

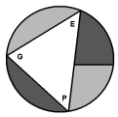
Main Article—Developments in the field

Geography, State and Ethnogeopolitics in the (post) Covid-19 Age of Globalisation

Babak Rezvani & Caspar ten Dam

Abstract This article deals with the question whether Geopolitics in general and Ethnogeopolitics in particular is still relevant in the age of globalisation. First of all, the age of globalisation is itself a controversial concept. Nevertheless the state of technology has advanced and different places in the world have become increasingly better connected to each other. Geopolitics has not become irrelevant, because geography remains relevant for statecraft, security and international relations by and among state and supra-state actors—as evident from the varying effects of the Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic and the measures taken to combat it taken in different countries and regions of the world. These differences are not solely political and cultural, but also geographical and demographical in nature. Thus geography is still socially, economically and politically a relevant factor. Moreover, there are no convincing signs of far-reaching state demise in the modern era and the state is still the main political actor—even though infra-state and supra-state organisations and identities may have become more prominent and influential. Geography and Geopolitics still remain relevant in the “new era” of globalisation.

Key words: Geography, Geopolitics, Ethnogeopolitics State, Globalisation, Concepts of Control



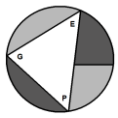
Introduction: Conceptualisations of (Ethno)Geopolitics

In this article, suitable for the section disciplinary development of Ethnogeopolitics as a field of studies, we are going to discuss whether geography, and hence geopolitics and ethnogeopolitics, have become redundant in the current global age. In order to do so we built on and refer to many of our own already published articles which deal with relevant issues in order to offer a good basis for further discussion. Thus we refer to many already discussed concepts and topics in this journal, including those by authors contributing to our section for disciplinary developments of Ethnogeopolitics, and other relevant articles.

As we intend to keep this current article short, one can consult the literature referred to in order to read more in-depth analyses about those issues. As broad this subject may be one can find plenty of interesting reading material. However, it is not part of the scope of this article to give a broad review of available literature and we intend to keep our account as short and succinct as possible.

To be sure, and above all in “international relations and political economy .. the concept geopolitics is often loosely used” (Rezvani 2018: 6). Our preferred conception is “close to the categories of the French ‘subversive’ school of *Géopolitique Interne et Externe* and ‘Critical Geopolitics’ (Ibid: 6; see also Rezvani 2019a: 32).

Consequently our concept of geopolitics is close to our own developed concept of *ethnogeopolitics* referring to “multiple scales, levels of analysis and actors” (Rezvani 2018: 6), including particularly ethnicities in concentrated geographical areas.

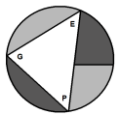


Even so, both geopolitics and ethnogeopolitics, as concepts and fields of discipline and study, are constantly evolving. This is particularly true of ethnogeopolitics. As Babak Rezvani put in the maiden Editorial of our journal, “Ethnogeopolitics, like any other academic field, is dynamic and subject to change and conceptual and methodological development” (Rezvani 2013a: 5).

As Rezvani reiterated in subsequent publications, Ethnogeopolitics is a new concept, indicating an emerging multidisciplinary field of research. Hence, its definition(s) and scopes of study depend much on those of related (sub)disciplines, particularly those of geopolitics (Rezvani 2013a: 4; see also Rezvani & Ilyasov 2017: 7; Ilyasov 2018; Gogsadze 2019; Kaplan 2019; Shahshahani 2019; Rezvani 2019a: 25; Rezvani 2020a: 19-20).¹

Indeed, it would be quite challenging to circumscribe geopolitics and ethnogeopolitics as *observable actions* and thus main concepts according to Caspar ten Dam’s rather strict if logical tripartite conceptualisation of *actions* (main concepts), *actors* (secondary concepts) and *motives* (tertiary concepts) (see Ten Dam 2015a). Even so, the “*why*, [the *who*] and the *how*, will always be more elusive and contestable than the *what*” (Ibid: 10)—one reason why main concepts should generally revolve around the what rather than the who, how or why.

Therefore, Ten Dam’s “action-actor-motive trichotomy” (Ten Dam 2015: 8) of the *what*, *who* and *why* may be applicable on (ethno)geopolitics if enough definitional efforts are made along these lines. Ten Dam prefers to classify discernible actions as primary concepts, such as ‘terrorism’ i.e.

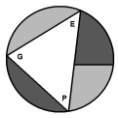


lethal violence against defenseless non-combatants; the actors who commit these acts as secondary concepts such as ‘non-state terrorism’ by e.g. rebels and ‘(semi-)state terrorism’ by e.g. paramilitaries; and apparent drives, motivations and ideologies accounting for these actions as tertiary concepts, such as ‘leftwing terrorism’, ‘rightwing terrorism’, ‘Islamist terrorism’, and so on.

Accordingly, one could lucidly construct *amalgam concepts* referring to jointly occurring actions and drives by discernable actors, such as ‘Islamist non-state terrorism’ by *Al-Qaeda* (‘the Base’ in Arabic) and ‘Islamist quasi/ semi-state terrorism’ by Islamic State or *Daesh*² when it had a more or less functioning ‘state’ during the few years its self-proclaimed Caliphate existed across a considerable swath of territory in Syria and Iraq.

In line with this reasoning, we need to determine whether geopolitics and ethnogeopolitics as such could best be defined as ‘timeless’ primary action-concepts or rather as ‘fluctuating’ amalgam action-actor-motive concepts that vary across time, place and particular phenomenon studied. Alternatively, these concepts could merely be terms referring to a range of topics and phenomena as areas of research, and not fall within the action-actor-motive trichotomy at all. At any rate, this definitional issue should be a topic of further study and consideration.

Be that as it may, do geopolitics and ethnogeopolitics have their legitimate place in the age of *globalisation*? In other words, are these concepts and (supposed) phenomena relevant in a presumably globalised world? Three conceptual problems should be cleared before this question can be answered. Thus (ethno)geopolitics—defined in



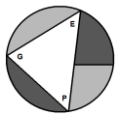
whatever way—is related to the state and geography. It also concerns a geographic focus on statecraft.

Therefore, it is apt to answer the question whether the (*nation-*)*state* and *geography* are relevant and meaningful political concepts in a globalised world or not. Nevertheless, before answering that question, one needs to question whether we are living a globalised world and whether such a labeling as the age or era of globalisation is a meaningful concept. We begin with the latter question first and then will elaborate more on the relevance of state and geography in the present time.

Existence and Saliency of Globalisation

The number of international and even transnational contacts and interactions have undeniably increased since the latter half of the 20th century and they continue to increase in an accelerated pace. Many would say that we are living now and indeed for some time in a new era: the era of globalisation i.e. increased transnational contacts, interactions and often one-sided center-periphery interdependencies across the globe—for so far globalisation is or can ever be precisely defined.

Nevertheless, the same kind of perceptions have existed before. Equally the advent of the discovery voyages in the 15th century, the industrial revolution since the mid-18th century and the era of colonialism since the late 15th century and beyond, could be seen as the advent of globalisation (See also Robinson 2011; Wallerstein 1991a; Wallerstein 1991b). Therefore, from that broad historical perspective, it is dubious to call globalisation a new 20-21st century phenomenon. This type of

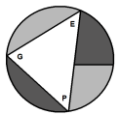


thinking relates to a linear thinking about time and development which is not useful, indeed misleading and erroneous.

Likewise, modernity or the modern—concepts closely tied to that of globalisation—are all too often obliquely identified with ‘dynamic’, ‘democratic’, ‘egalitarian’, ‘secular’, ‘scientific’, ‘industrial’, ‘advanced’ or ‘progressive’—in short ‘Western’ and presumed to be ‘uniquely’ tied to linear industrial and post-industrial revolutions that presumably first occurred in the West. These adjectives do suggest a forward-looking mindset (Ten Dam’s general definition of modernity), yet entail empirical modern regularities in the Western world, not universal modern characteristics across the world (Shils 1968: 7-9; see further for Ten Dam’s general definition of modernity: Ten Dam 2010: esp. 339-340; Ten Dam 2015a: 10).

Every date is a new date and every era is a new era compared to its preceding dates and eras. The economic, political and social realities change as time passes. It would be naïve to think that development of these realities proceed either in linear or circular fashion. It may seem odd, however, many ancient cultures had circular conceptions of time, which were looking better at their agricultural way of life, and this dependence on seasonal situation seems natural and understandable. To many analysts’ dismay, such developments cannot always be predicted exactly, but as evidence shows, it is more probable that these realities’ path of development will proceed towards diverse directions, will retreat again and find their way towards other directions again.

Nevertheless, technology will proceed owing to accumulation of scientific knowledge. However, the same is not true about the dominant

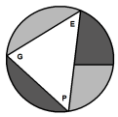


modes of political, social and economic conduct. One reason that our era is called the era of globalisation is because of neo-liberalism's hegemony and prevailing global capitalism. Still, there are no guarantees that this situation remains forever. It depends very much on the balance of power between different political, social and economic actors, and is related to the hegemonies of ideas and ideologies.

Following Bode (1979) and inspired by Gramsci, Van der Pijl (1992: 52) calls such ideologies *beheersconcepties* in Dutch, that is, comprehensive concepts of control (Van der Pijl 1998: 3-4 & 51; see also Overbeek 2004; Robinson 2005). Thus (ethno)geopolitical shifts, climate change and other man-made and/or natural disasters, may engender eras of *different* kinds of globalisation based on *different* political-economic systems than neo-liberal capitalism. Think of redistributive capitalism with extensive welfare states, classical communism or corporatism—historically existent in some form—or a new form of state(-run) capitalism as exemplified in and by China.

Arguably it is more likely that in the near future—given the current rise of populism and the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic—such developments may engender eras of nation-state protectionism, self-reliance and self-isolation which for better or worse would diminish or sever the ties so typical of globalisation as we know it. A regression to an anti-global, non-global or even pre-global world is a distinct possibility.

Nevertheless, as said earlier, the fact is that the number of international contacts and transactions have been increasing since the recent past, i.e. the last few centuries. This development has a lot to do with both the advance of technology and particularly communication technology and



the hegemony of neo-liberalism and global capitalism. These realities do exist and do continue to function, and are undeniable facts at least for now, even given the rise of populism and other anti-globalist trends, no matter in what way we look at them and interpret them.

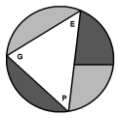
Existence and Saliency of (Nation-)State, Geography and (Ethno)Geopolitics

The second question is whether state and geography, and hence (ethno)geopolitics, have become irrelevant in the new era. The answer is no.

There is no convincing evidence nor indications that the (nation-)state in the modern era is in demise across the globe (barring some regions ridden with conflict). The state, as a political-territorial organisation of a corresponding nation (however defined) or common citizenry composed of multiple nations or ethnicities (however defined), continues to be the main (international) political actor in the contemporary era and it still has or at least presumes to possess sovereignty over all its territory.

One presumes here of course that the state in question is strong and functioning, and not a so-called failed state in which unrest, anarchy and warfare reign supreme (see notion of state in disarray Rezvani 2015: 39-42 ; Rezvani 2013c: 51-54; see also Lake & Rothchild 1996; Lake & Rothchild 1998: 17; Wolff 2006: 74).³

Indeed, one could argue that the “statebuilding process has been rudimentary in many “Third World” countries. These usually are



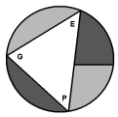
countries which are repeatedly affected by many types of internal conflict. The best remedial strategy would be to strengthen state structures and to encourage good governance and democratisation at the same time” (Rezvani 2013b: 51).

Actually, it is possible and desirable to “lambast the apparently corrosive effects of (neo-)liberal modernisation on the nascent state in the developing world” (Ten Dam 2016: 11; Rezvani 2013b). Yet even (the legitimacy of) the neo-liberal nation-state in the West is under pressure to deal with terrorism, immigration and the resultant rise in xenophobic and populist sentiments.

Thus societal and some political parties’ perception is that the “influx of Muslim refugees, not least owing to the Syrian Conflict, causes tension within most European societies and brings Europe into a situation of an acute security and identity crisis” (Rezvani 2016: 6). Of course, this is not our balanced academic point of view as there is no clear evidence of terrorism or other major security threats emanating from Muslim refugees.

However, this is the picture that the xenophobic or sensationalist media propagate which in turn is used in the discourse of certain politicians in the West. This example shows that geography matters; apparently a conflict in one state affects other states thousands of miles away.

Moreover, states are not the only global and even domestic actors nowadays. They have lost their monopolies in many aspects of decision-making and policy-making vis-à-vis their citizens or subjects (depending on the political systems of the states in question). Non-



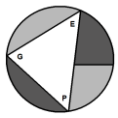
governmental organisations (NGOs) and multinational companies as well as supranational organisations are increasingly playing an important role in domestic and international affairs.

Most states have opened up their markets and cooperated in international fora and organisations—until the rise of the U.S. Trump Administration and its unilateralism, which is perhaps an odd phenomenon but no one can tell anything with certainty about future developments.

Most international organisations are intergovernmental ones which cannot be regarded as detrimental to the states' sovereignty, however. These organisations, in fact, may solidify state's sovereignty as these offer a platform with shared decision-making to different states that are thereby able to defend and safeguard their particular interests and choices.

However, supranational bodies of governance can cause a loss of state sovereignty. The case in point is the European Union (EU). The EU is a supranational entity which imposes its regulations on its member states after unanimous or majority decisions as in its European Council and other decisionmaking bodies. Consequently, votes in these supranational bodies by the member states relinquish parts of their sovereignties on matters covered by the decided regulations.

Nevertheless, it is debatable how effective or significant the European Union's impact on the overall erosion of state sovereignty truly is. Additionally, the EU member states are still free to sign bilateral or multilateral treaties or refrain from these and have their say on



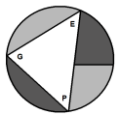
formation of the EU's regulations—with continuing veto powers regarding many of these regulations.

On the other hand, the 2008 and more recent financial crises in Greece, Cyprus, and to various extent also elsewhere in Europe, have shown how compelling the burden of European Union's regulations has become.

Most often, state sovereignty is also challenged, weakened or even obliterated in the significant number of failed states across the world, including to varying degrees Somalia, Libya, Yemen, Afghanistan, DR Congo and arguably also Iraq and Syria (at least until recently). These are countries which are politically chaotic and where the state—for so far it still exists—cannot effectively enforce its monopoly as the sole guarantor of security and order. Most of such failed states are located in Africa.

It is, however, important to note that the European Union is a unique experiment in the world. It only relates to a relatively small part of the world, both geographically and demographically. The paradigm, authority and legitimacy of states' sovereignty is still unchallenged in the largest part of the world.

It is naïve to think that geography has become politically, economically and socially irrelevant in the new era. Its relevance is convincingly argued in Robert D. Kaplan's 2012 book entitled *The Revenge of Geography: What the Maps tell us about Coming Conflict and the Battle against Fate*, which discusses the effects of geography on the security and power of countries. Although a bit physically deterministic in the broad sense of the word, this book brings ample evidence that



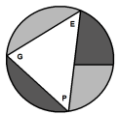
geography is still very relevant in studying state's power, security and international relations.

It is true that technological developments like speedy communications and contacts through computerisation, digitisation, digitalisation, automation and robotics are assumingly making geographical barriers irrelevant. However, this does not mean that it has made geography as such irrelevant.

Moreover technology's homogenising effect on cultures, places and hence societies should not be exaggerated. Even though modern communication technology enables easier interaction worldwide, it does not forbid interaction over shorter distances and hence technological advancement and globalisation may even go hand in hand with traditional (pre-modern) tribal structures as well (e.g. Ten Dam 2019).

Advanced methods and tools of communications such as the internet have made geographical distance less relevant, and advanced vehicles of transportation, military equipment and weaponry have been victorious over rough terrain. Nevertheless, geography is more than distance and terrain alone. Geography also relates to the location of territorial, cultural, ethnic and social entities and identities.

Hence, geography does not only refer to a territory, as space, but also to its cultural and demographic attributes and their combination (e.g. ethnogeographic configurations). It is clear that a place is imbued with meanings ascribed from nature, human intervention and the culture of its inhabitants. Also, the interplay of such attributes to an area of space



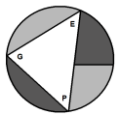
may have an impact on social lives and hence wellbeing of populations inhabiting in different parts of the world.

In this respect it is appropriate to mention ethnogeographic configurations, an abstract concept which is built on many cultural (and in a way also natural) attributes of an area. From Rezvani's research it appears that ethnogeographic configuration—roughly the way demographic pockets of ethno-linguistic and ethno-religious relate to each other spatially—may have an impact on the occurrence and maintenance of conflicts (Rezvani 2013c: 323-327; Rezvani 2015: 48-54, 298-301).

Likewise, Ten Dam's studies since 2010 on *brutalisation* i.e. increasing violations of local and/or international violence-norms, show how certain local cultural factors contribute to the escalation of violent conflict. Such cultural codes are developed in certain areas over a long period of time. In that sense these are geographic as these contribute to the identity-formation of that place and rule the social interactions in that area (to a certain extent).

At any rate, empirical findings indicating the significant yet partial validity of some (cultural) aspects or variables of Ten Dam's Brutalisation theory have already been published (see e.g. Ten Dam 2010, 2011, 2012, 2014, 2015a,b,c, 2016, 2017; Ten Dam & Polanski 2015).

Countries, regions, cities and other localities are situated somewhere in the world; and these locations are static, at least at one point in time and during a (lengthy) period of time, and their geographic locations' coordinates cannot be altered as such—barring major upheavals due to

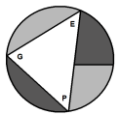


natural or man-made disasters. Think of earthquakes that destroyed cities and even states since ancient times. There also have been cases when landslides destroyed and relocated villages. Nevertheless, such disasters have been rare (if becoming more frequent due to climate change), and only major cities were involved in such total relocations.

Although political entities' territorial contours may change over time and this may change their geographical coordinates and boundaries—one example is Poland—they cannot be bereft of “location” as a concept. Everything has its location; everything has its place in the world.

Location of a country is politically relevant. It compels a country to deal with issues which it otherwise would not have to. For example, countries in the African Sahara have to deal with drought more than countries in Europe ever have to. Or countries like Italy, India and the U.S. with large densely populated cities and valleys interspersed with open plains have had to deal with the Corona COVID-19 outbreak more urgently and less successfully—especially if coupled with open contacts abroad and burdened health care systems at home—than countries like Ireland and New Zealand with small populations and low densities beyond their capitals, helped by surrounding seas, competent governments and well-developed health care systems.

Not only the natural realities but also social and political realities are relevant in this regard: think of U.S. President Trump's erratic responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and his pandering to his base that largely opposes the lockdown measures enacted by both Democratic and Republican governors in their respective states, not realising or caring

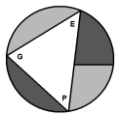


for the risks, which shows that he is not fully aware or blightly ignorant of his country's geography.

Or think of how Central Asian countries, and Iran and India, are facing threats from Salafi/Wahhabi extremist groups owing to their borders with Afghanistan and Pakistan where many of these groups operate from. It is true that Pakistan and Afghanistan are themselves a victim of these extremists, the same as Syria and Iraq were and still are.

However, proximity to such areas of conflict obliges the neighbouring states to act and often coordinate their actions with each other and preferably also with the states that have fallen victims to such extremist groups. This in turn may make the functioning of those states stronger. These examples easily show that geographical, location, distance and proximity have not become as irrelevant as one may think.

A recent study (Rezvani 2019b: 142-152) that compares Tajikistan with Georgia concludes that despite the fact that both have been small failed-states for some time after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgia and Tajikistan took different geopolitical orientations and paths owing to their geography, both in the sense of physical space and the cultural attributes to it. Thus their histories and cultures did matter. Still, their territories or populations as such did not matter as much as the fact that neither of these small countries could take a more dominant role regionally and had to take a more or less subservient or 'follower' position vis-à-vis one of the contending major powers. Even so, the most impactful factors affecting the geopolitical orientation of these countries were their geographical locations in fragile, contested neighbourhoods and their desire for security at almost any costs.

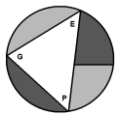


Conclusion: (Ethno)Geopolitics in a Still-Globalised World

In sum, a globalised world does not mean a “placeless world” but a reality in which different places all over the world are increasingly interconnected and interact with each other. International trade and migration have become increasingly pervasive. This fact means that social, economic and political realities in one place have their impacts on places elsewhere. Cheap labour attracts Western companies to move to Asia, Africa and Latin America which in turn causes unemployment in Europe and North America.

Migration of people from poor, politically unstable and/or undemocratic countries does not mean simply an economic burden on the West, but rather a social and political burden. Migrations of people may often bring with them the problems and conflicts from the mother countries. The ongoing, protracted conflict between Turkey and the militant Kurdistan Workers’ Party or PKK (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê* in Kurdish), is a point in case. Kurdish and Turkish (extremist) activists often clash with each other in European cities, which would be unimaginable if there had been no large migrations of Turks and Kurds from Turkey to European countries in the first place. In fact the realities of one place migrate to another place, which forms evidence of (modern-day) mechanisms of geography.

Geography is also important because it provides us knowledge about the different places in the world. Our information about and the knowledge of places get outdated as time passes. This is especially true in the current era in which technological developments change the characteristics of places even more rapidly than before. Therefore, we



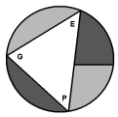
continuously need new information and insights about different places of the world.

The study of countries and peoples (*Länder- und Völkerkunde* in German) has been one of the main fundamentals of the 'scientific' disciplines of human geography and cultural anthropology (see e.g. Penck: 1912; Rezvani 2020b: 81-82). As time passes by and the processes of globalisation and counter-globalisation proceed apace, the character of regions changes, along with their physical appearance and cultural make-up. Scholars need to update their factual knowledge about these transformations. Geography is a the discipline *par excellence* which provides us information about the results of transformations on the ground. In that sense geography constitutes the linchpin or nucleus of ethnogeopolitics as an emerging field of studies.

Finally, (ethno)geopolitics concerns as much the actual influence of geography on statecraft as ideas and thoughts about the relationships between them. The location of a country and its specific historical pathways do influence one's country geopolitical codes and the way it views its place in the world, and perceives its security and even (trans)national mission (Dijkink 1996; Rezvani 2019b: 150-153).⁴

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Endnotes

1. See Rezvani (2020a: 19–20 [pre-print online version], endnote 15).
2. *Daesh* is the Arabic acronym for *al-Dawla al-Islamiya al-Iraq al-Sham* (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, ISIL) Many countries in the Middle East and the West (particularly France, the U.K. and the U.S.) opposing and fighting ISIL have preferred calling it *Daesh* rather than the Islamic State, denying it its claims of Islamic governance and legitimate statehood (Rezvani 2016: 6).
3. See for an optative solution the recent and interesting paper by Krzysztof Trzcinski (2020).
4. See also Rezvani 2019c and 2020b for a general picture of the modern-day geopolitics in Post-Soviet Space.

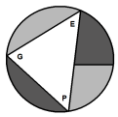
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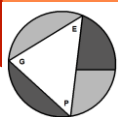
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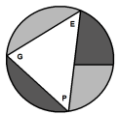
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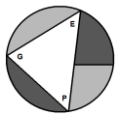
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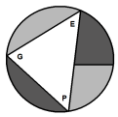
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