

HOW DOES GEOPOLITICAL REASONING IN US FOREIGN POLICY LEAD TO ERRONEOUS ASSUMPTIONS IN THE REPRESENTATION OF PLACES? A CASE OF CENTRAL ASIA

Yunusov Shokhrukh Musurmon o'g'li

Teacher at the Department of International Relations, Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies

yunusovsm17@gmail.com

Abstract: This paper aims to examine the role of geopolitical reasoning in shaping US foreign policy, specifically in Central Asia. The United States' global power is often attributed to its military and economic strength, but it also wields significant power through its ability to shape discourses and represent regions or states in certain ways. This paper examines how the US labels countries or regions—such as categorising some as part of the “Third World” and others as “democratic” or part of the “Western World”. The research explores the objectivity of these representations and how they oversimplify complex geopolitical realities. Using critical geopolitics as a theoretical framework, the paper argues that US foreign policy in Central Asia, like in other regions, often ignores the real geographical, socio-political, and cultural conditions, leading to distorted understandings.

Keywords: critical geopolitics, geopolitical reasoning, representation practices, US foreign policy, Central Asia, discourse, objectivity, formal and practical reasoning.

Introduction

The United States' status as a global power can be attributed to its formidable military and economic capabilities. At the same time, the US has another form of power that allows it to spatialise international politics. This power is the ability to represent regions or states, to shape discourses and narratives related to certain spaces. For example, the United States can shape a certain discourse by including some countries or regions as a third world and others as a democratic or Western world. The US foreign policy deeply embeds this power. Geopolitical reasoning helps in forming such a discourse. But to what extent is the practice of representing certain places in US foreign policy based on objectivity? To what extent does the US, when 'labelling' certain countries or regions, take into account their real situation, i.e., their real geographical circumstances and socio-political conditions? How can formal and practical geopolitical reasoning shape US foreign policy in specific places? This research paper aims to answer these questions. The paper tries to answer the above questions more broadly by analysing the use of geopolitical reasoning in US foreign policy in Central Asia. The main argument is that the geopolitical reasoning of US foreign policy in Central Asia, as elsewhere, tends to oversimplify the complex reality without taking into account the region's real geographical features, diversity, and complexity. Geopolitical reasoning leads to the oversimplification of foreign policy by abstracting complex realities.

Critical geopolitics serves as a theoretical framework in the paper to answer the research question and support the argument. Accordingly, the first part of the study covers the theoretical foundations of critical geopolitics and geopolitical reasoning. In the second part, geopolitical reasoning of US foreign policy in Central Asia is analysed across various periods.

Methods

This study employs discourse analysis as its primary methodological approach to examine how geopolitical reasoning manifests in U.S. foreign policy toward Central Asia (See for discourse analysis: van Dijk, 2008; van Leeuwen, 2008; Fairclough and Fairclough, 2012). Discourse analysis, in the context of critical geopolitics, involves examining the language, narratives, and representations through which states construct spatial understandings of the world (Ó Tuathail, 1996; Dalby, 1991). By analysing key policy documents, speeches, and strategic reports produced by U.S. governmental institutions—such as the U.S. Department of State, the White House, and congressional hearings—this study identifies patterns in how Central Asia is represented and categorised. These texts are approached not as neutral reflections of geopolitical reality but as active tools for shaping and legitimising foreign policy decisions. The method allows for the uncovering of underlying assumptions, ideological framings, and power relations embedded in geopolitical narratives.

Critical Geopolitics

Foucault's premise that geography as a discourse is a form of power/knowledge serves as a foundation for scholars of critical geopolitics (Dodds and Sidaway, 1994, p.516). Accordingly, geopolitics is understood as discourse, and in addition to the idea that practice forms the basis of geopolitics, it emphasises that discourse forms the basis for practice. For example, it is through discourse that countries decide to build military bases or fleets or conduct military operations (Ó Tuathail and Agnew, 1992, p.191). Ó Tuathail (1999, p.107) claims critical geopolitics 'is a problematizing theoretical enterprise that places the existing structures of power and knowledge in question'. According to him, knowledge is always situated and reflects subjective perspectives. Critical geopolitics writers deny that geopolitics has objective views and define it as power politics (Ó Tuathail, 1999, p.107). Critical geopolitics refuses to accept classical geopolitical theories 'as is' and doubts the objectivity of their motivation (Kelly, 2006, p.35). Hepple (1992, quoted in Kelly, 2006, p.37) argues, for example, that classical geopolitical theories serve certain groups and help legitimise their interests and interpretations.

Ó Tuathail and Agnew (1992, p.192) argue for the need to reconceptualize geopolitics as a discursive practice that helps the spatialization of international politics by intellectuals of statecraft. They further state that 'the challenge for the student of geopolitics is to understand how geographical knowledge is transformed in the reductive geopolitical reasoning of intellectuals of statecraft'.

Critical geopolitics writers intend to deconstruct the representational practices of foreign policy elites in spatializing international politics (Dodds and Sidaway, 1994, p.518). They also emphasise that the task of geographers is not to develop rationales for policymakers to promote imperial power (Dalby, 2008, p.417). Although geopolitics continues to be used in foreign policy analysis, its critics have linked it to ideologies ranging from fascism to the Cold War (Kelly, 2006, p.25). In this respect, critical geopolitics writers always question the objectivity of geopolitics.

Results and Discussions

Foreign policy – representational practice

In foreign policy, the problem of objectivity arises in the representation of certain places. As Gregory and Walford (1989, quoted in Dodds, 1994, p.187) claim 'our texts are not mirrors which we hold up to the world... they are, instead, creatures of our own making'. Therefore, it is crucial to examine the discourse of representation while analysing the writing of foreign policy.

Dodds (1994, p.188) states representational practices 'has increasingly been recognized as vital to the practice of foreign policy'. Due to the importance of 'mass documents' in conducting foreign policy, it requires textual practice. Department summaries, briefing papers, and intelligence reports have the ability to represent or reinterpret specific areas. For example, US foreign policy represents certain places by interpreting and depicting them and shaping the discourse about those places. The United States forms such representations based on its foreign political interests, without considering the actual situation or objectivity of the place it represents.

Dodds (1994, p.188) argues that such representational practices, which constitute foreign policy, play an important role in creating 'understandings' and cites an example from Shapiro's (1998) analysis of US practices depicting Guatemala in the 1980s. Shapiro (1998) analyses how US foreign policy discourse reduced Guatemala's complex characteristics to simple 'facts', dragging it into Cold War discourse. However, Dodds (1994, p.188) argues that it is difficult to see the US representation of Guatemala as a problematic depiction. Because, he claims, such a description in foreign policy can be very effective in mobilising or justifying support for a particular policy.

Geopolitical reasoning

The practice of representation in foreign policy paves the way for geopolitical reasoning. Ó Tuathail and Agnew (1992, p.195) argues 'geopolitical reasoning works by active suppression of the complex geographical reality of places in favour of controllable geopolitical abstraction'. For example, during the Cold War, US foreign policy discourse called certain regions or countries communist or capitalist; labelling the Soviet Union as 'oriental' or 'potential rapist' is an example of geopolitical reasoning by denying geographic knowledge of the diversity and complexity of regions (Ó Tuathail and Agnew, 1992, p.199-200).

Ó Tuathail and Agnew (1992, p.194) state that there are two forms of geopolitical reasoning: formal and practical. First, formal geopolitical reasoning is a codified system of ideas and principles developed by intellectuals and strategic thinkers that intends to guide foreign policy. Classical geopolitical theories and concepts are examples of formal geopolitical reasoning. It is widely acknowledged that there is interaction between academic experts and policy professionals (Dodds, 1993, p.110). However, it is challenging to clearly establish the correlation between geopolitical ideas and US foreign policy. At the same time, it is common to associate US geopolitics, especially in Eurasia, with classical theories. For example, Sempa (2004, quoted in Sieple, 2013, p.212) describes Mackinder as the grandfather of containment, in response to those who regard Kennan as the father of containment doctrine. Sieple (2013, p.212) notes that Mackinder was deeply rooted in US geostrategic thinking by the end of the Cold War. He cites Reagan's 1988 'National Security Strategy for the United States' as a prime example: 'It is the conviction that the United States' most basic national security interest would be endangered if a hostile state or group of states were to dominate the Eurasian landmass – that area of the globe often referred to as the world's heartland' (The White House, 1988, quoted in Sieple, 2013, 213).

Mayer (2008, p.22) notes that Mackinder's views are echoed in Kennan's containment thesis. He further states that Spykman also subscribes to the Cold War discourse, based on the fact that containment emphasises resistance against Russia in the buffer zones of Rimland. In 1949, the establishment of Communist China and the development of the atomic bomb in the Soviet Union led Truman to authorise a study of how containment could be systematically implemented (Meyer, 2008, p.22). As a result, the US State and Defence Departments jointly developed the famous NSC-86. The above nexus demonstrates the relevance of classical geopolitics and formal geopolitical reasoning in shaping US foreign policy.

Given the strong influence of realism in classical geopolitics, Ó Tuathail (1996, p.169) explores the realism/geopolitics nexus in US foreign policy. He argues that realist scientists codify what policymakers need, or, more importantly, what they are already thinking or practicing. Ó Tuathail (1996, p.169) states 'the renditions of nature of international politics offered by Wolfers, Morgenthau, and others codified and helped constitute... the political imagination, hegemonic ambitions, and reasoning processes of the bureaucrats and politicians who dominated the US state after World War II'. In general, formal geopolitical reasoning has played and continues to play an important role in the spatialization of global politics in US foreign policy.

Second, practical geopolitical reasoning means consensual and common-sense assumptions about certain places or identities. Taylor (1993, quoted in Dodds, 1994, p.187) notes practical geopolitical reasoning as 'the way in which governments conceptualise the distribution of political power beyond their boundaries as a precondition for conducting foreign policy in their special interests'. Ó Tuathail and Agnew (1992, p.195) argue that the analysis of US geopolitics should be analysed more within the framework of practical reasoning than a formal one. They highlight the power of the US president to 'describe, represent, interpret and, appropriate' certain places in world politics as a unique aspect of practical geopolitical reasoning in US foreign policy. At the same time, it is emphasised that this formidable power is not absolute and that the power to describe and appropriate should be compatible with the opinions of Congress, the media and, the public. It can be added that not only the president has the power to represent or 'tell a story' in foreign policy, but also foreign policy professionals (Dodds, 1993, p.107). Of course, it is inappropriate to compare the power of foreign policy professionals with that of the president, and it can be natural that foreign policy makers often speak narratives within the interests of the elite. As Dodds (1994, p.189) claim US representation of certain places 'play an important role in consolidating elite interpretative schemes and also in constituting political representation of places and peoples'.

Ó Tuathail and Agnew (1992, p.197) argue that certain narratives are durable in US foreign policy discourse. For example, totalitarianism and freedom, orient and occident, north and south, etc. Reducing everything into two opposing groups in this way reflects the elements of traditional geopolitical thinking. In classical Anglo-American geopolitical writing, the division of international politics into West and East, seeing the East as a threat to the West, was the main discourse (Dodds and Sidaway, 1994, p.517). The existence of durable and polar narratives similar to the above in the practical geopolitical reasoning in US foreign policy leads to a simplification of the actually complex problems in global politics, adapted to foreign policy.

US foreign policy in Central Asia and geopolitical reasoning

First period

The representation of Central Asia in US foreign policy can be divided into three periods. In the first period from 1991 to 2001, the US foreign policy discourse interpreted Central Asia as including the Caucasus. By analysing the opinions of Strobe Talbott¹, a foreign policy professional, and Fiona Hill², a foreign policy intellectual of this period, it can be seen that the US interpreted Central Asia as a unified region with the Caucasus. In his speech at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, Talbott (US Department of State Archive, 1997) never once commented on the significance of Central Asia as a separate region in US foreign policy. Central Asia is interpreted as the same region as the Caucasus throughout the address. Even at the end of his well-founded arguments that elements of the New Great Game are emerging in Central Asia but that this New Game is fundamentally different from the Great

¹ Former United States Deputy Secretary of State

² Then Senior Fellow at Brookings; former official at the National Security Council

Game of the 19th century, he links the region back to the Caucasus. However, the Caucasus has never been the main protagonist in the Great Game in Central Asia.

Dodds (1994, p.196) states that one of the most important components of critical geopolitics is to explore the official (practical) discourse of foreign policy professionals. Henrikson (1980, cited in Dodds, 1994, p.196-197) emphasises the need to study the 'mental maps' of foreign policymakers and admits that such 'mental maps' may not reflect objective reality. In Talbott's case, it's important to note that the US foreign policy makers' mental maps of Central Asia at the time did not accurately reflect the region's reality. Representing Central Asia as one region with the Caucasus, which is geographically and socio-politically dissimilar, is nothing more than a geopolitical simplification of complex reality in favour of conducting favourable foreign policy. Both Talbott and Hill (2001) emphasise the rich hydrocarbon resources of Central Asia and the Caucasus. But the reality is that only Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan on the Caspian coast are rich in energy resources, and the rest of the countries in the region cannot boast of such resources.³ This leads to the conclusion that, in the early period, the issue of energy resources played a key role in US foreign policy in the region.⁴ In order to simplify its foreign policy in the region where energy resources play a central role, the US represented Central Asia and the Caucasus, which are not really similar to each other, as one region. The geopolitical reasoning of the United States in Central Asia, which was aroused by the factor of energy resources, turned out to be ironically 'anti-geographical'⁵.

Also, one of the concepts that served as formal geopolitical reasoning in the US representation of Central Asia during this period is Brzezinski's (1997, p.124) 'Eurasian Balkans'. However, it should be noted that the direct connection of Brzezinski's concept to the foreign policy of the US in the region can be controversial. Because there is no reliable or official confirmation that the US implemented foreign policy in the region using the 'Eurasian Balkans' concept. But, first of all, Brzezinski's 'Eurasian Balkans' includes the states of Central Asia and the Caucasus, as in the discourse of US foreign policy in the region at that time. Secondly, the fact that Brzezinski was a former high-ranking US foreign policymaker does not allow us to completely deny that this concept served as formal reasoning in US foreign policy.

Second period

The second period of Central Asia's representation in US foreign policy includes 2001–2021. After the events of 9/11, Central Asia became an important region in US foreign policy with the start of the US war on terror in Afghanistan (Hooson, 2005, p.170). During this period, the United States' representation of Central Asia also changed, and now the region began to be depicted as being drawn to Afghanistan and South Asia. Sylvan and Majeski (1992, quoted in Dodds, 1994, p.196) focus on situation and place in US foreign policy and define description of situation as 'linguistically constituted descriptions of problems and solutions that apply to specific places'. They argue that situations have the potential to change the significance of places. In the case of Afghanistan, it can be seen that Central Asia has become a region of vital interest for the United States against the background of the war on terror and security issues. The representation of the region, along with the Caucasus, has halted.

Afghanistan held a prominent position in the US foreign policy discourse about Central Asia at this time. Despite the effective execution of the anti-Taliban operation, the US foreign policy

³ Uzbekistan is rich in gas reserves.

⁴ Hill also points out that the United States did not initially see interests in Central Asia and that without the Caspian's rich energy resources, the region would have become largely irrelevant to foreign policymakers.

⁵ The term used by Gearóid Ó Tuathail and John Agnew (1992, p.192).

discourse persisted in associating Afghanistan with the neighbouring region. By this time, the phrase 'Greater Central Asia' began to appear in the political discourse. 'Greater Central Asia' was a concept that combined elements of both formal and practical geopolitical reasoning. Frederick Starr (2005) originally developed the concept of 'Greater Central Asia'. In his concept, Starr includes Afghanistan among the Central Asian states and emphasises the importance of the US representing the region together with Afghanistan. Starr asserts that this will have a significant impact on the future cooperation between Central Asia and South Asia. Afghanistan is supposed to be a bridge connecting Central and South Asia.

In the same year, the US State Department established a new South and Central Asia Bureau, adding Central Asia to the South Asia Bureau (Dundich, 2013, 233). While there is no hard proof to support the claim that the US State Department established a new bureau specifically based on Starr's notion, it is highly probable that intellectuals such as Starr influenced the redirection of US policy in the region. Dodds (1994) argues that reflexive interaction between foreign policymakers and academic experts is important because it enriches each other's expertise and discourse. Based on this, the Greater Central Asia concept can be claimed as a hybrid variable of formal and practical geopolitical reasoning.

Dundich (2013, p.233) points out that the US has actually disclosed its heartland concept by adding South and Central Asian bureaus, which can be regarded as the US's heartland doctrine in the region. According to him, such a restructuring of the regions would give the US control of the heartland, thereby giving it the ability to counter the other major powers in the region. He also points out that the presence of the United States in Afghanistan will provide an opportunity to control the rich energy resources of the Caspian while deepening relations with the countries of the region. Thus, although Afghanistan was the main character in the discourse during this period, the topic of energy resources did not leave the agenda.

The above suggests that in the US's foreign political representation during this period, geopolitical reasoning once again exhibited anti-geographic characteristics. Ó Tuathail and Agnew (1992, cited in Dodds, 1994, p.199) deny the concept that 'the facts speak for themselves', emphasising that geographical facts are also spoken by geographers and other writers. Based on this, Dodds (1994, p.199) emphasises that the geographical depictions of certain places by foreign politicians and academics are also not natural. In our case, we can see that the fact that Afghanistan is located between Central Asia and South Asia is a reason for US foreign policymakers to represent the entire region. But it is not taken into account that these regions actually have complex characteristics and unique problems. Viewing Afghanistan as a part of Central Asia, which is not at all similar to Central Asian countries both geographically and socio-politically, gives rise to reasonable arguments.

Third period

The third period spans from 2021 to the present. This period can be referred to as the period of abstraction in the representation of Central Asia in US foreign policy. After withdrawing its troops from Afghanistan, it can be felt that the US is facing abstraction in how it understands and represents Central Asia. Because Afghanistan has been a central focus in the US foreign policy discourse in Central Asia for the past two decades. This is evidenced by the fact that two of the six policy objectives in the US Central Asia strategy for 2019-2025 relate to Afghanistan (US State Department, 2020). In particular, the strategy emphasises the importance of connecting Afghanistan with Central Asia and supporting economic projects between the parties. But after the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan, it seems abstract how the US interprets Central Asia for itself. The absence of a new strategic approach by the US in response to the evolving

situation in Afghanistan, coupled with the lack of a coherent long-term strategy for the area as a whole, suggests that the US now lacks significant interests in the region.

The analysis of official documents related to US foreign policy also shows that the US foreign policy discourse in Central Asia is undergoing changes. For example, in the 2012 hearing of the House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs, subcommittee chairman Dan Burton's comments about the Americans' view of Central Asia in the context of Afghanistan show Afghanistan's role in the US political discourse on Central Asia at that time (US House Committee on Foreign Affairs, 2012). Furthermore, despite the emphasis on focusing solely on Central Asian states during the hearing, content analysis reveals a recurring pattern of issues related to Afghanistan. In 2023, the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing was significantly less focused on Afghanistan (US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 2023). In addition, Senator Murphy specifically emphasised that by Central Asia, he meant five countries in the region, and nowhere did he include Afghanistan among the countries of the region. It can also be seen from this hearing that the Russia-Ukraine war has deeply penetrated the US foreign policy discourse in the region. The impact of the war on the region, Putin's imperialist views, and the possibility that these factors may cause Central Asia to turn towards the United States became the main topics of the hearing. It can be considered a positive trend that the US started to see Central Asia as a separate region, not connecting it to the Caucasus or South Asia. But depicting Central Asia in the context of the war in Ukraine is considered practical geopolitical reasoning and may lead to the further development of mythical concepts such as the New Great Game or the Eurasian Balkans in the region.

Thus, the geopolitical reasoning in the United States' foreign policy in Central Asia does not take into account the complex characteristics of the region in order to conduct a favourable foreign policy. Ó Tuathail and Agnew (1992, p.202) argue that in geopolitical reasoning 'a complex, diverse and heterogeneous social mosaic of places is hypostatized into a singular, overdetermined and predictable actor'. In US foreign policy, pulling Central Asia first to the Caucasus and then to South Asia through Afghanistan is actually a simplified representation of a region, neglecting its characteristics, problems, and complications. The confusion in the region's representation today stems from the United States' lack of a strategy focusing solely on the Central Asian countries from the outset. Reasoning, primarily influenced by ideology or subject will, leads to the formation of erroneous beliefs and assumptions about specific regions. Today, the United States' interpretation of Central Asia against the background of the Ukrainian war and the emergence of mythic views similar to the New Great Game in the discourse are the result of such misconceptions and misrepresentations.

Conclusion

The following conclusions can be drawn from the above analysis. First, geopolitical reasoning in US foreign policy is not based on objective conclusions and actual geographical knowledge in representing regions. Both formal and practical geopolitical reasoning are based on traditional geopolitical thinking, which is a product of ideology and subjective will. Such geopolitical reasoning reduces all factors without taking into account the specificities and complexities of regions or countries, simplifying policymaking for foreign policymakers. Geopolitical reasoning is a product of dichotomous or Manichean thinking, leading to a polar interpretation of everything. It is time in policy discourse to abandon the outdated classical geopolitical theories, mythical concepts, clichés, and polar views that divide everything into good and evil, East and West, land power and sea power, and democratic and totalitarian when representing a place/region in foreign policy.

Second, geopolitical reasoning in the foreign policy of the United States in Central Asia does not take into account the specific characteristics of the region. This led to the emergence of flawed perceptions about the Central Asian region based on the US's power to influence and shape international politics and geopolitics discourse. The region has become the hero of various gaming analogies and mythical concepts. Such reasoning also had a negative impact on US foreign policy representation in the region. That is, the use of such geopolitical reasoning by the United States in foreign policy did not allow the development of a long-term, clear strategy based on the reality of Central Asia. Myths, ideologies, and analogies have taken the place of concrete strategies that interpret Central Asia as a separate, complex region.

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