

Geopolitics: concept, limits, and uses in strategic analysis

Alejandro Amigo
Senior researcher, AthenaLab

April 15, 2026

CONTEXT

Geopolitics has become an omnipresent word in public debate on international relations, security, and economics; as a result, it is being used to describe virtually any phenomenon of a global nature. This semantic expansion has emptied the concept of analytical content, making it harder to understand complex security and strategic dynamics, and thus reducing the quality of debate on international policy.

II. BACKGROUND: ORIGIN, CRISIS, AND RECONSTRUCTION

The term **geopolitics** does not emerge as a neutral or merely descriptive concept, but as an explicit attempt to provide scientific rationality to state behavior in the international arena. It was coined in 1899 by Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellén, in a context shaped by imperial competition, the rise of economic nationalism, and growing concern over the control of territory and resources.^[1]

In its original formulation, geopolitics sought to explain international politics based on “objective” geographical factors: the disposition of continents, access to seas, the availability of natural resources, and the relative position of states. Its early exponents — Ratzel, Mahan, Mackinder — framed questions directly linked to power: how to grow territorially, how to project influence, and how to secure national greatness.^[2]

At its origin, it was a practice bound to the exercise of power — a way of thinking about the world from the state and for the state. Its dual condition — analytical and normative — explains both its influence and the controversies that have accompanied it.

This period reaches its most problematic point during the interwar years, with the development of the German **Geopolitik**. Under the influence of Karl Haushofer, geopolitics is transformed into an explicitly normative doctrine, as concepts like **Lebensraum** cease to be analytical hypotheses and become ideological justifications for expansionism. This association with Nazism generates a profound rupture after the Second World War. In the Western academic world, the term becomes discredited, associated with geographic determinism and the legitimization of aggressive power.

The crisis was not merely reputational but also epistemological, because the idea that geography could directly determine state behavior was called into question. Geopolitics was consequently displaced by more formalized approaches — structural realism, institutionalism — but did not disappear. The result is a concept that survives, but without a clear definition or disciplinary consensus: sometimes used as a synonym for political geography; on other occasions, as a strategic framework; and also, as a simple rhetorical label.^[3] That is, geopolitics continues to be used but is no longer always understood.

III. WHAT IS GEOPOLITICS?

Geopolitics is an analytical framework oriented toward strategic decision-making, which analyses how spatial conditions influence the configuration, projection, and limitation of power. Its focus is not on geography as static data, but on the interaction between space, power, and political action. In this sense, geopolitics allows us to understand how certain factors — such as geographic location, strategic depth, access to resources, communication routes, connectivity, and proximity to conflict zones — constrain, without determining, the options available to state and non-state actors.^[4] It is a framework of restraints and opportunities within which strategies are formulated.

Its value lies in translating space into concrete strategic-level problems. It allows for answers to fundamental questions for political and security decision-making: Where are the centers of gravity? What are the critical corridors? What structural vulnerabilities exist? What positions offer comparative advantages in a scenario of competition or conflict?

Geopolitics also incorporates the perceptual dimension of space. It analyzes not only objective conditions, but also how actors interpret their environment — what threats they identify, what priorities they set, and how they assess risks and opportunities.^[5] Geopolitics therefore shapes the way decision-makers conceive of their environment and define possible courses of action.

Two examples illustrate a rigorous use of the concept in recent debate. At the global level, analyses of the war in Ukraine that examine how control of the Black Sea conditions grain exports and Russian naval projection employ geopolitics correctly, as they connect space, power, and concrete strategic constraints without reducing the conflict to a single variable.

In the Chilean case, discussions about lithium policy that consider the country's position in global supply chains, its access to the Pacific Ocean, and great-power competition for critical minerals constitute an analytically valid use of the term, where space and its strategic value are effectively the central explanatory factor.

For AthenaLab, geopolitics is understood as an applied analytical tool that integrates physical, political, strategic, economic, and technological dimensions to support decision-making in complex contexts.

IV. WHAT IS GEOPOLITICS NOT?

Geopolitics is not synonymous with international relations or international political economy, nor a substitute for strategic analysis. Neither does it equate to any interaction among states or the mere description of global conflicts. Reducing it to these uses transforms it into an empty concept that loses analytical utility.

First, geopolitics is not geographic determinism. Geography does not dictate state behavior or predetermine outcomes. Interpretations that assume space automatically defines policy reproduce classical errors that have been widely questioned in the discipline.^[6]

Second, geopolitics is not a total explanatory narrative, since not every international phenomenon is “geopolitical.” Economic processes, institutional dynamics, and organizational decisions require their own analytical frameworks. Using geopolitics as an “explanatory wildcard” leads to simplifications that distort reality and impoverish analysis.^[7]

Third, geopolitics does not replace security studies or the inputs provided by strategic intelligence, although it is related to both. Security manages threats; intelligence produces information for decision-making. Geopolitics, by contrast, is a lens for interpreting space and power that can inform those processes but not substitute for them.

Finally, geopolitics must not become a rhetorical or ideological tool. Its use to justify preconceived political positions, or to overstate threats, undermines its credibility and affects the quality of public debate. In institutional and public policy contexts, this imprecise use can lead to flawed diagnoses and deficient strategic decisions.

For AthenaLab, establishing the scope of geopolitics—and clarifying what it is not—is as important as defining what it is. Only then can its analytical rigor be preserved, its trivialization avoided, and its utility strengthened in the formulation of national security, defense, and international relations strategies.

V. IMPLICATIONS OF INADEQUATE USE

The imprecise use of the term *geopolitics* is not a merely conceptual problem; it has direct consequences for the quality of analysis and, in more critical cases, for decision-making at the political-strategic level. The most evident risk is overgeneralization. In public debate, especially in the media, virtually any international event is labeled “geopolitical”: from fluctuations in the price of oil to trade tensions or internal political crises in other countries. This indiscriminate use not only dilutes the concept but prevents precise identification of the correct explanatory variables behind each phenomenon.^[8]

In the Chilean case, this tendency is visible. The rise in energy prices or disruptions in global supply chains are routinely attributed to “geopolitics,” without distinguishing between structural market factors, regulatory decisions, or economic competition dynamics. Likewise, distant international conflicts are frequently interpreted through a simplified geopolitical logic, without considering historical, institutional, or domestic dimensions that are equally determining. This type of interpretation not only impoverishes analysis but can also generate distorted perceptions of the international environment.

Faced with this situation, it is essential to recover geopolitics’ analytical character. Its value lies not in its capacity to explain everything, but in its usefulness for illuminating specific aspects of the strategic environment that other disciplines do not capture with the same clarity. Used correctly, it allows for the identification of constraints, the visualization of opportunities, and an understanding of the spatial dimension of power.

VI. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Geopolitics remains a valid and necessary tool for understanding the international environment, but its utility depends directly on the precision with which it is employed. It is not a total explanatory concept, nor a label applicable to any global phenomenon, but a specific analytical framework that allows for the interpretation of the relationship between space and power in strategic contexts. The challenge, then, is to recover its original meaning and delimit its scope. This means clearly distinguishing geopolitics from other disciplines, avoiding its use as a rhetorical device, and employing it only when it provides real analytical value.

AthenaLab, as a research center specializing in security, defense, and international relations, considers essential to contribute to this effort. Promoting a precise use of geopolitics is part of a broader task: raising the level of public debate, strengthening strategic analysis, and contributing to a better understanding of the international environment from Chile. As an analytical community, we share the responsibility of employing the concept rigorously, distinguishing it from other frameworks, and resisting its trivialization. Only then will geopolitics be able to fulfill its function as an effective tool for thinking strategically about the world.

Alejandro Amigo

Senior researcher, AthenaLab

April 15, 2026

VII. RECOMMENDED FURTHER READING

CLASSICAL GEOPOLITICS AND THEORY

Cohen, Saul B. *Geopolitics: The Geography of International Relations*. 3rd ed. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015.

Gray, Colin S. *The Geopolitics of the Nuclear Era: Heartland, Rimlands, and the Technological Revolution*. New York: Crane, Russak, 1977.

Ó Tuathail, Gearóid. *Critical Geopolitics: The Politics of Writing Global Space*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

O'Sullivan, Patrick. *Geopolitics*. London: Croom Helm, 1986.

CONTEMPORARY GEOPOLITICS AND WORLD ORDER

Brzezinski, Zbigniew. *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*. New York: Basic Books, 1997.

Kaplan, Robert D. *The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells Us About Coming Conflicts and the Battle Against Fate*. New York: Random House, 2012.

Kissinger, Henry. *World Order*. New York: Penguin Press, 2014.

LATIN AMERICAN AND CHILEAN GEOPOLITICS

Child, Jack. *Geopolitics and Conflict in South America: Quarrels Among Neighbors*. New York: Praeger, 1985.

Cañas Montalva, Ramón. *General Ramón Cañas Montalva: pionero de la geopolítica en Chile*. Edited by Griffiths, John and Massallera, Marcelo. Santiago, Chile: AthenaLab, 2024.

VIII. BIBLIOGRAPHY

Cohen, Saul B. *Geography and Politics in a Divided World*. London: Methuen, 1964.

Dodds, Klaus. *Geopolitics: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Flint, Colin. *Introduction to Geopolitics*. 4th ed. New York: Routledge, 2017.

Hepple, Leslie W. "The Revival of Geopolitics," in *Political Geography Quarterly*, Supplement to Vol. 5, no. 4 (October 1986): 21–36.

Kjellén, Rudolf. *Stormakterna*. Stockholm: Hugo Gebers, 1914.

Lacoste, Yves. *La géographie, ça sert, d'abord, à faire la guerre*. Paris: Maspero, 1976.

Mackinder, Halford J. "The Geographical Pivot of History," in *The Geographical Journal* 23, no. 4 (1904): 421–437.

Mahan, Alfred Thayer. *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1890.

Ó Tuathail, Gearóid, and Simon Dalby. "Introduction: Rethinking Geopolitics — Towards a Critical Geopolitics," in *Rethinking Geopolitics*, edited by Gearóid Ó Tuathail and Simon Dalby, 1–30. London: Routledge, 1998.

Østerud, Øyvind. "The Uses and Abuses of Geopolitics," in *Journal of Peace Research* 25, no. 2 (1988): 191–199.

Paret, Peter, ed. *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986.

Ratzel, Friedrich. *Politische Geographie*. Munich and Leipzig: Oldenbourg, 1897.

Spykman, Nicholas J. *The Geography of the Peace*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1944.

NOTES

^[1]Rudolf Kjellén, *Stormakterna* (Stockholm: Hugo Gebers, 1914).

^[2]Friedrich Ratzel, *Politische Geographie* (Munich and Leipzig: Oldenbourg, 1897); Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1890); Halford J. Mackinder, “The Geographical Pivot of History,” in *The Geographical Journal* 23, no. 4 (1904): 421–437.

^[3]Leslie W. Hepple, “The Revival of Geopolitics,” in *Political Geography Quarterly*, Supplement to Vol. 5, no. 4 (October 1986): S21–S36.

^[4]Klaus Dodds, *Geopolitics: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Colin Flint, *Introduction to Geopolitics*, 4th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2017).

^[5]Gearóid Ó Tuathail and Simon Dalby, “Introduction: Rethinking Geopolitics – Towards a Critical Geopolitics,” in *Rethinking Geopolitics*, ed. Gearóid Ó Tuathail and Simon Dalby (London: Routledge, 1998).

^[6]Flint, *Introduction to Geopolitics*.

^[7]Østerud, “The Uses and Abuses of Geopolitics,” 191–199.

^[8]Dodds, *Geopolitics: A Very Short Introduction*.