

DOES THE AGENT MATTER? THE GEOPOLITICAL AGENT IN NEOCLASSICAL GEOPOLITICS

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ABSTRACT

The neoclassical realist approach considers systemic stimuli (independent), and leader images, strategic culture, state-society relations, and domestic institutions (intervening) as the variables of an explanatory model of foreign policy and international outcomes (dependent variable).

Starting from the central assumptions of Ethology and Classical *Élites* Theory with the purpose of delimitating the agent – the geopolitical agent or the foreign policy executive – this paper aims to reinforce the importance of the intervening variables *geopolitical agent's perceptions and capacities* in shaping the geopolitical design and other foreign policy outcomes. The true core of the paper is to expand the scope of geopolitical studies by including the methodological task of studying the geopolitical agent's perceptions and capacities. In doing so, the matter directly relates to the analysis of both (i) how the geopolitical agent can perceive the geographical space (*Raumsinn*), and (ii) what can be the geopolitical agent's capacities in managing resources assigned to the foreign policy.

The purpose of the paper is then threefold: (i) conceptual – because it deals with definition of terms and their differentiation, (ii) theoretical – since the paper intends to review the neoclassical realist approach and merge it with geopolitical studies trying to forge a joint approach, and (iii) methodological – as it provides methodological guidelines about the new framework.

Therefore, the paper brings the innovation of including insights of the neoclassical realist intervening variables into the geopolitical studies' framework for a more accurate and enhanced scope of geopolitical analysis in the future.

Keywords: Neoclassical Geopolitics, Neoclassical Realism, Methodology, State, Foreign Policy

INTRODUCTION

This paper addresses the topic of the role of the *geopolitical agent* in the geopolitical studies' research agenda. In this way, it gives continuation to the author's endeavors to create a solid theoretical and methodological framework for neoclassical geo-

politics[2] The objective of the paper is to expand the geopolitical studies' domain by including the variables of geopolitical agent's perceptions and capacities in geopolitical reasoning, and subsequent methodological tasks of how to study them. There is a clear inspiration on the neoclassical realist approach. One of the most recent, and perhaps the greatest so far, development in that approach – the neoclassical realist theory of international politics (2016) – includes four intervening variables: leader images, strategic culture, state-society relations, and domestic institutions. For the purposes of theoretical modeling in neoclassical geopolitics, the first two can be roughly comprised in the variable *geopolitical agent's perceptions*, and the other two in the variable *geopolitical agent's capacities*.

In this context, the main argument of this research piece challenges the view that geopolitics should ignore the role of individual decision-makers. It contends that the behavior of the state is ultimately understood as the result of the choices of flesh and blood geopolitical agents (agency level). In this frame, their perception of the geographical setting is particularly relevant, and they can be straightforwardly connected to the 'system of ideas and representations' introduced by Chauprade and Thual [3]. This paper refines the way on how to assess the Raumsinn or the perception of space (Fig.1).

The structure of the paper is constituted of two sections. Section 1 accomplishes the delimitation of the geopolitical agent using results of ethology, classical *élites* theory, and the neoclassical realist approach. Section 2 comprises the explanation of the steps of the study of the

geopolitical agent's perceptions and capacities. It gives practical suggestions about (i) how to evaluate the geopolitical agent's *Raumsinn*, and (ii) how to assess the impact of the power structure on the geopolitical agent's capacities.

1. DELIMITATION OF THE GEOPOLITICAL AGENT

The literature in the science of Ethology provides concepts and assumptions with the highest interest for geopolitical studies [4]. The (i) concept of territoriality, i.e. the (innate) behavior that expresses intentions, by an individual or group, of controlling and defending a certain space, and (ii) the concept of hierarchy, i.e. there is a natural necessity in human societies, like other animal societies, for a minority of individuals that rules over the majority [5], are certainly among the most important. Nevertheless, for the objectives of this paper, the latter concept matters the most.

Admitting that in all human societies exists a numerically inferior group, which constitutes the ruling class (the political *élite*), if this group is actually equipped with power (one understands power, in the geopolitical framework, in the limits of the territorial state as unit of analysis), then that group can be identified as a *geopolitical agent* (GA) [6].

The geopolitical agent is in charge of the supreme administration, control and defense of the national territory. Although the vast majority of the population may also contribute to that defensive operation – and in a situation of emergency, a war, for example, it will be mobilized – it must do so complying with the directives from above, which the population cannot challenge or even directly modify in the

short-term.

Whether in a democratic or non-democratic regime, the ruling class constitutes the minority that occupies power positions or somehow influences them. These power positions are, in general, located in a certain territorial state's political structure. Therefore, for geopolitical studies' drives, it is logically consistent to accept Taliaferro's definition of state [7]. In this context, the geopolitical agent is another term to name the *élites*, the ruling class, or the 'state', which are also understood as the 'foreign policy executive', a term introduced by the neoclassical realist approach [8].

As quoted, the GA is then a very small group of individuals in every country's leadership. Heads of State, Heads of Government, Ministers of Foreign Affairs, and Ministers of National Defense are part of that small group. Depending on the circumstances of the caliber of the GA, the staff and teams of institutions' technocrats, clusters of experts in foreign affairs, defense, intelligence, who provide reports and advice, can be influent or not in the decision-making process. The text will offer a more in-depth insight below.

The scholarship in geopolitical studies is more or less consensual about the idea that Geopolitics blots out the role of individual decision-makers [9]. The main argument of this paper challenges that view, contending that the behavior of the state is understood as the result of the choices of flesh and blood decision-makers: the geopolitical agent. Those choices are dependent on his perceptions and capacities, particularly in the medium and long-terms. Therefore, if geopolitical studies aim to have a broader explanatory power of their object, then they have to

include the examination of the GA's perceptions and capacities.

2. THE STUDY OF THE GEOPOLITICAL AGENT'S PERCEPTIONS AND CAPACITIES

The study of the GA's perceptions and capacities follows its delimitation.

While considering the full picture of the set of the neoclassical realist variables, the model sustains that foreign policy and international outcomes (the dependent variable) are explained by a causal chain of systemic stimuli (independent variable), and leader images, strategic culture, state-society relations, and domestic institutions (intervening variables). Unfortunately, space is limited and it is not possible to pursue a full literature review of neoclassical realism. The paper presents a very brief summary of the theory itself that will remain necessarily poor. Consequently, to understand this paper's main purpose is required to get in touch with that preliminary knowledge [10].

Put in simple terms, 'systemic stimuli', the old realist tradition of distribution of power, concerns to the analysis of the international system, alliances (political, military), regional integration, ranking the state within the hierarchy of powers. From this observation, one can infer that geopolitical studies and neoclassical realism overlap. Geopolitical studies reveal full compatibility with the international system's assessment through spheres of influence, choke points, borders, circulation, geohistorical nucleus, locations, resources, pan-ideas, among many other issues that shape the distribution of power.

At the next level, the one of the intervening variables, the GA's perceptions and capacities are the innovative topic of this

paper for geopolitical studies.

From the geopolitical studies' angle, however, why is the study of those aspects of the decision-makers crucial in the investigation of foreign policy, and by extension, of international politics?

The previous section paved the way to answer the question with the help of Ethology. Furthermore, the methodological steps of political science in the analysis of the empirical reality – raising other questions, such as: *who wants what? How, when, and by which* means is the agent pursuing his action [11] – increase the relevance of the role of the GA too. In fact, those questions are too exact to be answered exclusively by impersonal forces or by abstract structures. Therefore, to trace the actions, the perceptions, the capacities of the GA seems to be the most accurate procedure to take. This perspective converges with Wohlforth [12].

Accordingly, having a satisfactory answer for (a) *who* the GAs are, the point is now to answer (b) *what* exactly are the GA's perceptions about? The argument here is that it refers to perceptions of the systemic stimuli, which include both the relative material state potential (and the distribution of power) and the systemic constraints (e.g. structural modifiers, polarity, clarity, the nature of states' strategic environment).

The independent variable of both the neoclassical geopolitics model (Fig. 2) and the neoclassical realist model is objective, tangible, its material components of the essence of the political reality can be observed. Nonetheless, it is argued that, on their own, they cannot *impact* on the international arena on medium to long-terms, except through the flesh and blood GAs' perceptions and capacities.

The relative state potential is the foundation of foreign policy, namely because the GA's ambitions 'to control and to shape external environment' depend on the relative state potential too [13]. In spite of that, a high relative state potential *per se* is not a guarantee of successful foreign policy outcomes, taking into account the decisive role of the intervening variables, which expand from the short to the long-term. The prominence of the *perceptions* and *capacities* of those agents as key intervening variables is validated.

At this point, the national interest deserves a special reference. The national interest is deeply linked to the GA's perceptions, taking into account that the national interest is what the GA interprets it to be [14].

In the finest traditions of political science, the emphasis is put on *élites* as agents, instead of on the masses. However, in order to understand the GA's perceptions, attention must be paid to the nation's identity (something that fits in Chauprade's second stable geopolitical variable [15]), making comparisons and extracting results. This methodological step will be recaptured below.

In the sequence of formulating these introductory notions, this section will be further divided into two subsections: (i) *how can the geopolitical agent's perceptions be studied?* And (ii) *what can be the geopolitical agent's capacities in managing resources assigned to foreign policy?*

i. How can the geopolitical agent's perceptions be studied?

The images and perceptions of the GA, i.e. the beliefs or mental pictures of individual decision-makers, are consequently highly personalized. Thus, they tend to remain

stable. For those reasons, they provide the researcher with information about how an individual understands a certain event, fact, data, what captures his attention, what does he ignore. The latter dimension can be assessed by mapping the individual's 'consciousness' horizon' – a concept (and, simultaneously, a methodological step) created by Carvalho [16].

In order to answer the research question (i) stated above, and thus to give solution to the problem of the analysis of the GA's images and perceptions [17], this subsection will point out the following methodological assignments: (a) assessment of the "consciousness horizon" (including the specific problem of the perception of the geographical space (*Raumsinn*)); (b) analysis of the coherence in the discourse (statist / anti-statist ideology); (c) investigation of the network of relations; (d) examination of the intentions of the GA; (d) exploration of the GA's personality.

The study of the geopolitical agent's perceptions must take into account a lack of information, false information, misguided predictions, inaccurate evaluation of potential, opportunities, and threats. Among other aspects, these must be comprised in the task of mapping of the GA's 'consciousness' horizon' since they deeply affect the GA's perceptions. In this respect, the text returns to the significance of the staff and teams of institutions' technocrats, clusters of experts mentioned above. It may happen that those groups of senior officials and advisors not only influence the GA's perceptions but, in some circumstances, they become the GA, in the sense that they can formulate or make a decision. This might happen in the case that the politician, as decision-maker, is not trained to make a certain kind of choice (a knowledge factor), or due

to timing restrictions (a time factor). Although the GA is restricted not only by international systemic constraints and relative material state potential, but also by foreign policy traditions – and, at a lower level, by the country's public opinion [18] – the fact seems to be that the groups of senior officials and advisors should not be disregarded. There are also, of course, exceptional cases in which the staff is practically irrelevant [19]. Consequently, every study needs to examine this dual matter on a case-to-case basis.

The 'consciousness horizon' is related to the perception of space (*Raumsinn*) too.

The old Ratzelian concept of *Raumsinn* was duly explained and framed in geopolitical studies in the author's former publications already quoted. There, *Raumsinn* was explained as the sense, or the perception, of space that the GAs have concerning their own country, i.e. how far can they discern or ignore the implication of the geographical setting's incentives in the geostrategic formulation and foreign policy conduct. Hence shaping the geopolitical design.

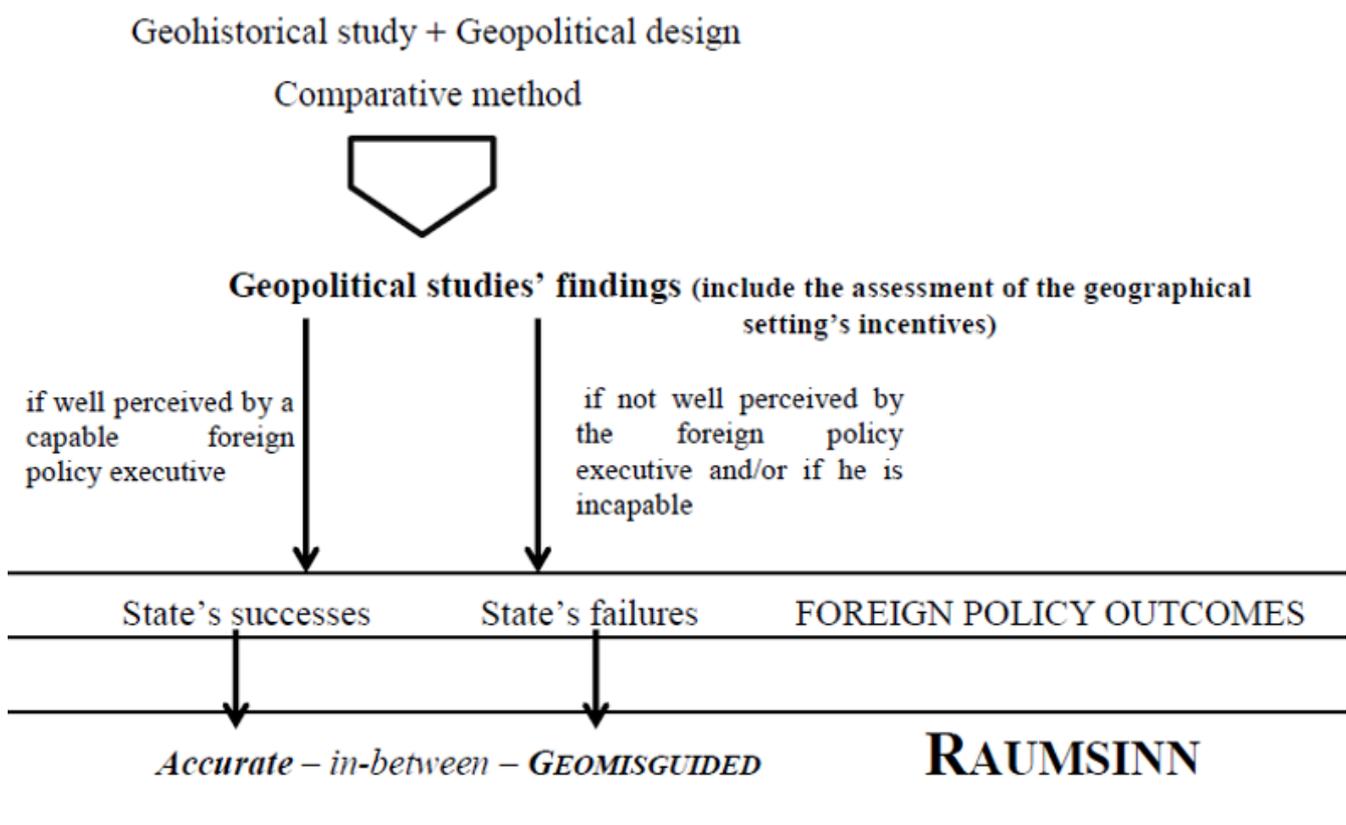
If the GA is not well aware of the geopolitical studies' findings (which result from the dialectic between the geohistorical approach examining the past and the geopolitical design studying the present and the future scenario, using the comparative method to refine the conclusions), and he, therefore, accumulates observable failures, he can be considered misguided in terms of sense of space, or in a single word, *geomisguided*. *Geomisguidance* – a concept created and used by the author in the mentioned research pieces – characterizes this precise GA's *Raumsinn*, in the way that he does not perceive well and/or is incapable of taking advantage

of the geographical setting's incentives (fig. 1).

Couper stated that 'places and identities are experienced...' [20]. This is precisely the issue of the GA's perception of space. It is eminently a methodological benchmark in neoclassical geopolitics. Besides, in the understating of this research, it is at this level that the 'system of ideas and representations', formulated by Chauprade and Thual, fits in the neoclassical geopolitics model (fig. 2). That system will assist in explaining the geopolitical design, its antecedents, and causes.

Figure 1

Analyzing the Raumsinn



The (b) analysis of the coherence in the discourse of the GA includes the evaluation of their ideology (statist or non-statist). Furthermore, this factor influences the GA's capacities in extracting resources. For example, an individual with a strong belief in the state's interest will be more capable of extracting more, better quality resources, with the objective of promoting that state's interest, than another individual without that strong belief.

The (c) network of relations of the GA is central too. His perceptions are, in general, shaped by consultation with businessmen, the military, parliamentary commissions, or also by his engagement to certain national or international organizations. The latter may even establish a direct link with international constraints (as it is the case of São Paulo Forum in South America [21]).

The (d) examination of the GA's intentions comes together with the (e) exploration of the GA's personality. The methodological procedures include the study of biographies, speeches, behavior, and foreign policy outcomes, with the objective of deducing the GA's perceptions. The technique of political personality profiling, which gives coordinates for the assessment of the psychobiography, is extremely useful too [22]. Other psychological models also give a hand in this type of analysis [23]. Bessa contended too that the GA's 'personal and psychological parameters' are essential elements since they impact on political decisions [24].

Although the structuralist approach to geopolitics refuses to look at the agents, focusing almost exclusively on the general international puzzling, the paper firmly claims that the role of the perceptions of the agents is not a minor topic and thus cannot be disregarded.

In this domain, finally, there is the precious contribution of Frankl's logotherapy and *search for meaning* [25]. Not only Frankl's ideas mingle in the neoclassical geopolitics' theoretical principle of possibilism, but they also impact on the matter of the geopolitical agent's perceptions, therefore, they have methodological consequences too. This latter aspect requires the use of an 'intuitive understanding', considering that facts matter as 'part of man's experiences', avoiding 'any personal bias', and requiring 'a certain scientific detachment' [26].

Taliaferro already endeavored to connect realism with psychology, focusing on *élites'* perceptions, in his 'balance-of-risk' theory [27].

The order of researching these aspects is not rigid. Whereas in a chapter devoted

to analyze Salazar's perceptions, the order of the tasks was [28]: (a) analysis of the GA's personality, (b) assessment of the 'consciousness horizon' (including Salazar's *Raumsinn*), (c) identification of the network of relations, and (d) analysis of the coherence in the discourse (statist or anti-statist ideology); in a working paper about Bolsonaro's perceptions [29] the text followed a less complete structure: (a) examining the coherence of Bolsonaro's discourse, (b) assessing the connections or the network of Bolsonaro's administration (domestic and international), and (c) making some notes on Bolsonaro's personality.

Accepting that the response to systemic stimuli depends on the perception of those systemic stimuli, and the perception of those systemic stimuli depends on the GA's images and core beliefs the paper can move forward to the matter of the GA's capacities.

ii. What can be the geopolitical agent's capacities in managing resources assigned to foreign policy?

The resources allocated to foreign policy and their optimization depend not only on the GA's perceptions but also on the GA's proper abilities, which are constrained by the power structure. In this way, foreign policy outcomes also depend, in a causal chain, on the GA's abilities to manage resources [30].

Two notes to make on this level: (a) with respect to the security policy domain, Christensen contended that the 'national political power' [31] depends on *élites'* capacities indeed; (b) the relation between *élites* and the nation must be recaptured (vide Taliaferro's methodological hint on nationalism and statism) since that, in fact, democratic regimes, gener-

ally, do not allow so much freedom to the GA, due to the required democratic accountability to the people.

Put simply, the power capacities of the GA involve the conversion of potential (tangible means) into power (capacity). Something that Taliaferro defined as 'state power' [32].

Although not exclusively, the above-stated questions of *how* and by *which means* the agents execute their actions is concerned with the intervening variable GA's capacities, i.e. the capacities of the GA on how to manage the country's resources.

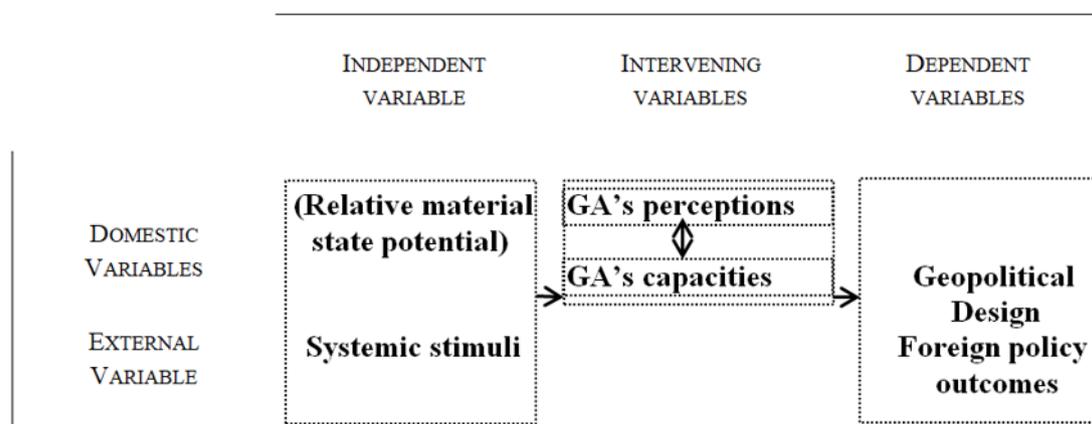
As to the aspect of the internal power structure, Schweller noted that it is important to consider the relations between the society and *élites* since, in general condi-

tions, when society and *élites* form a homogeneous mass, the state will more likely approach the form of a unitary actor ('coherent actor'), in the manner of structural realism [33]. In short, all those relations are included in Taliaferro's recommendation of looking for not only state-sponsored nationalism but also for statist ideology in the positioning of the GA.

To finalize the topic, geopolitical studies have a word to say in the task of assessing the capacities of the GA. In fact, his capacities can be constrained also by a geopolitical continuity, i.e. a 'long-term dynamic' [34] that can be deduced from the endurance of a certain project or objective (e.g. struggle of Russia Russian state to get access to warm seas, or the integration maneuver in South America under an ideological directive).

Figure 2

Systematization of the variables in the neoclassical geopolitics model



Source: adapted from Taliaferro and Ripsman et al. [35]

CONCLUSION

The German historian Leopold von Ranke contended that the relative material state potential gives a state its position on the international arena [36].

It is considered factual that the distribution of power shapes international relations. Yet, for the analysis of the geopolitical design and foreign policy responses, the neoclassical geopolitics model (fig. 2) suggests the inclusion of two key intervening domestic variables.

The argument is that the geopolitical design and foreign policy responses depend on the GA's perceptions and capacities, particularly on the medium and long-term. In other words, it is assumed that the distribution of power cannot always impact on the international arena on medium to long-terms, except through the perceptions and capacities of flesh and blood GAs. This is especially relevant at the level of perceiving the incentives provided by the geographical setting in political activity (*Raumsinn*), and capacities in managing the resources allocated to foreign policy.

The operationalization of the study of GA's perceptions includes, furthermore, the scrutiny of their 'consciousness horizon', the analysis of the coherence in the discourse – ideology (statist or non-statist), the network of relations (hierarchy, soli-

arity, etc.), examination of the intentions of the GA, and analysis of the GA's personality. This is an effort to clarify, on the one hand, how Chauprade's and Thual's 'system of ideas and representations' could be understood, and, on the other hand, how Frankl's logotherapy may give a hand to neoclassical geopolitics.

These methodological guidelines are not compartmentalized. Consequently, it is possible to find remarks or analysis of data that would better fall into a certain topic, but for the sake of reasoning is integrated into the body of text of another topic. As far as everything is arranged for the greater coherence of the research, the placement is not a priority and the flexibility helps a lot.

Hence this paper gave a contribution to sharpening geopolitical studies.

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