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THE RETURN OF THE TERRITORY AFTER THE "END OF HISTORY": THE SHAPE OF POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY TO COME

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ABSTRACT

This article asks who speaks for geography now that geopolitics has returned after the "end of history". It starts from the expectation, widespread in the popular reading of the post-Cold War period, that borders, strategy and geography were losing their significance, and confronts it with the events of 2014–2026. Three propositions are advanced. First, the period after 1989 brought not an end but a continuity of the territorial and positional logics of power, while the norm of territorial integrity that constrained them after 1945 is eroding; Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2022 does not open a new phase but makes this continuity visible. Second, the return of geography has two strands, which correspond to Ratzel's *Raum* and *Lage*: territory as an object of conquest and appropriation, in Ukraine and in the rhetoric about Greenland, and chokepoints and flows as instruments of power, in the Strait of Hormuz**;** territory returns alongside flows, not as a restoration. The US strike on Iranian nuclear facilities in June 2025, Operation Midnight Hammer, shows that technology can overcome physical distance, but that political space, rather than disappearing, sets the conditions and the price of crossing it. Third, what returns first is geopolitics as practice and discourse. Whether political geography will have a voice in interpreting this return depends on whether it can offer analytical tools that go beyond neoclassical reflexes. The article puts three such tools to work: a ladder of territorial revisionism, the analysis of geopolitical codes and a reading of geopolitical discourse by register.

Keywords: geopolitics; territory; chokepoints; territorial integrity; neoclassical geopolitics; critical geopolitics; political geography

INTRODUCTION

Political geography has already experienced one period of marginalisation. After the Second World War, discredited by its association with German Geopolitik, it became what Berry (1969, as cited in Johnston, 2001) called a "moribund backwater", before reviving from the mid-1970s onwards (Johnston, 2001; Muir, 1976). This article extends that history over the past three and a half decades and starts from a question that seemed entirely legitimate at the end of the Cold War: If history, in the sense in which Fukuyama (1989) defines it, is coming to an end, does political geography face a second marginalisation? Strictly speaking, Fukuyama's thesis concerns the end of ideological evolution, that is, liberal democracy as the final form of government, not the end of wars. The expectation that peace and stability would spread throughout the world is its popular and historically influential reading (Gallaher, 2009, pp. 71–72).

The question, however, turned out to be wrongly posed. Political geography did not disappear after 1989. Critical geopolitics, in fact, came of age in the 1990s. What changed was its place in public debate. When geopolitics returned, first after 2001 and forcefully after 2014, it was interpreted above all in international relations, strategic studies and think tanks, often in the neoclassical register that Megoran (2010) criticises and Haverluk et al. (2014) defend. The question this article asks is therefore not whether political geography returns, but who speaks for geography when geopolitics returns, and with what tools.

The aim is not to prove that "geography is back" but to show why contemporary events make spatial analysis necessary again, without automatically legitimising classical geopolitics. First, the period after 1989 brought not an end but a continuity of the territorial and positional logics of power, while the norm of territorial integrity that constrained them after 1945 is eroding. Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2022 does not open a new phase but makes this continuity visible. Second, the return of geography has two strands: the return of territory as an object of conquest and appropriation, in Ukraine and in the rhetoric about Greenland, and the return of chokepoints and flows as instruments of power, in Hormuz. Third, what returns first is geopolitics as practice and discourse, and its interpretation is conducted largely outside the discipline. Whether political geography will have a voice in that interpretation depends on whether it can offer analytical tools that go beyond neoclassical reflexes.

Methodologically, the article is a critical reading of recent literature and primary documents through concepts drawn from political geography: territory and sovereignty, geopolitical codes and orders, and the distinction between formal, practical and popular geopolitics. The sources play three distinct roles, which are kept apart throughout. Official documents, speeches and resolutions (e.g. Putin, 2021, 2024; The White House, 2025; United Nations General Assembly, 2022) serve as evidence of practical geopolitics, that is, of what states claim and do. Peer-reviewed articles serve as analytical sources. Analyses by think tanks, institutional documents such as NATO (2023) and web commentaries are treated as texts of

formal geopolitics: they are read as part of the discourse under study rather than as neutral authorities, even where they also supply factual detail. A simple bibliometric indicator from OpenAlex (Priem et al., 2022) is used in section 9 to trace the proliferation of the term geopolitics. One methodological rule applies throughout: that events can be read through classical geopolitical frames does not mean that they confirm them. The analysis covers events up to mid-2026.

GEOPOLITICS: FOUR MEANINGS AND TWO LOGICS

The fate of geopolitics mirrors the fate of political geography. The ambiguity of the term is best illustrated by the two definitions in the *Oxford English Dictionary* cited by Dahlman (2009, p. 87): "It is, on the one hand, 'the influence of geography on the political character of states' and, on the other, 'a pseudo-science developed in National Socialist [Nazi] Germany'. Both definitions have troubling connotations - the former for its deterministic view of geography, the latter for its connection to fascism." In what follows, the term is used in four senses that need to be kept apart: German Geopolitik of the interwar period; classical geopolitics as a broader intellectual and practical tradition that includes Mackinder and Spykman; neoclassical geopolitics, the contemporary revival of that tradition, associated above all with Kaplan's (2009) rediscovery of Mackinder (Megoran, 2010; Haverluk et al., 2014); and critical geopolitics as the problematisation of all of them. When this article argues of the "return of geopolitics", it refers to the return of the classical tradition as practice and discourse, not to Geopolitik. Neoclassical geopolitics is the form this return most often takes when it is written down, in think tanks, strategic studies and the press. It is therefore a genre of formal geopolitics, not a practice of states.

After the Second World War, the tradition of advocating state power did not disappear but became less visible (Herb, 2008). It continued in military academies, in the popular media and in South American military regimes, while through Spykman and his thesis of the rimland academic geopolitics moved from geography to international relations and strategic studies (Herb, 2008; Jones et al., 2004, pp. 4–7). In a textbook from the Russian tradition, Okunev (2024) describes this continuity with the term revisionism, a reformulation of geopolitics as a security discourse: "The revisionist school of thought skillfully avoided the trap of justifying aggressive expansionism and militarism, shifting from expansionist ideas to security discourse." Okunev's "revisionism" should not be confused with the use of the term in international relations, where "revisionist powers" are states that seek to overturn the existing order (Mead, 2014) - in his usage it is the discipline, not the state, that revises itself. Herb (2008) observes: "With the exception of the case of Hérodote, geopolitics or political geographies that advocate state power are mainly pursued outside of geography at present."

The response of political geography was critical geopolitics, which developed from the late 1980s, above all in the work of Gearóid Ó Tuathail (also published as Gerard Toal) and Simon Dalby. Gallaher et al. (2009, p. 8) summarise its basic thesis:

"Instead, critical geopolitics holds that all truth claims are political: that they are made on behalf of vested political interests and often in the pursuit of political economic imperatives." Following Ó Tuathail and Dalby, Painter (2008, p. 65) distinguishes three registers of geopolitical practice: formal geopolitics, developed in think tanks, strategic institutes and academia; practical geopolitics, conducted by state institutions; and popular geopolitics, the everyday cultural constructions of the mass media and film. In a 2026 forum on whether Trump is an anomaly or the herald of a new geopolitical order, Sharp (in Agnew et al., 2026, p. 59) questions the usefulness of this distinction: "Trump's apparent refusal to use diplomatic channels, and diplomatic language, has raised the stakes of engagement (and rendered fairly meaningless O'Tuathail's (1996) distinction between formal, practical and popular geopolitics)." This article retains the distinction precisely as a diagnostic tool. When a head of state conducts foreign policy through social media, practical and popular geopolitics merge, and the merger can be observed only if the registers are kept analytically apart. Sections 8 and 9 apply the distinction systematically (Table 2), and the case of Greenland shows why it matters: a text of formal geopolitics disavows annexation, while the practical geopolitics of the administration does not rule out the use of force. Both traditions are used in this article: the classical one as a set of frames through which current events are read, the critical one as a way of analysing that reading.

Two further distinctions organise the argument. The first concerns the forms in which geography enters power. Ratzel (1897) distinguished between *Raum*, the area a state occupies or claims, and *Lage*, its position relative to other places, routes and powers. The distinction allows the two strands of the contemporary return to be named precisely. Territorial logic treats *Raum* as the object of power: territory is conquered, annexed, purchased or claimed. Positional logic, as the term is used here, means the use of location (*Lage*) rather than area (*Raum*) as a source of power: control over chokepoints, corridors, bases and overflight rights through which flows pass, rather than appropriation of territory itself. It has a contemporary counterpart in the concept of weaponised interdependence, which shows how states that control the hubs of global networks can turn the networks themselves into instruments of coercion (Farrell & Newman, 2019). The second distinction concerns what "logic" means when this article claims continuity. It refers to the practice of treating territory and position as objects and instruments of power, not to the normative framework within which that practice operates. After 1945 that framework was dominated by the norm of territorial integrity, under which the forcible revision of borders became rare and, when it occurred, was generally not recognised (Zacher, 2001). The argument is that the practice has been continuous, while the norm that constrained it is now eroding. The distinction also makes the continuity thesis testable: a genuinely new phase would require either a new practice or the collapse of the norm, not merely a larger scale of the old practice.

THE END OF HISTORY AND THE SECOND "MORIBUND BACKWATER"

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union created a climate in which, in its popular reading, geopolitical thinking seemed redundant. Within academic geography, the 1990s were in fact the decade in which critical geopolitics flourished - the expectation concerned above all the practice of politics. Sloan (2026) reconstructs its assumptions. Beyond the first, that the United States was an indispensable power, two are directly political-geographical:

> Two more assumptions took hold: first, democracies would not for the foreseeable future be required to think strategically. Second, thinking about assumptions, ends, ways, means, and the evolving strategic and political importance of certain geographical locations and configurations would have little pertinence in a new globalized world.

The third assumption links trade with peace and political change. Sloan (2026) sums it up with the German maxim: "It is summed up in the German mantra of 'Wandel durch Handel' ('change through trade'), the hope that both Russia and China would turn into Western style democracies and free market economics by trading intensively with the West." Had these assumptions been correct, political geography would have faced the prospect of a second marginalisation, after that of the 1950s and 1960s. In a world in which borders lose their significance, trade produces peace and the liberal order spreads of its own accord, the question of the spatial causes and effects of political processes appears secondary.

The opposite happened. The dissolution of the Soviet Union created fifteen new subjects of international relations and fundamentally changed the geopolitical situation of the region (Demedziuk, 2017). The dissolution of Yugoslavia, in turn, brought Balkanisation, in the original sense of the term, back to the place where it originated. Following Brzezinski (1997), Mirza and Ayub (2022) describe the situation: "Post-Cold War Balkan region in Europe was internally weak, torn by ethnic, religious, and territorial conflicts." The new borders and new states were not a deviation from the new order but an integral part of it. Territory also remained an object of military force from the very first months of that order. Iraq's annexation of Kuwait in August 1990 was declared void by the Security Council (United Nations Security Council, 1990), and the war that reversed it became the clearest demonstration of the norm of territorial integrity in action (Zacher, 2001). The boundaries of the norm nevertheless remained contested. In his address on the annexation of Crimea, Putin (2014) invoked "the well-known Kosovo precedent" to justify Russia's action, turning the Western-backed secession of 2008 into an argument for Russian revisionism. In the South Caucasus, Azerbaijan recovered Nagorno-Karabakh by force in 2020 and 2023, within its internationally recognised borders but at the price, in 2023, of the flight of more than 100,000 Armenians (UNHCR, 2024): the norm protected borders, not the populations within them. After the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, the war in Iraq and the global financial crisis, Mackinder re-entered public debate. Megoran (2010, p. 187) describes the

logic of this return: "For Kaplan, Mackinder is the wise 'Victorian' sage to whom we must at last return having recognised the enduring relevance of his insights as the heady promises of post-Cold War neoconservative politics and neoliberal economics are buried in the wreckage of the Iraq debacle and global financial collapse." A pattern was thus visible more than a decade before 2022: when the promises of the post-Cold War order fail, classical geopolitics returns.

The annexation of Crimea in 2014 revealed the essential part of this pattern: territory once again became an object of military appropriation in Europe. Sloan (2026) links it to what was to follow: "The failure of the West to deter Russia after the invasion of Crimea in 2014 was compounded by the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022." Mileski et al. (2023) theorise such changes through the concept of geopolitical order and note that the transition from the Cold War order happened more suddenly and quickly than earlier transitions. The events since 2014 suggest that the Cold War order collapsed quickly, but that the order that is to replace it has not yet been established.

2022: CONTINUITY, NOT A NEW PHASE

Russia's aggression on Ukraine of 24 February 2022 is usually described as a historical turning point, and the surprise was real, not least because of the severity of Russia's military actions against civilians and civilian infrastructure (Śliwiński, 2023). But the war is a turning point in its consequences and in the norm it openly breaks, but not in its logic. The continuity is twofold, chronological and substantive.

Chronologically, the territorial phase of the war began not in 2022 but in 2014. NATO (2023) dates its beginning to 20 February 2014, when the operation to annex Crimea began, whereas Kyrydon and Troyan (2022, p. 170) date it to 26 February 2014 and periodise it as follows:

> The war of aggression unleashed by the Russian Federation against Ukraine has lasted more than eight years, since February 26, 2014. It has passed through two phases: I - hybrid war from February 26, 2014 to February 23, 2022; II - total large-scale conventional war, lasting from February 24, 2022.

Substantively, the object of the war is territorial. The Kremlin justifies the war with several narratives, from the "denazification" of the Ukrainian government to NATO's eastward enlargement, and part of the realist literature seeks its causes precisely in that enlargement (Mearsheimer, 2014); Kyrydon and Troyan (2022) characterise this view as a justification of the aggression. The task here is not to adjudicate between these explanations but to show the object of the war. In any case, both Russia's own claims and the outcome of the war are territorial. The territorial claim was prepared in identity terms before the invasion: Putin (2021) wrote that "Russians and Ukrainians were one people - a single whole" and that "true sovereignty of Ukraine is possible only in partnership with Russia". The territorial logic is also visible in the very course of events: "On the 21 February 2022 the Kremlin recognized the so-called

Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic as independent entities, opening the way to their annexation by the Russian Federation" (NATO, 2023). On 30 September 2022 Russia proclaimed the annexation of four Ukrainian regions, Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson, including territory its forces did not control at the time. The General Assembly declared the annexation invalid by 143 votes to 5, with 35 abstentions (United Nations General Assembly, 2022). In June 2024 Putin (2024) made the withdrawal of Ukrainian troops from the entire territory of these four regions a precondition for a ceasefire and negotiations. NATO's (2023) own definition of the war as an attempt "to regain spheres of influence lost as a result of the collapse of the USSR" is the interpretation of a party to the confrontation, but on this point the primary record supports it. Demedziuk (2017, p. 101) had already described the political-geographical core of this mechanism: "The psychological aspect is based on manipulating the opponent, 'seizure' of part of the territory, arousing and supporting ethnic separatists, creating a regional opposition, aimed at federalisation, leading to the detachment of certain territories from the states." The war of 2022, therefore, does not usher the world into a new phase of practice, but rather, it shows that after 1991 territory never ceased to be an object of power politics. What is new is not the logic but its scale, and the open breach of the norm of territorial integrity by a permanent member of the Security Council.

A WORLD DIVIDED

The war in Ukraine divided the world, but not along the lines of the Cold War. For the West it is a question of international law (NATO, 2023), whereas part of the media in the Global South frames it rather as a conflict to be resolved through dialogue (Akinboade et al., 2023). The line of division follows the debate on the polarity of the international system. One group of authors speaks of a new bipolarity between the United States and China (Mileski et al., 2023). China, by contrast, promotes the multipolar narrative. De Freitas (2026, p. 55) describes its function: "China has long argued that the U.S. unipolar moment is over and that a multipolar world is both inevitable and desirable." In this reading, a war against Iran opposed by most of the Global South only reinforces that narrative. A third group speaks of a world without a centre, for which Mirza and Ayub (2022) cite Kupchan's *No One's World* and Buzan's decentred globalism.

The dispute over polarity is therefore not merely analytical. Multipolarity is at once a description of the system and a geopolitical programme, and the choice of description is already a choice of side. For political geography this is a familiar insight: the division of the world into blocs and spheres has always been a representation as well, and not merely a statement of fact. Okunev (in Agnew et al., 2026) takes this insight a step further with the idea of situational polarity: "Its essence lies in the fact that the world is simultaneously unipolar, bipolar, and multipolar, depending on which side you look from and which specific issue is being discussed (Okunev, 2020)." In his examples, Russian policy follows a unipolar logic when it supports sanctions

against North Korea, a bipolar one on the geopolitical choice of Ukraine and a multipolar one in the Syrian settlement. The choice of a polar description is, in this reading, itself a geopolitical act. Writing from an African perspective, Aniche (in Agnew et al., 2026) holds that states remain the dominant actors and that the competition between Chinese and Western infrastructure initiatives is producing a geo-economic order resembling Cold War bipolarity, with Africa as one of its central arenas. The war returned Europe to the center of geopolitics, but at the same time it accelerated the shift of the center of gravity towards Eurasia. Śliwiński (2025) draws the broader conclusion that, as the focus of international relations shifts from the North Atlantic back to Eurasia, China and Russia are increasingly likely to hold the keys to international peace and security, potentially more so than the United States.

HEARTLAND AND RIMLAND AS FRAMES OF READING

The two best-known formulas of classical geopolitics are once again being used to read current wars, and the first question is who is doing the reading. The Heartland reading of Russia's war belongs above all to formal geopolitics: to Western strategic studies (Śliwiński, 2023; Sloan, 2026) and, on the Russian side, to the Eurasianist tradition (Okunev, 2024). The practical geopolitics of the Kremlin speaks a different language, that of historical unity, compatriots and security (Putin, 2021, 2024). Formal geopolitics thus translates an identity claim into a spatial formula. Russian aggression, motivated by both strategic and identity considerations, is read through Mackinder's (1919) dictum:

> Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland: Who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island: Who rules the World-Island commands the World.

Śliwiński (2023) applies the formula to the war: "Notably, the key to controlling the Heartland area lies in Central and Eastern Europe, as it is an area that borders the Heartland to the West." Ukraine lies precisely in this space, which Kyrydon and Troyan (2022) regard as central to Russia's position. Nor is the reading only a Western one: as Okunev (2024) shows, Russian geopolitical thought, especially the school of Eurasianism, shared the Anglo-Saxon reading of the Heartland. Sloan (2026) describes Mackinder's present-day topicality: "Today there is a third rainstorm, a product of Russia's invasion of Ukraine." After Pearl Harbor and the onset of the Cold War, this is the third revival of his work. Such readings do not imply geodeterminism. Mackinder (1904, p. 437) himself lists non-geographical factors: "The actual balance of political power at any given time is, of course, the product, on the one hand, of geographical conditions, both economic and strategic, and, on the other hand, of the relative number, virility, equipment, and organisation of the competing peoples."

The war of the United States and Israel against Iran, which began on 28 February 2026 (Britannica Editors, 2026), is read, again mainly in formal geopolitics (Ullah, 2026), through the other classical formula, that of Spykman (1944, p. 43, as cited in

Gray, 2015, p. 873): "Who controls the Rimland rules Eurasia; who rules Eurasia controls the destinies of the world." Okunev (2024) locates the battlegrounds of the Cold War almost exclusively in the Rimland, Iran among them. After the ceasefire of 8 April 2026, the war continued in the form of a US naval blockade of Iranian ports and restrictions on navigation through the Strait of Hormuz (Belhaj, 2026). Its logic is not that of territorial conquest. Bassou (2026, p. 14) formulates the first lesson: "The first lesson is that coercion can serve as a substitute for occupation." The object of the struggle is control of flows. In Ratzel's terms, it concerns *Lage* rather than *Raum*. Hormuz, through which about one fifth of global oil consumption passes (U.S. Energy Information Administration [EIA], 2025), overturns a basic assumption of globalisation (Belhaj, 2026, p. 22): "For decades, Hormuz embodied a central paradox of globalization: a narrow and exposed passage carrying a large share of global energy flows, yet one that remained largely insulated from sustained disruption. In 2026, that paradox collapsed. Exposure became leverage." For a single chokepoint, the formula restates the logic of weaponised interdependence (Farrell & Newman, 2019).

Control of flows, however, is itself exercised through claims over space. The same author formulates the political-geographical essence of the crisis (Belhaj, 2026, p. 28):

> The result is worse than legal void, it is legal duplication: two parallel readings of the same maritime space, each aligned with a different conception of order - one privileging sovereignty, the other circulation.

Iran's geography is a resource that compensates for its military inferiority. Sarkhosh et al. (2026) write that Iran regards the strait as a key asset in its doctrine: "It also views the Strait as a critical asset in its doctrine of asymmetric warfare, relying on unconventional tactics and weapons to deter or counter superior adversaries." The consequences are also felt in the Heartland: "If Gulf shipping lanes become unsafe, China's reliance on land-based energy imports via Russia and Central Asia will increase" (De Freitas, 2026, p. 54). The insecurity of sea routes lends new value to overland routes across Eurasia, a Mackinderian motif, this time without Mackinder.

Symbolically, the two classical frames are being used simultaneously to read two wars at the two ends of the contact zone between the Heartland and the Rimland: in the west, in Ukraine, and in the south, in Iran. In the classical schemes Ukraine does not belong to the Rimland in the narrow sense: for Mackinder it is part of Eastern Europe, the key to the Heartland, whereas for Spykman the Rimland is the coastal belt of Eurasia. The first war is a war for territory, the second a war for control of flows. Bassou (2026, p. 19) links the two through their common outcome: "This war has confirmed a truth that history has been accumulating for over a century: In the 21st century, even the most powerful nations find it first difficult, and eventually impossible, to overthrow their enemies through military force alone. Russia in Ukraine and America in Iran both provide contemporary illustrations of this reality."

That events can be read through the classical frames, however, does not mean that they confirm them. The fit itself is at least partly a product of the reflex described in a web commentary from the first weeks of the Iranian crisis: "During geopolitical

crises, the influence of classical theories of international relations tends to come to the fore" (Ullah, 2026). Sloan (2026), himself an advocate of Mackinder, recognises the same problem: "In the discipline of international relations, there are few theories that have been as misread and poorly utilized as geopolitics. Today it is caught in a vortex of overuse and misreading." The Heartland and the Rimland are useful as frames for the persistent spatial conditions of power, but not as explanations that replace political decisions.

DISTANCE AND SPACE: FROM MIDNIGHT HAMMER TO HORMUZ

Even before the war of 2026, on 22 June 2025, the United States struck three Iranian nuclear facilities. Galbraith (2025, p. 799) describes the operation: "This attack, called 'Operation Midnight Hammer' involved a combination of stealth bomber planes that had departed eighteen hours earlier from Missouri and missiles launched from U.S. submarines." A world power projected its will from its own territory, across oceans and continents, without having to rely on immediate geographical proximity to the target. This does not mean that bases, supply lines and routes have lost their importance, but that the traditional strategic value of particular locations, on which classical geopolitics built the projection of power, is changing. The question belongs to geopolitics itself. Sloan (2026) writes of classical geopolitics: "It provides an assessment of how changes in transport and weapons technology can affect the political and strategic importance of certain geographical locations and configurations." Technology does not abolish geography - it changes the value of particular places.

The same flight has another side. Physical distance can be overcome, but political space does not disappear, it becomes conditional and costly. Even a strike launched from Missouri depended on positions held in advance: during the eighteen-hour flight the bombers completed multiple in-flight refuellings, supported by what the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff described as "dozens and dozens of air refueling tankers" (Caine, 2025). *Lage* did not vanish, it moved from the launch point into the logistical network. Political space, for its part, did not stop the strike but registered it. Among the states that questioned the legality of the strikes, Iraq objected to "repeated violations of Iraq's airspace as breaches of its sovereignty and the UN Charter" (Galbraith, 2025, p. 800, note 32). When Iran responded with a strike on the American base in Qatar, Qatar invoked the same principle: "Qatar objected strongly to this 'blatant violation of the sovereignty and airspace of … Qatar, international law and the Charter of the United Nations'" (Galbraith, 2025, p. 804). A distinction should be drawn here between sovereignty as a legal-political principle and the actual capacity to control airspace: the objections of Iraq and Qatar show that the principle is invoked precisely when actual control has been overridden. In 2025 such objections raised the political cost of the operation without preventing it. Access to foreign territory is nevertheless neither automatic nor unconditional. Lesser (2026, p. 41) observes: "The U.S. has been accustomed to more or less unfettered access to European

bases and the ability to overfly allied territory as needed to support routine operations in the Middle East." In the war of 2026, which the United States waged as Operation Epic Fury, this habit proved to be conditional: "As noted above, European allies have grown increasingly reluctant to provide operational support for Operation Epic Fury" (Lesser, 2026, p. 41). Physical geography may be losing some of its value, but the political geography of sovereignty, airspace and alliances retains its own: not as a barrier that technology cannot cross, but as a set of conditions that determine the political price of crossing it.

Technology also has limits. The depth of one of the facilities exceeded the capabilities of even the most powerful weapons: "The third nuclear facility, Isfahan, was targeted with submarine-launched missiles focused only on inflicting surface-level damage, reportedly because the site's considerable depth would have thwarted even bunker buster bombs" (Galbraith, 2025, p. 800). In 2026, the Strait of Hormuz confirmed the same duality elsewhere: the ocean can be overflown, but a strait, and whoever controls it, can choke the global geoeconomy. Bassou (2026, p. 19) draws the broader conclusion: "Yet the conflict has also revealed something more subtle: overwhelming tactical and technological superiority can coexist with a structural strategic inability to translate that superiority into political outcomes." Geography in politics is thus at once defeated and invincible: the same technology that shrinks the world comes to a halt at the height of a mountain and the width of a strait.

TRUMP 2.0: TERRITORY IN THE RHETORIC OF THE HEGEMON

Trump's second term moved the territorial logic from the periphery of the system to its centre. Anglițoiu (2026) writes: "However, the second term of the Trump Administration brought forth a multitude of postulates, initiatives and expectations of geostrategic essence, which revived the realist perspective that geopolitics is expansionism by other means." Greenland is the clearest example. Paul (2026) recalls that the idea is an old one: "The acquisition of Greenland has repeatedly been a topic of discussion within US government circles since the 19th century." What is new is its persistence and its consequences for the Alliance: "For their part, the Danish intelligence services have responded by identifying the United States, for the first time ever, as a potential threat to the security of the Kingdom since Washington is no longer ruling out the use of military force even against allies" (Paul, 2026). The practical register is explicit: asked in January 2025 whether he would rule out military or economic coercion to gain control of Greenland and the Panama Canal, the president-elect declined to do so, saying that the United States needed them "for economic security" (Breuninger, 2025).

A proposal for the integration of Greenland with the United States, published in *Strategic Horizons*, a publication of the US Northern Command, with a note that the views expressed are the author's own, explicitly rejects the interpretation of annexation: "At its core, this proposal is not about annexation, coercion, or imperial ambition - it is about offering Greenlanders a clear, compelling, and pragmatic choice"

(Gunasekara-Rockwell, 2025). Read as a text of formal geopolitics, such a disavowal recalls a rhetorical maneuver familiar from the history of the discipline, in which the name of a practice is distanced from its content. Paul (2026) offers two interpretations. The first is personal: Trump may simply see the island as the largest real-estate deal of his life. The second is structural: "On the other hand, the bid for Greenland makes sense if the geostrategic objective of the Trump administration is to establish a US-controlled North American hemisphere protected by a comprehensive defence system ('Golden Dome')." A broader hemispheric logic, extending beyond North America, took military form in Venezuela, where on 3 January 2026 US forces seized Nicolás Maduro in Caracas and took him to New York to stand trial (Curtis, 2026). In the forum cited in section 2, the operation is read as the emergence of a "Donroe Doctrine" (Sharp, in Agnew et al., 2026) and as a form of new imperialism (Flint, in Agnew et al., 2026). Venezuela, however, is a case of intervention within a hemispheric sphere, not of territorial appropriation. It belongs to the logic of spheres of influence than to that of annexation.

The hemispheric logic also has a doctrinal text. The National Security Strategy released in December 2025 announces a "Trump Corollary" to the Monroe Doctrine, commits the United States to restoring its preeminence in the Western Hemisphere and to denying "non-Hemispheric competitors" the ability to position forces there or to own or control strategically vital assets in the hemisphere (The White House, 2025). It is a text of practical geopolitics in the strict sense, and section 9 reads it as a geopolitical code.

Bados Nieto (2026) describes the mechanism with the tools of critical geopolitics and securitisation theory and reaches for the vocabulary of Geopolitik: "From this perspective, Greenland is presented as a 'vital' space, Haushofer's contemporary Lebensraum, whose eventual loss of control would alter maritime routes, national defence capabilities and the strategic balance with China and Russia, reproducing a preventive logic that shifts the traditional threshold of war." The analogy is polemical but telling: the concept that after 1945 came to embody the stigma of the discipline is once again being used in scholarly analysis, albeit as critique. The logic of spheres of influence is thus returning from three directions: NATO (2023) attributes it to Russia, Bados Nieto (2026) to the United States, and part of the literature applies it to China (Mileski et al., 2023). From the standpoint of classical geopolitics, Sloan (2026) criticises precisely this policy: "This is complicated by the Trump administration's inability to recognize the opportunities and restraints of a closed international political system where geography is not political destiny." Even the advocates of classical geopolitics, then, do not read it as a licence for territorial expansion.

Critical scholars of geopolitics reach the same conclusion from the opposite direction. For Preciado Coronado (in Agnew et al., 2026), Trumpism speaks the language of realism but does not practise it: strategy gives way to coercion backed by only thin consent. Sharp (in Agnew et al., 2026) notes that the classical ring of "America First" does not extend to Trump's geopolitical economy. The same forum also diagnoses something stronger than a return of spheres of influence, namely the

erosion of the norm of territorial integrity, and from three directions at once. Jones (in Agnew et al., 2026) observes that all three great powers now treat territorial integrity as negotiable, in rhetoric or by force: the United States with its designs on the Panama Canal, Canada and Greenland, Russia in Georgia and Ukraine, and China in the South China Sea and in Bhutan, with Taiwan in view. Flint (in Agnew et al., 2026, p. 49) links Washington's wavering support for Ukraine and its readiness to accommodate Russia's territorial claims with Trump's own view that territory belongs to whoever is strong enough to take it, a view that in his reading also underlies the ambition to annex Greenland, and concludes: "The old geometry of territorial integrity seems to be no more." The two territorial cases of this article thus share a single logic, that of treating territorial integrity as negotiable, but they do not stand on the same rung. Table 1 distinguishes five rungs of territorial revisionism, from rhetorical and toponymic claims to annexation by force. The scale is the rung on which a state acts. Read in this way, the ladder also shows that the hegemon's territorial turn did not begin in 2025. In his first term, Trump recognised Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights and Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara (Proclamation No. 9852, 2019; Proclamation No. 10126, 2020): a lower rung than annexation, but one that already treats territory held by force as open to recognition. Whether that logic is new is a separate question. Flint reads Trump as announcing a new world order, a product of declining US hegemony and of the geopolitical transition it sets in motion. Sharp (in Agnew et al., 2026, p. 59) is more cautious: "Firstly, the 'post-liberal' Trump administration has abandoned the previous US emphasis on persuasion, diplomacy and negotiation to a language of friends and foes, but this differs only in scale from George W Bush's insistence that post-2001, states were 'either with us or with the terrorists.'" The two readings are compatible with the argument of section 4 if the logic is distinguished from the norm and from the order: the logic is continuous, the norm is eroding and the order is in transition. In the case of the hegemon, what is new is not the logic but the rung on which it is now practised, and the fact that it is practised by the state that led the defence of the norm in 1990–1991.

Trump's second term also shows the merger of registers announced in section 2. Territorial claims are made not only in strategy documents but in names and maps. On his first day in office, the president ordered that the Gulf of Mexico be renamed the Gulf of America, describing it as "an indelible part of America" (Executive Order No. 14172, 2025). Within weeks the new name appeared on Google Maps for users in the United States, and the White House barred an Associated Press reporter from the Oval Office because the agency kept the old name in its style guidance (Nilsson-Julien, 2025). An executive order, an act of practical geopolitics, was enforced through a digital map and through access to the press, that is, through the channels of popular geopolitics. Toponymy is one of the oldest political-geographical acts, and here it shows practical and popular geopolitics merging in a way that can be described only if the two registers are first kept apart. The repeated description of Canada as a potential "51st state" (Breuninger, 2025) belongs to the same register: rhetoric that costs nothing to utter but turns the territorial integrity of an ally into a topic of conversation.

Table 1. A ladder of territorial revisionism

Rung	Form	Examples
1	Rhetorical, toponymic and cartographic claims	Renaming of the Gulf of Mexico (2025); Canada as a "51st state" (2025)
2	Coercive pressure without the use of force	Greenland and the Panama Canal: refusal to rule out coercion (2025)
3	Intervention within a sphere of influence, without annexation	Capture of Nicolás Maduro in Caracas (2026)
4	Recognition of territory acquired or held by force	US recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights (2019) and of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara (2020)
5	Annexation by force	Kuwait by Iraq (1990); Crimea (2014); Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson (2022)

Source: author's own compilation from the sources cited in sections 3, 4 and 8.

WHAT IS RETURNING, AND WHO SPEAKS FOR GEOGRAPHY?

The world after 2022 is a world of open questions: relations between the United States and the European Union, the position of the United States in NATO, the role of China, the future of Iran and the Middle East, and the future of Ukraine and Russia. Alliances persist, but without a common direction. Belhaj (2026, p. 23) writes: "They operate instead as flexible, interest-driven arrangements, what might be termed alliances without alignment." Contemporary conflicts also call into question the third assumption reconstructed by Sloan, namely that economic interdependence necessarily produces political stability. Belhaj (2026, p. 34) concludes: "Interdependence is no longer always stabilizing. And vulnerability is no longer just a weakness - it can also be a source of power."

In this context, three things need to be distinguished. Geopolitics is returning as a practice: states are again thinking in terms of territory, spheres of influence, strategic locations and chokepoints. Geopolitics is also returning as a discourse: the word geopolitics is once again everywhere. Agnew (2026, p. 41) observes: "Newspaper headlines and social media feeds announce the 'geopolitics of this' and 'the geopolitics of that.'" Flint (in Agnew et al., 2026) adds that this proliferation obscures rather than clarifies the nature of the changes under way. The proliferation can be measured. In OpenAlex (Priem et al., 2022), the number of works with "geopolitics" in the title rose from 31 in 1990 to 297 in 2010, 670 in 2022 and 1,363 in 2025, relative to all indexed works, this is a rise from about 15 to about 93 per million, with marked jumps in 2014 and in 2024-2025 (author's calculation; data retrieved on 21 August 2026). But the return of the practice and of the word is not the same as a return of the discipline's voice. Megoran (2010, p. 188) warns that critical geopolitics was

complacent in believing that it had defeated classical geopolitics: "However, I suggest it bespeaks complacency that the successful institutionalisation of critical geopolitics in geography departments has vanquished neo/classical geopolitics." Neoclassical geopolitics shares with classical geopolitics a realist understanding of international relations, political conservatism, the ambition to advise politicians and a propensity for dramatisation, generalisation and simplification, and for this very reason the old arguments against classical geopolitics are not sufficient to refute it (Megoran, 2010). The opposite pole of the debate is represented by Haverluk et al. (2014), who argue that critical geopoliticians, by defining themselves against geopolitics, cartography and environmental explanation, have limited their own influence: "We argue for a more holistic, neo-classical geopolitics." Megoran asks political geography to engage neoclassical geopolitics critically, while Haverluk et al. ask it to compete with neoclassical geopolitics on its own ground. Both, in different ways, register the same gap: the discipline's voice in public debate on geopolitics is weaker than its institutional position in geography departments would suggest.

The events after 2022 show that tools for reading them are available within political geography, in both its classical and its critical wing, even though much of the current debate is conducted outside the discipline. The corpus of this article illustrates the point: of the analyses of the events of 2014–2026 cited here, only the 2026 forum (Agnew et al., 2026) appeared in a journal of political geography and geopolitics, while the others were published in journals of international relations, security studies, international law, media and area studies, by think tanks, or as web commentary. The discipline has, however, begun to respond, as the 2026 forum cited above shows: twelve scholars, most of them political geographers, discuss whether Trump is an anomaly or the herald of a new geopolitical order (Agnew et al., 2026). The concept of the geopolitical code, developed by the political geographer Taylor, describes the logic of states that are returning to territory (Taylor, 1993, p. 64, as cited in Mileski et al., 2023):

> The geopolitical code is the result of practical geopolitical thinking. It contains a set of political-geographic assumptions that support the state's foreign policy. The geopolitical code includes the definition of national interests, identifying external threats to those interests, the planned response to those threats, and the justification of such response.

The concept of the geopolitical order, in turn, encompasses the organisation of space as a whole (Agnew & Corbridge, 1995; Mileski et al., 2023). Bados Nieto's analysis of securitisation, in which a geographical issue becomes a security necessity, is essentially critical-geopolitical. Belhaj's distinction between sovereignty and circulation addresses a classic political-geographical question about the nature of space. The question, therefore, is not whether geography matters again, because that much is obvious. The question is which political geography will interpret it.

Megoran (2010) draws a historical parallel with the first return of geopolitics, in the 1980s. Geographical scholarship then responded to Hepple's call (Hepple, 1986, as cited in Megoran, 2010) by examining both the traces of classical geopolitical thought and the rise of contemporary conservative geopolitics. The present revival, Megoran (2010, p. 188) argues, calls for the same response: "Kaplan's article likewise illustrates that we have both a disciplinary and a political duty to engage with the latest revival of classical geopolitics, that of neoclassical geopolitics."

Three tools of political geography are particularly relevant to this task. The first is the concept of territory and territoriality, which makes it possible to analyse Ukraine and Greenland not as exceptions but as cases of an ongoing contest over the control of space. The second is the pair of concepts of geopolitical code and geopolitical order, which link the assumptions of individual states to the organisation of space as a whole (Flint & Taylor, 2018). The third is the critical analysis of geopolitical discourse, which treats the revival of Mackinder and Spykman, and the vocabulary of vital space, spheres of influence and hemispheric defence, not as explanations but as objects of analysis. Together, they allow the discipline to take the return of territory seriously without reproducing the neoclassical reflex.

Read as geopolitical codes, that is, as statements of a state's interests, of the threats to them, of the planned response and of its justification, the 2025 US National Security Strategy and the 2023 Russian Foreign Policy Concept reveal something that the Heartland - Rimland reading cannot see. The Russian Concept defines Russia as "a unique country-civilization and a vast Eurasian and Euro-Pacific power" at the core of the "Russian world", names the near abroad as the main direction of its foreign policy and identifies the United States as the principal source of anti-Russian policy (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2023). The US Strategy announces that "after years of neglect" the United States will reassert and enforce the Monroe Doctrine, defines illegal migration, drug smuggling, cartels and the presence of "non-Hemispheric competitors" as the main threats in the hemisphere, and presents its response as a "Trump Corollary" to the doctrine (The White House, 2025). The two codes are structurally alike. Each defines a privileged sphere adjacent to the state, each justifies its claim to that sphere in historical or civilisational terms rather than in terms of international law, and each treats the presence of an outside power within the sphere as a threat in itself. A Heartland reading places Russia's claim at the centre of world politics and America's at its edge, in the outer or insular crescent (Mackinder, 1904). A code reading shows instead two codes that converge on the same geometry, a world of adjacent spheres, which is precisely the geometry the norm of territorial integrity was meant to replace.

The third tool can be shown in the same way. Table 2 sorts the four cases discussed in this article by register. Two observations follow. First, the classical frames of Heartland and Rimland appear almost exclusively in the formal register,

while practical geopolitics speaks the languages of history, identity, security and hemispheric doctrine. The neoclassical reflex is a translation of these languages into spatial formulas, not a description of how states reason. Second, the popular register is the least documented in the literature used here, although it is the register in which practical and popular geopolitics now merge. Far from being meaningless, as Sharp (in Agnew et al., 2026) suggests, the distinction between registers is what makes this merger visible.

Table 2. Four cases in the three registers of geopolitics

Case	Formal geopolitics	Practical geopolitics	Popular geopolitics
Ukraine	Heartland readings (Śliwiński, 2023; Sloan, 2026); NATO enlargement as cause (Mearsheimer, 2014)	"Historical unity" (Putin, 2021); annexation of four regions (2022); withdrawal as a precondition for talks (Putin, 2024)	Divergent framing in US, Chinese and South African newspapers (Akinboade et al., 2023)
Hormuz	Rimland readings (Ullah, 2026); "exposure became leverage" (Belhaj, 2026)	Iran's doctrine of asymmetric warfare (Sarkhosh pour et al., 2026); US naval blockade (Belhaj, 2026)	Not addressed in the sources used
Greenland and Canada	Integration proposal disavowing annexation (Gunasekara-Rockwell, 2025); "Lebensraum" as critique (Bados Nieto, 2026)	Refusal to rule out coercion (Breuninger, 2025); Danish threat assessment (Paul, 2026)	Canada as a "51st state" (Breuninger, 2025)
Venezuela and the hemisphere	"Donroe Doctrine" and new imperialism (Sharp and Flint, in Agnew et al., 2026)	"Trump Corollary" (The White House, 2025); capture of Maduro (Curtis, 2026)	Gulf of Mexico renamed, enforced through map platforms and press access (Nilsson-Julien, 2025)

Source: author's compilation. Registers after Ó Tuathail and Dalby, as summarised by Painter (2008, p. 65).

Taking the return of territory seriously also means specifying what exactly is returning. Agnew (2026, p. 46) acknowledges that territorial geopolitics is reviving almost everywhere, but immediately qualifies the observation: "Persisting global strategic interdependence, however, in terms of global capital flows, trade, migrant flows, and financial connectivity, undermines the case for the emergence of a singular geometry of global power based entirely on inter-imperial rivalry and spheres of influence." Territory returns alongside flows, not instead of them, which corresponds

to the two strands identified in this article. Okunev (in Agnew et al., 2026) goes further: "The construction of walls and the introduction of duties are, perhaps, not so much a return to the 19th century as the agony of a departing territorial model." Whichever reading prevails, the return of territory is not the restoration of a territorial world. This is precisely why it calls for political geography rather than for the neoclassical reflex, which recognises only one geometry of power.

THE SHAPE OF POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY TO COME

If political geography is to speak for geography in the return of geopolitics, four lines of research follow from the argument of this article. The first is the political geography of chokepoints, corridors and logistical networks, the *Lage* of power, where control over flows replaces or accompanies the conquest of territory and where the vocabulary of weaponised interdependence (Farrell & Newman, 2019) can be given the spatial precision it often lacks. The second is the erosion of the norm of territorial integrity, traced not only in wars of annexation but on all the rungs of Table 1. The open question is at what point the accumulation of lower rungs, from renaming and recognition to coercion and intervention, changes the norm itself (Zacher, 2001). The third is toponymy and cartography in digital statecraft, where executive orders are enforced through map platforms and access to the press, and where practical and popular geopolitics merge in real time. The fourth is the perspective of small states and of the semi-periphery, for which the erosion of territorial integrity is not an abstract question of world order but a direct condition of existence. Seen from the Balkans, where the Kosovo precedent is still invoked from opposite sides, the return of territory is a return to familiar ground. In each case the task is the one Megoran (2010) assigned to the discipline: to engage the latest revival of classical geopolitics rather than to assume that it has been defeated.

CONCLUSION

Instead of a second "moribund backwater", the end of history produced a paradox: the more geography was declared irrelevant, the more it returned. According to Sloan (2026), Mackinder's own work has followed a trajectory resembling that of the discipline as a whole: "This has to be juxtaposed with the reality that his book has been subjected to a phoenix-like trajectory in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries." Mackinder himself noted this as early as 1942: "My book returns as a ghost revisiting a world in which it lived without much honour" (Weigert, 1942, pp. 135–136, as cited in Sloan, 2026).

The period after 1989 brought not an end but a continuity of the territorial and positional logics of power, while the norm of territorial integrity that constrained them is eroding. Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the war with Iran and the American rhetoric about Greenland have made this continuity visible in two strands: territory as an object of conquest and appropriation, and chokepoints and flows as instruments of power, *Raum* and *Lage*. This continuity extends to the hegemon itself, yet the return of territory it reveals is not the restoration of a territorial world: territory returns alongside flows, within a plurality of geometries of power (Agnew, 2026). Operation Midnight Hammer and the crisis in Hormuz show that technology can overcome physical distance, but that political space, rather than disappearing, sets the conditions and the price of crossing it. What returns first, is geopolitics as practice and discourse, and when it is written down, it is often written in neoclassical form, and mostly outside the discipline. This time, the pressure on political geography to speak comes not from within the discipline but from the events themselves.

Therefore, there is a need for political-geographical analysis without a guaranteed disciplinary ascent. Whether political geography will have a voice in interpreting the return of geopolitics depends on whether it can offer tools that go beyond neoclassical reflexes. Such tools exist in both its classical and its critical wing, and this article has put three of them to work: a ladder that separates the logic of territorial revisionism from its scale, a reading of geopolitical codes that reveals a convergence on a world of adjacent spheres, and a reading by register that shows the neoclassical reflex to be a translation of state languages into spatial formulas rather than a description of how states reason. The discipline cannot leave the interpretation of territory to others in a world in which territory, borders and chokepoints are once again objects of war and appropriation. Its response will show whether it has learned from its own history, whether it will cede the field to the neoclassical reflex or subject that reflex to analysis together with the geopolitical narratives themselves.

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