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*The Indo-Pacific turn in US foreign
policy: a neoclassical realist approach to
geopolitics*

Abstract

This article seeks to develop a geopolitical explanation for the Indo-Pacific shift in US foreign policy. To do so, it draws on the theoretical framework of neoclassical realism and its different levels of analysis. It focuses on the interactions between systemic pressures and perceptions of the US elite from a spatial point of view. Mental geographic maps are the analytical tool used for this purpose because they help to understand how US statesmen perceive the international geopolitical environment and how they respond to external pressures. The article asks what role these mental maps have played in the new geopolitical orientation of US foreign policy. The answer to this question is that the US elite has understood China's rise through its mental geographic maps, which has led it to see China as a threat to the US international position. The study uses a qualitative methodology to test this hypothesis, by reviewing the available literature on neoclassical realism and geopolitics, and the contributions of foreign policy advisors and official statements by US institutions and decision-makers.

Keywords

Mental geographic maps; Indo-Pacific region; International system; Rise of China; Perception of reality.

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Introduction

The most immediate antecedents of the importance of the Indo-Pacific region in US foreign policy can be traced to the end of the first term of President Barack Obama's administration. However, during Donald Trump's presidency, and especially throughout Joseph Biden's presidency, this region of the world has acquired strategic importance for US foreign policy. The rise of China is the main reason for this shift in US foreign action as it is perceived as a strategic threat.

Different realist authors have analysed the future of Sino-American relations from different perspectives. Henry Kissinger, for example, approaches these relations from the perspective of classical realism and pays special attention to the balance of power between these two countries (2016: 230-237). John Mearsheimer, for his part, studies these relations from the perspective of defensive neorealism by analysing the challenge that the rise of China represents for the international position of the US (2014: 368 *et seq.*)

In contrast, the main objective of this research is to develop a geopolitical explanation of the Indo-Pacific shift in US foreign policy through studying American statesmen's perception of the international reality. To carry out this task, neoclassical realism is adopted as a theoretical framework, thereby providing the conceptual system with which to analyse the interactions between system and unit variables, and more specifically the relationship between China's rise and American statesmen's perception of this phenomenon. Geopolitics is therefore the instrument through which to examine these interactions from a spatial perspective.

The question to be answered is the following: What role have the US elite's mental geographic maps played in the orientation of US foreign policy towards the Indo-Pacific region? The hypothesis put forward in response to this question posits that the US elite has interpreted China's increasing national capabilities through their own mental geographic maps. This has led them to seeing the rise of China as a strategic threat to the US position in the international power structure. As a consequence, the US has oriented its foreign policy towards the Indo-Pacific region to contain the rise of China.

To test the above hypothesis, a qualitative methodology is used that draws on the literature of neoclassical realist authors, especially those that pay attention to the intervening variable of the perception of reality in their explanation of foreign policy. This methodology is combined with the use of mental geographic maps as an analytical concept to address the spatial dimension of American statesmen's perception of reality. The available literature in cognitive geography and geopolitics is used to clarify this concept and how it is used to test the hypothesis. Furthermore, to elucidate the mental geographic maps of US leaders, case studies of government advisors are analysed, especially the works of the authors who have had the greatest impact on US foreign policy in strategic terms. In addition to these works, we also use official documents from the main decision-making bodies and public statements by the country's leaders.

The structure of the article is as follows. First, the theoretical framework of neoclassical realism with its conceptual system is presented. The variables considered and the interactions between them are discussed. The following section clarifies the way in which geopolitics is understood and used in this research, as well as the concept of the mental geographic map that is applied and the geographic scales used. This is followed by the rise of China is addressed. Subsequently, the mental geographic map that shapes the geopolitical vision of American statesmen is elucidated to explain how the rise of China has been interpreted in geopolitical terms and the Indo-Pacific orientation that US foreign policy has acquired.

Systemic pressures and perceptions of reality

The formation and development of neoclassical realism has not been absent of intellectual controversy, which has made its status in the discipline of International Relations a matter of debate. It has received mixed reviews (Rathbun, 2008; Romanova, 2012; Quinn, 2013; Wohlforth, 2015; Narizny, 2017, 2018; Sears, 2017; Streltsov and Lukin, 2017; Smith, 2018; Konyshv, 2020). However, this has not prevented it from being consolidated within the discipline, with important contributions from different authors (Ripsman *et al.*, 2016; Gelot and Welz, 2018; Taliaferro *et al.*, 2018; Smith, 2019; Meibauer *et al.*, 2021).

The theoretical matrix of neoclassical realism is Kenneth Waltz's (1959) neorealism, along with the three levels of analysis consisting of the first, second and third images, corresponding respectively to the level of the individual, the state and the international system. To this effect, like neorealism (Waltz, 1979), neoclassical realism considers the system level to be decisive in explaining the behaviour of states in the international sphere. However, unlike neorealism, it integrates factors belonging to the first and second image into its analysis.

The focus of neoclassical realism is on the interaction between external stimuli and the intervening variables in the first and second images to explain the link between system constraints and state behaviour. In this way, the intervening variables at the domestic level filter the systemic variables of the international environment. In any case, it is the system-level variables that have a dominant role in their analyses. This means that complex domestic policy processes operate as a transmission belt for external forces (Schweller, 2004a: 164). States' domestic situations explain why they react differently to similar opportunities and systemic pressures (Schweller, 2004b). For this reason, it can be said that foreign policy is ultimately the product of an amalgamation of the systemic, state and individual levels (Schmidt, 2005).

Neoclassical realism analyses include a wide variety of different intervening variables from the first and second image (Ripsman *et al.*, 2016: 61-79; Götz, 2021). Of interest in this research are the interactions of external stimuli, in this case the rise of China, with first-image variables, such as cognitive filters that affect how American leaders process information and perceive reality (Hadfield-Amkhan, 2010; Kitchen, 2010;

He, 2017; Meibauer, 2020). These filters are made up of values, beliefs and images that affect how statesmen understand and interact with the outside world. Its role is to assist foreign policy decision-makers in processing information. These filters vary from person to person, which explains why each leader reacts differently to the same challenges and opportunities (Khong, 1992; Larson, 1985; Renshon and Larson, 2003; Farnham, 1997; Ripsman *et al.*, 2016: 62). This intervening variable is used here via the analytical concept of the mental geographic map to elucidate how US statesmen perceive international geopolitical reality, and how they thereby interpret the rise of China and their country's international position in relation to this rising power. In other words, the aim is to shed light from a spatial perspective on how US elites perceive the international balance of power in relation to the rise of China and how this has impacted on US foreign policy (Taliaferro, 2004; Friedberg, 1988; Wohlforth, 1993).

Foreign policy is made by people organised in governments and bureaucracies (Schweller, 2006: 47), which is why they are likely to reach different conclusions in relation to the interests at stake at any given time (Kitchen, 2010: 135-136). This makes it particularly important to analyse their vision of the international scene, for which mental geographic maps are an appropriate analytical tool. Moreover, the pressures of the international system do not interact mechanically with unit-level factors, but are filtered by the human factor such that the ideas that organise rulers' perceptions mediate this interaction and condition the final response to these pressures (Christensen, 1997: 68; Rose, 1998: 147; Zakaria, 2000: 52).

Geopolitical codes, mental geographic maps and geographic scales

This section addresses the compatibility between neoclassical realism and geopolitics, and the way in which the latter is understood is clarified. This is important because it affects the way in which the analytical concept of a mental geographic map is defined and applied.

Realist theories are based on a number of geopolitical assumptions that have rarely been made explicit (Haslam, 2002: 162-182; Gökmen, 2010; Dalby, 2013). However, the views of realist authors differ in their understanding of geopolitics. In this regard, Hans Morgenthau, for example, considers it a pseudoscience (1963: 213), while John Mearsheimer integrates it into his analysis by considering the geographical location of the state in the projection of its power in certain regions (2014). This view is shared by the authors of neoclassical realism (Meibauer *et al.*, 2021). Realist authors generally tend to conceive of geopolitics in systemic terms, whereas in this study it is conceived at both international and domestic scales (Giblin 1985).

On the other hand, the important divergences there are between specialists in relation to the object, method and foundations of geopolitics are not negligible (Cairo, 1993: 32; Dodds, 2005: 27-34). For this reason, it is necessary to speak of geopolitics in the plural, as there are different definitions (Mamadouh, 1998) that respond to divergent

worldviews (Dodds and Atkinson, 2003). The various existing schools of geopolitical thought account for this reality, including classical geopolitics, neoclassical geopolitics, critics of neoclassical geopolitics, Marxist political geography, radical geopolitics and critical geopolitics (Parker, 2015; Kuus, 2017; Criekemans, 2022). Apart from these differences, geopolitics is considered here to be the study of how political phenomena play out in the geographical environment, and how this affects the organisation of space (Kristof, 1960; Lacoste, 1985; Dalby, 2004: 234).

Geopolitics is conceived here in strategic terms because it is based on geography, which is strategic knowledge (Lacoste, 1977). Given that the focus is on US foreign policy, geopolitics is also understood as the study of the external spatial relations of states in the organisation of international space (East and Moodie, 1956: 23). In addition to this, geopolitics is considered an instrument that allows us to focus spatially on social phenomena to elucidate the geopolitical logic they obey (Grabowsky, 1933).

In contrast to the authors of critical geopolitics, who consider geopolitics as a set of discursive practices (Agnew and Corbridge, 1995: 47; Ó Tuathail and Agnew, 1992), in this study it is understood as a set of practices embedded in war, foreign policy and diplomacy that are manifested in the way space is organised. There are, then, no purely spatial processes that precede, influence or even determine the social and political processes that develop on them (Cairo, 1993: 60). Space is a constructed social reality that implies, contains and conceals social relations, as well as reflecting power relations because they are the result of social superstructures like the state. Space is thereby ordered according to the specific requirements of these structures (Lefebvre, 2013: 139, 141). Physical geography only limits the possible configurations of space.

Decisions made by statesmen in the organisation of space in areas such as military, diplomatic and foreign policy reflect a country's prevailing geopolitical practices. These form, let's say, geopolitical codes that constitute a particular form of reasoning based on a set of political-geographical assumptions about the security of the state or a group of states, and about potential threats and possible responses. State elites develop these codes through their everyday geopolitical spatial planning practice. To this effect, each country has its own geopolitical codes that are conditioned both by the geographical position it occupies and by its position in the international power structure, all of which also condition the geographical scales (local, regional and global) on which it operates (Taylor, 1988: 22-23, 1990: 13; Cairo, 1993: 40-42; Gaddis, 2005: ix; Rae, 2007: 19-20; Flint and Taylor, 2018: 51-52; Flint, 2022: 50-54).

National capabilities and geographic position both play a role in defining national interest and its geopolitical scope. Both factors condition the state's strategic relations on the international stage. In this way, state interactions with other international actors take the form of a series of geopolitical codes that contribute to shaping the perception that state elites have of international reality, which crystallises in a mental geographical map that defines their national vision or image (Boulding, 1959).

To this end, statesmen develop a set of ideas or beliefs based on material factors that are shaped by their perception of national capabilities (Christensen, 1997: 68; Rose,

1998: 147; Zakaria, 2000: 147; Wohlforth, 1993: 26-28), and consequently of state's position in the international power structure. These ideas also include the existing spatial relations between states according to their position in this structure, i.e., the relations between the central spots, where international power is concentrated, and the peripheral ones. Here the focus is on American statesmen's perceptions of China's growing national capabilities and how this affects the organisation of the international system and the US position in it.

Mental geographic maps are a simplification of reality that helps to take decisions. They are a mental structure made up of a set of beliefs and ideas that filter information from the geographical environment, allowing it to be organised in a more or less coherent way (Holsti, 2006: 34; Henrikson, 1980). Mental geographic maps are therefore spatial frames of reference that affect how policymakers understand reality and define a situation. Mental maps help the individual or group to make their diagnosis and assessment of problems, which ultimately conditions the possible policies that can be adopted (Moreland and Levine, 1992; Vertzberger, 2002; Sylvan and Voss, 1998). Mental maps are therefore a variable that intervenes in the representation of reality by interacting with systemic pressures in the definition of external threats and possible state responses.

Although mental geographic maps are an analytical concept with little theoretical development (Vinha, 2011, 2012, 2019), they are useful for elucidating the worldview of the American elite. There are different procedures to clarify what these mind maps are like. Alan Henrikson approaches his study by analysing the ideas present in public speeches, diplomatic notes, cartographic annexes, etc., and the behavioural patterns of foreign policymakers on their official visits (1980: 508-512). In this research, we analyse the contributions of the government advisors who have had the greatest impact on the definition of the broad strategic lines of US foreign policy, and the official documents that define the strategic doctrine and international vision of American leaders in their public statements. This is combined with the study of external actions and relations with other countries.

Elucidating the mental maps of the American ruling elite can clarify the degree of importance of different places and spatially represent the relationships between different actors on the international stage. They are a simplified image of a complex reality, thereby helping to define foreign policy, which is the policy that projects the vision that a country, in this case the US, has of its place in the world, its national interest and how to defend it, all of which guides the conduct of the state's foreign action (Morin and Paquin, 2018: 3).

Last, it should be noted that the levels of spatial analysis used correspond to the levels of conceptualisation that neoclassical realism establishes with the interactions between the first and third images. The interrelationships between these levels are examined (Lacoste, 1985: 48). Mental geographic maps thus correspond to a large-scale level of spatial analysis by focusing on the individuals who make up the US elite, while at the same time corresponding to the level of conceptualisation of the first image. Given that US foreign policy is the object of study, the other level of

analysis is the small scale, such that the spatial set of reference is both the US and the international system. This is a level of spatial analysis that corresponds to the levels of conceptualisation of the second and third images.

The US vis-à-vis China's rise

At the end of the Cold War, the US was at the height of its power (Bush and Scowcroft, 1998: 564). The disappearance of its main antagonist on the international stage opened the world to the expansion of US influence, and with it the incorporation of the countries of the former socialist camp into the *New World Order* enunciated by President George H. W. Bush. In this context, the US could reorganise the international system and hold a dominant position during the 1990s in the absence of any rival that posed a serious threat to its primacy.

Despite the seismic gap between the Chinese economy and the US economy in terms of gross domestic product, and even more so in military terms, during the 1990s some realist analysts advocated adopting a strategy of containment of China. China's high economic growth rates and social potential made it, in the eyes of some authors, a colossus with feet of clay and thus a potential threat. While most of these analyses were produced from 1995 onwards (Krauthammer, 1995; Rachman, 1995; Segal, 1996; Brzezinski, 1998), a time when there was a clear distancing between the US and China - especially as a result of the diplomatic crisis resulting from Chinese hostilities towards Taiwan in the wake of the first democratic elections on the island - what is perhaps the first wake-up call on the need to orient US foreign policy towards the Western Pacific can be detected as early as 1993. It was Denny Roy's (1993) view, at least, that China's rapid economic growth would lead it to adopt a more aggressive foreign policy, which would affect stability in the region because its increased national capabilities would translate into greater military power, pushing Japan to expand its military forces and creating a security crisis. China would thereby have the means to seize resource-rich areas, control sea lanes, disrupt trade flows, annex Taiwan, and unleash all manner of coercive measures on its neighbours, from conquest and annexation to various forms of intimidation.

There is no doubt that the reforms of the 1980s and 1990s, with the introduction of free market elements, laid the foundations for the subsequent surge of the Chinese economy. Double-digit annual economic growth rates are proof of this. However, the starting point of the Chinese economy was far removed from the US, due to the catastrophic material and social consequences of the experiences of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. Irrespective, it can be said that China began a process of accelerated economic development of its productive forces, which led to a progressive increase in its national capacities. None of this went unnoticed by some analysts due to the potential threats to the US in the long term.

Nevertheless, US foreign policy towards China remained within the guidelines established during the administration of President Richard Nixon, when diplomatic

relations between the two countries were resumed. This policy was marked by economic and trade cooperation, driven by the conviction that it would help China evolve politically towards liberal democracy through changes in its economic organisation (Ikenberry 2011: 342-348; Zoellick, 2005). US foreign policy maintained a liberal approach to China for decades, including during the presidencies of George Bush senior, William Clinton and George Bush junior (Tovar, 2021: 112). Indeed, it was this approach that enables China's accession to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001.

Subsequent US military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq reoriented foreign policy towards the Middle East, which in the view of some realist authors was a strategic mistake that diverted American power away from its national interest (Walt, 2011, 2018). These conflicts contributed to weakening the international position of the US, while the Chinese ruling elite saw this as the beginning of a process of reorganisation of the system that could make it evolve towards a multipolar scenario (Kissinger, 2012: 517). But above all, they interpreted the new situation as a strategic opportunity to make decisive progress in their internal development to reduce their economic distance from the US (Hu, 2018: 174-177). This view was reinforced by the 2008 global financial crisis and made explicit by Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao, who warned that China was in danger of being left behind if it did not seize this opportunity (Masayuki, 2009: 62-63).

While the US was trapped in Afghanistan and Iraq, China, thanks to its new WTO membership, gained access to international markets through foreign investment and growing manufacturing exports. China thereby gained prominence in the world economy by growing its exports at an average annual rate of 22% until 2011, allowing it to double exports almost every three years. Access to global value chains was fundamental for China's definitive take-off, increasing its share in world trade to more than 13% of the total (Jorrín, 2021).

China became the world's factory through its manufacturing industry, which allowed it to accumulate growing economic wealth with its balance of trade surpluses from exports. Evidence of this is that foreign trade accounted for 64.47% of the Chinese economy's GDP in 2006 (The World Bank, undated). Although, as has been mentioned, China showed high growth rates during the first half of the 1990s thanks to liberalising reforms, it was not until the twenty-first century that its accumulated wealth took a significant quantitative leap. In this regard, it went from a GDP of \$1.33 trillion in 2001 to accumulating a wealth of \$4.57 trillion in 2008, when the global financial crisis erupted (Textor, 2022). In this way, China began to significantly narrow its economic gap with the US, which did not go unnoticed by American statesmen.

In addition to buoyant economic growth, China also increased its military power, which was manifested in the modernisation of its armed forces and the development of an assertive foreign policy in the China Sea from 2007 onwards (Chubb, 2021). This led to increasing incidents not only with neighbouring countries but also with the US, whose presence in the region is intended to guarantee the international principle of free navigation. A clear example of this is the incident with the US Navy ship *Impeccable* in 2009.

China's increasing aggressiveness in the international sphere has been linked to its growing domestic capabilities (Friedberg, 2015), which has contributed to changing the perception that US analysts and statesmen have of China as a threat to the US. This view has been reinforced by China's 130% increase in military investment over the past decade, reaching a total expenditure of \$250 billion in 2018 alone, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (2020). According to some estimates, the annual increase in the military budget was 7% until 2020. This has made it the world's second-largest defence investor with \$270 billion in 2021 (The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2022: 255). This has been accompanied by an expansion of its naval forces that has tripled in size in just two decades (Department of the Navy, 2020: 4), leading to the construction of new aircraft carriers, amphibious assault ships, destroyers, surveillance ships, nuclear submarines, etc. (Chouza and Torralba, 2019; Vidal, 2022).

American statesmen have not overlooked China's military build-up, which has affected their view of the country. In this way, China's rise to power has operated as a systemic pressure on the US that has interacted with American leaders' perceptions of this process. This perception is articulated through the mental geographic maps of foreign policymakers as they have filtered pressure from China, which helps to understand the Indo-Pacific shift and the adoption of a strategy aimed at containing this rising power.

Shaping the mental geographic map of the US elite

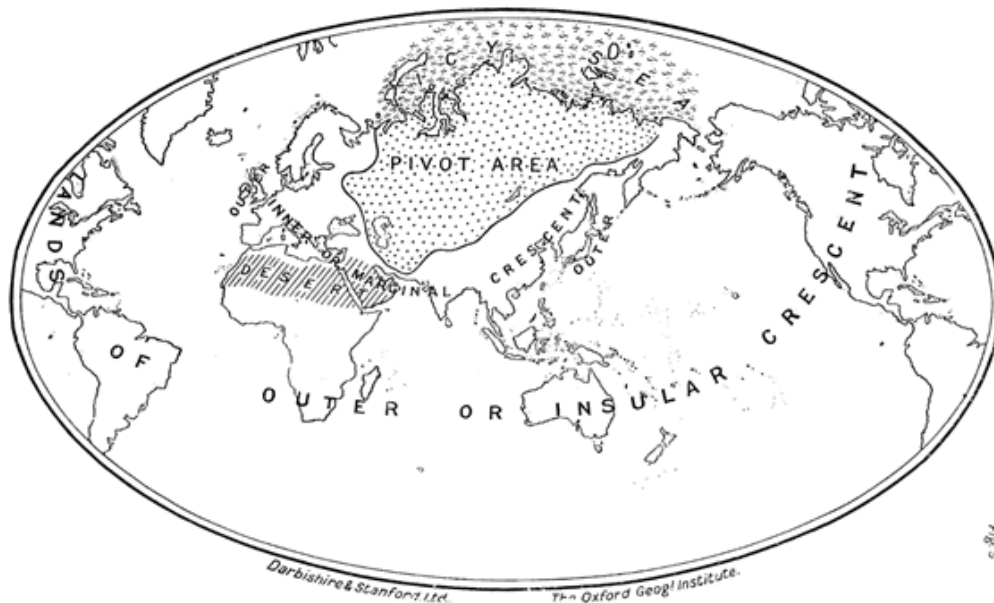
As discussed above, the configuration of mental geographic maps depends on the geographical location of the state and its position in the international power structure. In the case of the US, it has a very favourable geographical position, as there are no other major powers in the region that would make it fear external invasion. This has provided it with considerable levels of security, coupled with the fact that most of the other major powers are located in Eurasia, which has kept the main threats away from its borders. This location has enabled the US to keep its productive base intact during the recent military conflicts in which it has been involved.

Physical geography is undoubtedly a very important factor in defining the US elite's perspective of the international scene, but this would paint an incomplete picture without also considering the pre-eminent position of the US in the international system. In this respect, the mental geographic map that organises US foreign policy was defined during the course of the Second World War, and reflects the perspective of the power position achieved by the US at that time. This had an impact on the way US statesmen began to perceive and understand international reality as a result of the broadening of the geographical scope of US interests.

In the late nineteenth century, Alfred T. Mahan conceptualised the US as a maritime power due to its geographic location by facilitating the development of its external action in a maritime sense (2000). However, Halford J. Mackinder's contribution

to geopolitical thinking was decisive in shaping the mental geographic map of the American elite (1904, 1996). This is because his work reflects the perspective of an established maritime power, such as Great Britain at the beginning of the 20th century, proving to be very functional in explaining US interests in the world in spatial terms.

Mackinder conceptualised history as a constant struggle between maritime and continental powers determined by the disposition of emerging lands. From this assumption, Mackinder developed a geopolitical perspective on historical processes, leading him to formulate his theory of the geographical pivot of history, which he later called the *heartland*. According to this theory, the heart of Eurasia is a vast area that cannot be encircled from the sea or completely invaded, making it a strategic zone insofar as its control allows for the control of world politics. Mackinder himself summed up this view by stating the following: “He who rules Eastern Europe rules the heartland: he who rules the heartland rules the world-island: he who rules the world-island rules the world” (1996: 106).



Map 1. Map of the pivot area reflecting Mackinder's mental geographic map (1904: 435).

In Mackinder's view, the foreign policy of a maritime power like Britain should be aimed at preventing a continental power from gaining control of the Eurasian *heartland* and thus achieving hegemony in the island world. This scenario would pose a serious threat to the interests and security of the British Empire, as it would have ample resources to build a fleet, allowing it to compete for control of the oceans, and eventually achieve world hegemony. During the 20th century, the state that really constituted a potential threat from this geopolitical perspective was Russia, and this remained the case for the US after the Cold War began.

¹ It should be noted that the geographical extension of the *heartland* or pivot area varied throughout Mackinder's work.

The configuration of this mental geographical map outlined by Mackinder is based on the physical morphology of the earth. In this regard Mackinder stated, “There is an ocean which covers nine-twelfths of the globe; there is a continent—the world island—which covers two-twelfths of the globe; and there are many smaller islands, of which North America and South America are, for all practical purposes, two of, which together cover the remaining one-twelfth” (1996: 46-47). This vision of the world’s geographic space laid the foundations for the subsequent conceptual development of the US as a maritime power, and above all for the delineation of the mental geographic map from which US foreign policy would be articulated after World War II².

The adaptation of Mackinder’s geopolitical model to US foreign policy was carried out by Nicholas Spykman in 1942. To this effect, and building on Mackinder’s contribution, Spykman outlined US strategy in the world. This task was carried out in line with the approaches underlying Mackinder’s geopolitical vision, i.e., the influence of physical geography on historical events. In this respect, Spykman infers the foreign policy of states from the characteristics of their geomorphology (1938a, 1938b). In his view, physical geography is the most fundamental factor in foreign policy, being the most stable of all of them (Spykman, 1938b: 29). US international strategy must therefore adjust to the physical reality imposed by geography, which ultimately establishes a maritime perspective due to its geographical position.

Spykman, in contrast to Mackinder, saw the decisive region in world politics not as the *heartland* but as the *rim land*, i.e. the strip of land extending from north-western Europe through the Middle East and South Asia to the far east of the Eurasian continent. Control of this vast geographic region spanning the edges of Eurasia is crucial to control the world, which led him to state the following: “He who controls the rim land governs Eurasia: he who governs Eurasia controls the destinies of the world” (Spykman, 1944a: 43). This intermediate zone between the *heartland* and the insular crescent, together with the islands surrounding the continents, is the crucial geopolitical region of the planet, since historically it is the area where the greatest conflicts between maritime and continental powers have taken place, making its control decisive for exercising a dominant role on the international scene³.

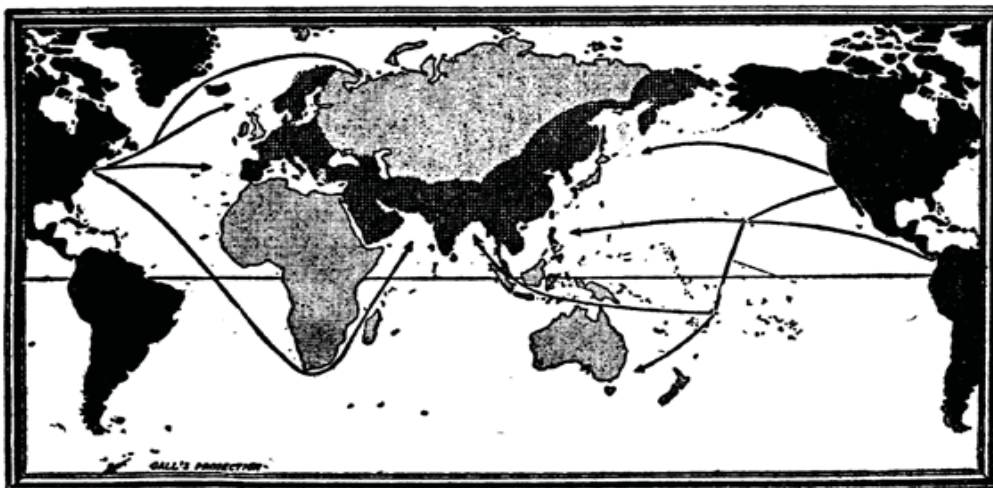
² Mackinder’s geopolitical vision was outlined in his lecture to the Royal Geographical Society in London in 1904, and later developed in his aforementioned *Democratic Ideals and Reality: A Study in the Politics of Reconstruction*, first published in 1919.

³ Alfred T. Mahan came to a similar conclusion as Mackinder and Spykman by identifying the area between the 30th and 40th parallels north latitude as the geographical area where instability is concentrated, as a space contested by different states on the axis of conflict articulated between the north, within the Eurasian continent, and the south, from the edges and outside the world island (1900: 21 *et seq.*)



Map 2. The world according to Spykman (Gray, 1988a: 8).

Spykman concluded that the best way to ensure US security is to prevent one state or alliance of states from dominating the Old World (Eurasia, Africa, Australia and the islands off the coasts of these continents). To achieve this goal, a balance of power policy is deployed in these regions based on the alliance with weak states to counteract any possible state with hegemonic aspirations (Spykman, 1944b; Nijman, 1994a; Parker, 2015: 114-115). Foreign policy must therefore focus on the *rimland*, i.e. the Eurasian littoral from northwest Europe to Southeast Asia and East Asia via the Middle East and South Asia, to prevent any other power from controlling this strategic area (Nijman, 1994b).



Map 3. Old World encirclement and rimland (Spykman, 1944b: 177).

Spykman's geopolitical vision reflects a regionalist perspective insofar as it underlines the importance of particular places on the global geopolitical stage, and thus the significance of the role of regional actors or power centres in regional developments across the world. This perspective has been developed by different authors who have

outlined the mental geographic map of the US elite, including George Kennan when referring to areas where military-industrial power is concentrated (1954: 66; Nijman and Ó Tuathail, 1994: 137); Saul B. Cohen and his notion of the *shatter belt* (1963, 1982); and Zbigniew Brzezinski and his concept of the *linchpin state* (1986). According to this regionalist approach, there are areas of special strategic importance for US security and interests, such that US foreign policy should be oriented towards maintaining the balance of power and focus on these regions, which are mainly concentrated in the *rimland*⁴.

The containment policy outlined at the time by George Kennan (X, 1946) follows the basic approach set out by Spykman, aimed at preventing one state or alliance of states from taking control of the Eurasian continent. In this case, containment was directed towards the Soviet Union. From this geopolitical theory, it was inferred that there were a number of strategic geographic points along the Eurasian periphery that should remain outside Soviet control. These were places of critical importance to the US, and were concentrated in the *shatter belt* around the periphery of the USSR. The intention was to prevent this power from gaining access to the sea via the Indian Ocean or the Mediterranean (Sloan, 1988: 131; Kennan, 1967; Gaddis, 2005: 24-52; Ó Tuathail, 1994; O'Sullivan, 1994). This strategic approach was implemented by establishing a network of alliances with different countries across the *rimland* to deter Soviet expansion. In any case, the implementation of the containment policy reflects the importance and influence of certain geopolitical theories in shaping the perceptions and actions of foreign policymakers, which is embodied in maps that reflect US statesmen's views of the international environment (Sloan, 1988: 134).

The influence of mental geographic maps on the Indo-Pacific shift in US foreign policy

The influence of mental geographic maps on the Indo-Pacific orientation of US foreign policy cannot be explained without reference to the historical background and geopolitical determinants of this shift.

The disintegration of the USSR and the end of the Cold War created a new international scenario in which US foreign policy during the 1990s, and particularly during William Clinton's presidency, was aimed at reorganising the governance of the world economy through international bodies and the establishment of regulatory standards. In this regard, both domestically and internationally the US focused its attention on economic issues, which did not prevent the geopolitical paradigm that articulates the US elite's mental geographic map from being updated to make it useful in

⁴ The regionalist point of view contrasts with the globalist approach of authors such as Colin S. Gray (1988a, 1988b) and Ray S. Cline (1980), who understand security in fundamentally military terms, and who consider that the US has a global responsibility in international affairs, such that its foreign policy must also be developed on a global scale, beyond the *rimland*.

the new international context, as Zbigniew Brzezinski's (1998) work proves. Although there was no immediate adversary to contain, from 1995 onwards analysts began to point to the potential threat posed by a China engaged in a process of accelerated economic development (Krauthammer, 1995; Rachman, 1995; Segal, 1996).

The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq focused US foreign policy in the Middle East, and helped divert attention from China. Despite this, during President Barack Obama's first term, the US began to reorient its foreign policy towards the Western Pacific, and to adopt a more realistic approach to its relations with China. Although this took time to be reflected in US foreign policy, President Obama signalled his intentions early on in his term by calling himself the first Pacific president (Allen 2009). This, together with the views of some of his advisors on the rise of China, led to the search for a new strategy that would allow the US to manage the challenges of an increasingly relevant region (Tovar, 2021: 93).

Thus, in 2011, coinciding with the withdrawal of troops deployed in Iraq, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton publicly stated the new strategic direction of the US when she spoke of the shift to the Pacific (2011). This meant increasing the US presence in the Western Pacific, and revitalising the alliance system in this region. The adoption of this strategic approach was also combined with the withdrawal of troops from the European arena. This policy soon showed its limitations, fading into the background when new conflicts and strategic priorities emerged, and following the departure from government of those who defended its implementation (Tovar, 2021: 94).

The Pacific orientation began to materialise in US foreign policy under Donald Trump's administration, thus ceasing to be an intention but a visible reality within the framework of the new structural trends of a changing international system. The hardening of policy towards China, especially in the areas of trade, technology and security, with increasing tensions between the two powers, was embodied in the strategic national security doctrine. In 2017, the US considered for the first time in decades that the rivalry between the major powers constituted the most important challenge to US security and the international system (The White House, 2017: 2-3).

The geopolitical determinants of the Indo-Pacific orientation of US foreign policy include the rise of Chinese capabilities and the growing importance of East Asia as a new geographic centre of global power. On the other hand, there are domestic US geopolitical factors that have also made the Pacific region more important. In this respect, the US West Coast accounts for most of the country's international trade. Proof of this is that California is the leading importer of goods worth more than \$470 billion in 2021, with a GDP of \$3.35 trillion, representing more than 14% of US GDP and making it the fifth-largest economy in the world (Hughes, 2021; Koop, 2022), while being the most populous state in the Union.

The orientation of foreign policy towards the Pacific has been both the result of changes in the international system due to the rise of China, and the economic importance of this region for the US. This has combined, in turn, with the mental geographic maps of the US elite, such that the interpretation of international reality

has led American leaders to consider Russia a regional power (Yoo, 2014) that is no longer the main threat to the US at a strategic level (The White House, 2022a). China, having increased its national capabilities and broadened the geographic scope of its interests with a growing presence in the Indo-Pacific, however, poses a serious threat to the US position in the international system. Indeed, American statesmen have concluded that China can become a regional hegemonic power and deny the US access to the East Asian region. China's assertive foreign policy in the South and East China Sea to assert its territorial rights over these waters, coupled with its desire to become a maritime power (Holmes and Yoshihara, 2008; Chan, 2022), would confirm this view. All this explains why the US has defined China as the only competitor with the potential to combine its economic, diplomatic, military and technological power to pose a sustained challenge to the established international system, which has justified the need to reorient its foreign policy towards the Indo-Pacific (Biden, 2021: 8). This is much so that the 2022 national security strategy not only reaffirms this perception of China, but also underlines that China has both the will to change the rules governing the international system to its own advantage, and increasingly the capacity to achieve this goal (The White House, 2022a).

The geopolitical logic of the containment strategy that drives US foreign policy still has a clear correspondence with the mental geographic maps delineated since the Second World War. In this case, it is a question of containing a power that controls around 18,000 km of continental coastline along the western Pacific (Wang and Aubrey 1987), and whose economic and military development means that it projects its influence and growing power over neighbouring countries and surrounding waters. In fact, most of China's population and its productive fabric are located near the coast (Li *et al.*, 2018), an area that corresponds to a considerable part of the Eurasian *rim land*. China's combined national capabilities and geographic location make it a threat, especially if it develops the means to deny the US access to this region.

All the above is part of the Old World encirclement logic prescribed by Spykman, aimed at preventing one state or alliance of states from controlling the *rim land*. This mental map has led US leaders to believe that China's rise may lead to control of the Eurasian *rim land*, and thus control of the Old World. The latter would allow China to develop a navy capable of dominating the oceans and thus project its power and influence over Oceania and especially Africa, a continent where it has developed a growing presence in recent decades (Shepard, 2019; Sun, 2017; Kim, 2017; Lee, 2017). In this way, China would displace the US and achieve world hegemony.

The above reasoning is manifested in US actions in international spatial planning through different measures taken in the Indo-Pacific region to contain China, and in various public statements by US government agencies. The approach adopted by American statesmen, which in some ways evokes some of the practices of Cold War containment policy, is regionalist in character insofar as the focus is primarily on the *rim land*, while the actions taken are not limited to increasing the US military presence in the Western Pacific (Nijman 1994c). While the relocation of an increasing amount of military assets to this area is significant (Zhou, 2021), this is combined with various

diplomatic, economic and political initiatives by which the US seeks to geopolitically limit China's scope for action.

The strengthening of the US presence in the Western Pacific is linked to the US policy of diplomatic alliances with a number of China's neighbours. This is the case of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), which includes India, Japan, Australia and the US, in addition to Vietnam, South Korea and New Zealand in the so-called QUAD plus. This space serves as a forum for dialogue in the field of strategic security, largely in response to concerns about China's rise among these countries.

Another security initiative, also aimed at containing China, is AUKUS. This trilateral security pact between Australia, the UK and the US announced in September 2021 has the Indo-Pacific as its geographical area of action. As the US ambassador to Australia, Caroline Kennedy, stated at the time, the purpose of this pact is to deter any Chinese aggression in the region (Hurst, 2022).

While the above initiatives have a strategic and military dimension, the US has also developed forms of civilian cooperation with other countries that have strengthened its influence in the Indian Ocean region. This is the case with the I2U2 group, which includes India, Israel, the United Arab Emirates and the US, but also envisages the possible future addition of other countries such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Its scope extends to joint investments in energy, water, transport, health, food security, etc. (The White House, 2022b).

There are also the bilateral relations that the US maintains with different states in the Indo-Pacific region, which sometimes take the form of security partnerships or strategic alliances. Indeed, most of these relations have their origins in the Cold War and include traditional allies such as the Philippines, Thailand, South Korea and Japan. It is also worth noting the US commitment to Taiwan's security under the *Taiwan Relations Act*, as well as the marked improvement in relations with Vietnam in recent years, which has resulted in growing military cooperation (Tu and Nguyen 2019).

Furthermore, from 2007 onwards, the maritime strategy that articulates the projection of US naval power (U.S. Navy *et al.*, 2007; Department of the Navy, 2015) acquired a new character, becoming increasingly focused on controlling the oceans against potential rival powers. In 2020, this strategy explicitly included China as a rival power and the main and most pressing long-term strategic threat to the US, requiring it to prepare its naval forces to deter and successfully compete with China (Department of the Navy, 2020). This has meant that the US navy is no longer conceived solely as a police force dedicated to combating threats from non-state actors, but as a force aimed at combating the navies of rival countries such as China (Till, 2007; Yoshihara and Holmes, 2018: 251-255), which explains why 60% of its forces have been deployed to the Indo-Pacific region (Department of the Navy, 2020: iv).

Last, there is the Indo-Pacific strategy enunciated by the White House in early 2022. While US naval strategic doctrine is aimed at deterring and countering China's growing presence in the Indo-Pacific, the strategy put forward by President Joseph Biden's administration defines the US as an Indo-Pacific power, due to the economic

and national security interests that the US concentrates in this region. But even more important is the fact that this strategy is clearly defined in geographical terms by specifying the area over which the US projects its external action. This includes Northeast and Southeast Asia, South Asia and Oceania (The White House, 2022c: 5).

Likewise, the strategy defined by the Biden administration is not limited to the military sphere, but also includes other areas such as diplomacy, with the reinforcement and modernisation of US alliances in the region, and also the strengthening of regional organisations and new partnerships with other countries. The strategy mentions the states with which it intends to deepen existing relations. First, there are the countries with which the US has a regional alliance treaty, such as Australia, Japan, South Korea, the Philippines and Thailand. And then there are the countries with which the US wants to strengthen its relationship, including India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mongolia, New Zealand, Singapore, Taiwan, Vietnam and the remaining Pacific island states. It is also important to underline the strategic importance of the partnership with India in the South Asian context. To this can be added in the political arena the support of international law, especially with regard to free maritime and air navigation, which is specified in relation to the area of the South and East China Sea (The White House, 2022c: 8-9, 16).

The updating of the American elite's mental geographic maps in the new international context reflects the role they play in conditioning the US response to China's rise and thus the Indo-Pacific orientation of its foreign policy of containing China.

Conclusions

The mental geographic maps of the American elite have played an important role in their perception of international reality. These maps are not designed in a vacuum, but are based on a number of material factors such as the geographic location of the US and its position in the international power structure. These maps thus constitute the frame of reference that American statesmen use to interpret international relations. The works of various academics and government advisors such as Spykman, Kennan, Cohen and Brzezinski attest to this. The mental maps that these authors have helped to shape have served as a frame of reference for the design of the main strategic lines of US foreign policy. As a consequence, US external action was aimed at preventing the emergence of a hegemonic power in Eurasia, which made the Eurasian *rim land* a decisive factor in the Soviet Union's containment policy.

While the end of the Cold War created a scenario in which the US had no serious rival to contend with, the evolution of the international system completely changed this situation as China increased its domestic capabilities and the geopolitical importance of the Far East region grew.

China's economic growth, the modernisation of its armed forces, the geographical expansion of its national interests and the development of an assertive policy in the South China Sea have operated as an external pressure on the US. The mental

geographic maps of the American elite have filtered this pressure, which has meant that China has begun to be seen as a threat to the US's international standing. This, in turn, has served to confirm that the policy adopted with China during the Nixon administration was a mistake in failing to transform the country into a liberal democracy through trade cooperation and, more generally, through economic interdependence via its integration into international organisations such as the WTO.

The mental geographic maps of American leaders have conditioned the response to China's rise by perceiving it as a growing threat, which has been embodied in the Indo-Pacific orientation of US foreign policy. To this effect, the general approach of US strategy has not departed from that of the Cold War and thus from the map outlined by Spykman. The US strategic approach remains unchanged with regard to the relevance assigned to the Eurasian *rim land* in its foreign policy, which has translated into a foreign policy whose main objective is to contain the rise of China to prevent it from becoming a regionally hegemonic power capable of blocking US access to the Far East. If China were not contained, it would increase its power not only in East Asia but also in the Indian Ocean and the Eurasian continent as a whole, eventually allowing it to dominate the seas and thus expand its influence and power globally. Such a scenario would create favourable conditions for displacing the US to become the world's leading power.

China's containment policy has made the Indo-Pacific region central to US foreign policy, which is reflected not only in the military sphere but also in the political, diplomatic and economic spheres with the re-launching of US relations with different countries in the region that can collaborate in its containment strategy. Examples include AUKUS and QUAD, and the strengthening of US partnerships and strategic alliances with countries in the Western Pacific. All of this is aimed at countering Chinese influence through the support of its neighbours and, on the other hand, increasing US influence and presence in this region of the world, which has led American leaders to define the US as an Indo-Pacific power.

Although a geopolitical theory such as Spykman's has been instrumental in shaping the perceptions of American statesmen, and thus defining US strategic preferences to ensure its security and position in the international system, its function for practical purposes is to operate as a frame of reference in dealing with changes in the international sphere. To this effect, the *rim land* theory constitutes a filter for systemic pressures, which conditions the country's possible responses on the international stage. It thereby establishes a specific logic in US foreign policy that is inherent in the geopolitical codes of the American elite, which is consistent with its political-geographical assumptions about its security and about potential threats and possible responses to them.

Irrespective, the mental geographic maps of American statesmen allow us to understand not only the current international behaviour of the US but also the geostrategic importance of certain areas of the planet for US foreign policy, as is currently the case with the Indo-Pacific region, which directly influences the way in which its leaders interpret the rise of China. In parallel, the mind maps inform the future evolution of US foreign policy by setting the strategic framework within which China's containment will unfold.

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