each country and to the different geopolitical representations these leaders have of the world. Whereas some see NATO as obsolete since the end of the Cold War, others would like it to integrate states close to Russia, such as Ukraine and Georgia. Moreover, while the presence of Turkey in NATO is used by some as an argument to push for the integration of Turkey into the European Union as proof that it belongs in the Western camp, others stress the reluctance of the government led by the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* -AKP) to let the US military use Turkish bases to launch its offensive against Iraq. This is seen as a sign of an essentially long-term move away from the Western camp to reconnect with Ottomanism. NATO is a geopolitical subject indeed.

GRAPH – NUMBER OF ARTICLES PER YEAR IN *LE MONDE DIPLOMATIQUE*  
USING THE WORD “GEOPOLITICS”



La Découverte| Downloaded on 06/03/2026 from https://shs.cairn.info (IP: 216.73.217.142)

Data compiled from a CD-ROM archive of *Le Monde Diplomatique* (1968-2010). The papers in which the word “geopolitical” appeared not in the text but in the key words (which were not in the paper version but were added around the text for the purpose of searching the CD-ROM) have been excluded. Of the 1,195 papers using the word “geopolitics” in the period covered by the CD-ROM, only the 959 with the word “geopolitics” in the text printed at the time (article, map, bibliography, author’s biographies, notes, etc.) were included.

### Bibliography

- DEMANGEON, Albert. 1923. *L'empire Britannique: Étude de géographie coloniale*. Paris: Armand Colin.
- DEMANGEON, Albert, 1927. “Les Îles Britanniques” vol. 1. In *Géographie universelle*, edited by Paul Vidal de La Blache and Lucien Gallois. Paris: Armand Colin.
- DE MARTONNE, Emmanuel. 1908. *Traité de géographie physique*. Paris: Armand Colin.
- GIBLIN, Béatrice. 2006. “Fracture sociale ou fracture nationale? De la gravité des violences urbaines de l’automne 2005.” *Hérodote* 120:77-95.
- GIBLIN, Béatrice, ED. 2011. *Les conflits dans le monde: Approche géopolitique*. Paris: Armand Colin.

- GIBLIN, Béatrice, ED. 2012. "L'extrême droite en Europe." *Hérodote* 144.
- KAPLAN, Robert D. 2010. "The Geography of Chinese Power: How Far Can Beijing Reach on Land and at Sea?" *Foreign Affairs* (May-June): 1-12.
- LACOSTE, Yves. 1976. *La géographie, ça sert, d'abord à faire la guerre*. Paris: Maspero. New enlarged edition. 2012. Paris: La Découverte.
- LACOSTE, Yves. 1979. "À bas Vidal . . . Viva Vidal." *Hérodote* 16:69-81.
- LACOSTE, Yves. 1992. *Dictionnaire de géopolitique*. Paris: Flammarion.
- LACOSTE, Yves. 2006. *Géopolitique: La longue histoire d'aujourd'hui*. Paris: Larousse.
- LACOSTE, Yves, ED. 2008. "Géographie, guerres, et conflits: La géographie, la géopolitique, et le raisonnement géographique." *Hérodote* 130.
- LACOSTE, Yves. 2012. "Mackinder, 'Le pivot géographique de l'histoire:' Une lecture critique." *Hérodote* 146-147.
- MACKINDER, Halford J. 1904. "The Geographical Pivot of History." *The Geographical Journal* 23 (4): 421-37.
- VIDAL DE LA BLACHE, Paul. 1916. *La France de l'Est (Lorraine-Alsace)*. Paris: Armand Colin.