

Prerequisites for Political Understanding and Policymaking (Part 3)

The Role of the Map in Political Understanding

(Translated)

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It has been said that a politician who does not know the world map does not know politics; the world map and its knowledge are essential to political understanding.

Map-related information is not limited to knowing the location of the country to which the particular event under investigation relates. Instead, it extends to understanding the country's location on the map, the nature of the geography related to the country, the nature of its borders, its connection to oceans, its connection to important geographical features, and understanding the demographic situation in terms of population number, population density, the nature and characteristics of the population, and its possession of energy and technology.

It is worth noting that there is an intersection between the political and strategic features of a country's location. Political features help a country to carve out an important international position, and help the analyst understand the political issues and events related to the country. Understanding the strategic features of a country's location on the map is useful in military analysis, and for the country's military position to be strong. The intersection is due to the fact that the political strength of a country is linked to its military strength.

Understanding a country's location requires several factors, including whether it is a continental state, an oceanic state, or a combination of both. A continental state is one whose geographical location is on land, with its borders surrounded by land, land-locked, with no access to the sea. An oceanic state is one located in the ocean, and therefore its borders are surrounded by ocean waters. A country that combines both is one that has a continental mass, that is, a large portion of land, and coasts open to oceans or seas.

A continental state's strength is continental, meaning its power is linked to the strengths of the land, in terms of terrain, transportation and trade routes, and land power. An oceanic state's strength is oceanic, due to its openness to sea routes, the ability of its fleets to transport and wage war, its broad trade horizons, and its extensive ability to communicate with other peoples. Therefore, the continental state lacks peripheral projective power, and its ability to carve out an influential international position remains less than that of more peripheral states. As for those states that possess both characteristics, having a continental mass and an oceanic mass, their ability to carve out an advanced global position is high.

Continental countries include those located in the centers of continents, such as Afghanistan, Chad, Niger, Bolivia, and Paraguay. Oceanic countries include Britain, Australia, Japan, the Philippines, and Indonesia. Countries with both characteristics include the United States, Spain, Turkey, India, Egypt, Libya, Algeria, Yemen, ash-Sham, Iran, Pakistan, France, Italy, Germany, and China. Russia's continental mass is large, but it is connected to frozen waters, making its use of the oceanic aspect very costly. Therefore, it has made tremendous efforts throughout its history to reach warm waters, and continues to do so, in order to take on the oceanic dimension.

A country's location on the map remains a decisive factor in determining its global weight, whether through its ability to connect to other countries, or its location on key international communication routes. Not all oceanic countries are made equal; those connected to important geographic features are more likely to assume a high global weight. Important geographic features include islands, straits, isthmuses, and locations overlooking international shipping lanes.

Islands are of great importance in several respects. If a country's borders extend to include an archipelago of islands in a significant region, and it controls the surrounding sea, it gains global influence. Therefore, Japan sought to control the Pacific Ocean, and its attack on Pearl Harbor was perhaps motivated by its desire to control the Pacific Ocean. Had it achieved this, it could have easily assumed the position of the number one country. If the islands are not on trade routes, their location can be considered if it is important for influencing other countries. They can be controlled and used as military bases, such as the Solomon Islands in northeastern Australia, and the Socotra Islands in southern Yemen opposite the Horn of Africa. Peninsulas, such as Crimea, are also included in the list of islands.

International maritime transport takes routes across the high oceans, and if a situation compels it to change its route, this is not at all difficult. However, when shipping routes pass through straits, they are indispensable routes, as the route is often restricted through these straits. Britain's control of Gibraltar and the Bab al-Mandab made this a tool for its global influence when it was the leading power there. The Taiwan Strait, through which 500,000 commercial sea voyages pass annually (Asharq Al-Awsat, 21 August, 2023), prompted America to turn it into a zone of influence and friction with China, by winning over the ruling regime in Taiwan to its side. The Bosphorus Strait made Istanbul an internationally influential region, prompting the Allies to grant it special status in the Treaty of Lausanne, which stipulated the demilitarization of the Strait, along with the Dardanelles, the Sea of Marmara, the Turkish islands, and some Greek islands.

An isthmus is a thin strip of land connecting two larger areas of land. Its location on international shipping routes makes it a port and embarkation point for ships at either end, or it may prompt the country administering it to dig a canal connecting the two ends of the isthmus. Examples of these are the Suez Canal, the Panama Canal, and the Kiel Canal. Prior to the opening of the Panama Canal, the Isthmus of Tehuantepec was the shortest route between the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Ocean.

It is clear that if continental countries do not have access to the oceans, they will be forced to rely on intermediary, more peripheral states that occupy a place between the continent and the sea. Even those countries with little global influence are viewing this issue with concern. Ethiopia, for example, concluded an agreement with the breakaway Republic of Somaliland in 2023 to grant it access to the Red Sea.

The nature of geography related to a state encompasses several fundamental elements, including its area, the nature of its borders, its domestic, internal terrain, and its natural structure. As for the nature of a state's borders, there is no specific law governing the nature of borders, whether chosen or imposed by a state. It is natural for a state to have defined itself by natural boundaries, such as mountain ranges, river courses, and seashores. Borders may have been drawn pursuant to agreements with neighboring countries, or as a result of expansion or contraction due to wars. However, since the emergence of the new world order, nationalistic borders have taken on a sacred character, and the issue of expansion has become a matter of global abhorrence, or in need of justification that reflects a popular will for annexation or secession. Among the geography related to borders is the type of

population centers located on the border. Some borders border two countries and separate two peoples, while others border two countries and separate a single people into two parts, each part belonging to a separate state. This helps us understand the stability and permeability of borders due to the connection or separation of the two peoples on either side of the border. Border geography includes knowing the countries bordering the border and knowing their international status, which opens the door to competition, dispute, war, dependency, or taking over vital territory.

The natural structure is related to the nature of the country's environment and the resources contained within its geography. A country's surplus water resources are vital to its water security, and the depletion of groundwater reservoirs is a risk indicator. Oil and mineral wealth is an important factor in countries, enabling them to achieve self-sufficiency in energy and industry, and even enhancing their ability to influence others through these resources. Marine mineral and fish resources are an important factor in their wealth and food security. The nature of the soil, in terms of the vastness of fertile land, and the contrasting expanse of deserts, influences a country's position in terms of the true strength of its economy, or in other words, its productive capacity. This even influences the nature of its people.

The area of a country, as in the vastness of the area, has a value in several aspects — one of which is the connection between the vastness of the area and the population, another through the connection between the area and the wealth, and another through the strategic depth of the country. This last aspect is very important, especially in the event of its exposure to invasion, as the large area makes the control of the invaders slow, and perhaps faltering if their invasion is an invasion of the territory, and not an invasion of the centers of power.

Domestic terrain grants natural internal defensive lines for a country if it contains rugged terrain, or vice versa if it contains flat terrain. The diversity of terrain also contributes to the diversity of production in a country. The Ural Mountains in Russia were a natural barrier, behind which a vast extension to the east protected Russia from collapse, in the event that invaders took control of its western part, the part in which the Russian capital, Moscow, is located. In contrast, the European Plain in Eastern Europe made its countries a corridor for wars and an arena of cultural conflict.

It is important for countries to be located on land ports and transportation routes. Turkey's location makes it a major land link between Asia and Europe, and thus, land trade routes between Asia and Europe pass through it. The same applies to countries located along the ancient Silk Road and the Belt and Road Initiative, including China, Kazakhstan, Russia, Belarus, Poland, and Germany. This has prompted the implementation of major projects along these routes, including railways, land ports, and oil and gas pipelines.

Population, on the other hand, is a very important factor in a state's strength. Research into it takes several approaches, one of which is population size and growth rate. Another links population to area, thus studying population density. Another relates to the age density of the population, and another relates to the nature of the people. Countries that aspire to assume international status push toward increasing their population. This is achieved by encouraging the population to reproduce, and providing benefits for each additional family member, thus increasing birth rates in the country. Another approach is to compensate for the population deficit by immigration, thus increasing the incentives that drive people to immigrate into the country, thus increasing the population. This stimulates the economy, provides protection from extinction, and provides the potential to pursue major projects that may require waging costly wars in terms of manpower, whether in terms of preparation or in terms of bearing losses. Population density, on the other hand, is an indicator of a state's human and economic strength, as you will see that the largest cities in the world are those

that provide abundant economic opportunities, abundant resources, financial activity, or political centers. Population density indicates the ageing or youthfulness of societies. Young societies have a high capacity for production and fighting, unlike aging societies.

Energy and technology have become key issues in shaping the strength of nations, especially those that have, or seek to achieve, a prominent international position. Energy and technology are interconnected. While energy can be classified as a nation's resource, it can also be given a separate classification. It can be viewed in terms of the availability of raw materials for fossil fuels and nuclear energy within a nation. It can also be viewed in terms of the nation's investment in its existing energy resources, such as the presence of oil wells, refineries, nuclear reactors, and the level of enrichment in nuclear reactors. These resources and associated facilities are extracted and operated by the nation, or the nation has granted concessions for other nations to do so. Conversely, some technologies are relatively common within a nation and do not significantly impact its weight, while others are a key factor in its strength. These include iron and steel technology, heavy industries, electronics technology, and the microchip industry. Others include artificial intelligence, which is used in military industries and espionage operations, and aviation and satellite technology. There are many examples of this. Taiwan's "monopoly" over the microchip industry has given it global influence. In other words, America has influenced the world because the Taiwanese government is subordinate to America, and because the operating system for Taiwanese chips is American. Indeed, America provides subsidies to companies operating in this field in America, including Intel, which has chip projects in Arizona, Ohio, New Mexico, and Oregon, and the Taiwanese company, TSMC, which has two factories under construction near Phoenix (Al Jazeera Net, January 28, 2024). This is to ensure the industry remains under its control. Furthermore, America excels in the software aspect of microchips, and has been ahead of the rest of the world in this field, which has helped strengthen its global influence. On the other hand, the development of the missile industry in Russia has made it a reality in wars. The Kinzhal missile and the hypersonic Oreshnik missile have distinguished Russia's strength. As for the espionage industry, America developed it to the point of producing aircraft during the Soviet era that fly at high altitudes beyond radar detection, equipped with high-resolution cameras that accurately capture the desired locations. It then developed into the manufacture of spy satellites with ultra-high-resolution cameras. Let's not forget modern technologies in image analysis, facial recognition, and network security, to the point where its armies wage wars as electronic hackers. Although these things haven't been captured on modern maps, they must be observed in countries, just as raw material and oil resources are observed.

This is a brief overview of a collective of issues that are important to consider when looking at a map, noting that some are more influential in highlighting a state's power than others. There is no single law that determines whether a state possesses certain characteristics that make it more powerful than another. Instead, it examines the overall geopolitical situation of the state and the sum of its characteristics.