

GPS: Geopolitics and Security - Critical Perspectives From Royal Holloway

Written by The GPS Contributors

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2012/10/16/gps-geopolitics-and-security-critical-perspectives-from-royal-holloway/>

THE GPS CONTRIBUTORS, OCT 16 2012

This is our first blog posting for e-IR. We are a collective of faculty and doctoral students from the Geography and Politics & International Relations Departments at Royal Holloway, University of London who, collectively run the university's Geopolitics and Security MSc programme – a new distinctive perspective on geopolitical and security research and analysis.

In this first post, we sketch out some of the detail of that framing and outline the promise and possibility of a dialogue between IR and Geography. By taking a sensitive spatial — or geographical, spelled with a small g – approach, our programme, and our postings on this blog, revolve around a central question: What insights can be gained by highlighting the 'geo' within studies of geopolitics and security?

First, our research interests orbit around empirical and theoretical questions implicitly and explicitly addressing the spatial.

- We write frequently on the traffic across and within border zones – between separation walls, through highly secured termini, and within frontier areas that might be unmarked but actually often ambiguous.
- We research governance, and the conflict and contestation over resources, trade routes and territorial disputes in places such as the Arctic, the South West Atlantic, Latin America and international waters.
- We analyze communications and media from the cold war to today, that as well as skewing and stretching the projection of power to far off places, have a spatiality of their own.
- We hone in on the violence and security performed in cities and urban places, through the plans and practices that prepare us for risk and emergency, and we interrogate the sky and the ground (and even below) to comprehend the vertical and the volumetric, as states and other actors attempt to exert influence over the highest and deepest reaches of our planet through control over tangible and intangible resources and territories.
- We study the individual as a geopolitical agent, in the home, in the boardroom, on the border, and off the map.
- We examine the multitude of institutions, structures, relations, and affects that make us, as individuals, secure and insecure in our specific places.

While some of our work resonates with classical geopolitical perspectives, most recently reproduced, for instance, in Robert Kaplan's *Revenge of Geography*, we vociferously contest these perspectives. For us, classical perspectives fail to challenge the reductivist and foundationalist assumptions about geography that are then reproduced within the ideologies, discourses, practices and strategies of states. While we recognize that the 'geo' remains very much within geopolitics and security analysis and practice, we assert that this occurs in a way that is highly nuanced and continually challenged, as the 'geo' itself exists within continual social (and more-than-social) reproduction.

Furthermore, we hold that the perspectives of consultants, elites and policy-makers cannot very well be seen in isolation from the cultural, social, political and the economic. These are contexts through which the doing of security and geopolitics is routinely performed and circulated in extraordinary as well as banal, popular and everyday settings.

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In short, the textures of place matter, and we seek to account for that in our analysis.

There are four further lines of enquiry our postings will take. Let us outline those briefly:

Geographical Imaginations

Absolutely at the heart of our work is a recognition that particular imaginations or geographical representations of the world proliferate in international relations and geopolitics. These are neither innocent nor natural. Instead they tend to perpetuate particular world-views, stereotypes, binaries and social, cultural and political assumptions about places and peoples. From the Arctic, which is all too often seen as a region wherein political and economic actors wage unmediated wars against each other and against nature, to the Middle East, which is all too often portrayed as a region whose politics is defined by irrational and permanent ethnic conflicts, these imaginations are often very powerful and have sustained traction if they are not challenged. We aim to challenge them, contemplate alternative geographical imaginations, and disseminate those imaginations to different security and geopolitics communities and audiences.

Practices

Although much of our research is rooted in the analysis of geopolitics and security as a discursive practice, we also recognize that there is more to the world than the texts and speeches that represent it. Geopolitical norms are also reproduced through *practices*, whether in the realm of 'everyday life' or the circulation of policy elites. Much of our work engages the 'minor practices' that constitute geopolitics and security. From the humiliating touch at the security checkpoint to the waves of passion feeding audiences at political rallies, to the ways in which capabilities are enacted during military and emergency exercises, our work challenges researchers to tackle the little things and acts that make up our world.

Materialities

In the same vein that our discourses might be inadequate to explore practices we recognize that the worlds we explore are made up of things and materialities that cannot simply be grasped through the study of geopolitical scripts or foreign policy decisions and legal frameworks. The city, for example, constitutes an imaginary as well as a very real arena of social struggle and resistance to administrative, political and military goals. Things and objects can and do *object* to their enrollment, and there is significant excess at the margins of practices, techniques and technologies. Our work is attentive to rethinking the 'geo' from its more classical geographical, and even geophysical, origins.

Pedagogy

Finally, this blog is inspired by our ongoing research and teaching. And our research and teaching will be inspired by this blog. Blogging is being initiated as a collaborative effort between staff and students in the MSc programme, and MSc students will contribute to our postings. Our writing will be authoritative but accessible and always open to comment and reply.

While our students will likely find employment in the very geographical, social and politico-economic contexts that concern us, it is our hope that they do so with the critical ethos and atmosphere of the programme and this blog.

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This is the inaugural blog post of GPS: Geopolitics and Security – Critical Perspectives From Royal Holloway