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Toward a Methodology for Geopolitical Analysis

Hacia una metodología para el análisis geopolítico

Abstract: Geopolitics, long contested between classical determinism and critical theory, demands a rigorous and systematic analytical approach if it is to serve policy-relevant ends. This text proposes a structured methodology for geopolitical analysis, drawing on classical and contemporary scholarship to outline the essential steps, analytical tools, and core competencies a geopolitical analyst must command. Grounded in works ranging from Halford Mackinder and Nicholas Spykman to Klaus Dodds and Colin Gray, the propositions offered here treat geopolitical inquiry as an iterative process that integrates spatial reasoning, historical analysis, power-distribution mapping, geoeconomic assessment, and structured scenario development. The framework also engages the cognitive and epistemological challenges inherent in geopolitical analysis, including mirror-imaging, confirmation bias, and the misreading of structural change. Practical examples drawn from the Indo-Pacific competition, European security architecture, the war in Ukraine, and the October 7, 2023 Hamas attack illustrate each methodological step. The article concludes with a set of core competencies — spatial, historical, quantitative, and tradecraft-oriented — that define professional geopolitical practice in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Geopolitics; Methodology; Strategic analysis; Intelligence analysis.

Resumen: La geopolítica, largamente disputada entre el determinismo clásico y la teoría crítica, exige un enfoque analítico riguroso y sistemático si pretende servir a fines relevantes para la formulación de políticas. Este texto propone una metodología estructurada para el análisis geopolítico, basada en la literatura clásica y contemporánea, que describe los pasos esenciales, las herramientas analíticas y las competencias centrales que debe dominar un analista geopolítico. Fundamentadas en obras que van de Halford Mackinder y Nicholas Spykman a Klaus Dodds y Colin Gray, las propuestas aquí presentadas tratan la investigación geopolítica como un proceso iterativo que integra el razonamiento espacial, el análisis histórico, el mapeo de la distribución del poder, la evaluación geoeconómica y la construcción estructurada de escenarios. El marco aborda también los desafíos cognitivos y epistemológicos inherentes al análisis geopolítico, entre ellos la proyección de la propia racionalidad sobre el adversario (mirror-imaging), el sesgo de confirmación y la lectura equivocada del cambio estructural. Ejemplos prácticos extraídos de la competencia en el Indo-Pacífico, de la arquitectura de seguridad europea, de la guerra en Ucrania y del ataque de Hamás del 7 de octubre de 2023 ilustran cada paso metodológico. El artículo concluye con un conjunto de competencias centrales (espaciales, históricas, cuantitativas y orientadas al oficio analítico) que definen la práctica geopolítica profesional en el siglo XXI.

Palabras clave: Geopolítica; Metodología; Análisis estratégico; Análisis de inteligencia.

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1 INTRODUCTION: WHY METHODOLOGY MATTERS IN GEOPOLITICS

Geopolitical analysis has often been treated as a craft rather than a discipline — an intuition-led exercise practiced by diplomats, soldiers, and strategists who develop their judgements through accumulated experience rather than systematic procedure. Yet the increasing complexity of twenty-first-century international politics — marked by multi-polarity, geoeconomic competition, hybrid warfare, and the weaponization of interdependence — demands that geopolitical analysis be conducted with the rigour, transparency, and reproducibility expected of any serious scholarly or policy-relevant inquiry (Blackwill; Harris, 2016; Dodds, 2019).

The absence of explicit methodology produces several recurring pathologies. Strategic surprise arises when analysts over-rely on recent trends and discount structurally significant but low-frequency events, what Nassim Nicholas Taleb (2007) famously characterized as 'black swan' dynamics. Mirror-imaging occurs when analysts project their own rationality, values, and threat perceptions onto adversaries, producing systematically distorted assessments of intentions. Confirmation bias — the tendency to select and weight evidence that fits pre-existing threat assessments — is among the most pervasive cognitive distortions documented in the intelligence and policy literature (Kahneman, 2011; Heuer; Pherson, 2014). These failures are not idiosyncratic; they are structural properties of unguided analytical practice.

Historical cases illustrate the costs of methodological complacency at the highest level of statecraft. The 2002–2003 United States intelligence assessments on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction represent a paradigmatic case of groupthink and confirmation bias within a major analytical community, resulting in a war whose consequences reshaped the entire Middle East strategic landscape (Pillar, 2011). Two decades later, the intelligence failures preceding the 7 October 2023 Hamas attack on Israel — widely attributed to conceptual over-confidence in deterrence frameworks and an excessive fixation on Hamas's economic and administrative preoccupations — illustrate how structural analytical complacency can override tactical warning signals (Bergman; Mazzetti; Abi-Habib, 2023; Byman, 2024). In both cases, the failure was not primarily informational but methodological: the right questions were not consistently posed, alternative hypotheses were not rigorously tested, and structural pressures were subordinated to prevailing interpretive frameworks.

This text argues for a six-step methodology that combines spatial, historical, structural, and actor-level analysis, and concludes with a set of competencies the professional geopolitical analyst must develop. The framework is deliberately eclectic, drawing on classical geopolitical thought, contemporary geoeconomics, and critical geopolitics to avoid the explanatory blind spots of any single tradition. It treats geopolitical analysis not as a predictive science but as a disciplined craft of probabilistic assessment: one that produces better, more defensible judgements through explicit reasoning rather than through the elimination of uncertainty.

2 EPISTEMOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS: WHAT KIND OF KNOWLEDGE DOES GEOPOLITICS PRODUCE?

Before specifying method, the analyst must clarify the epistemological status of geopolitical knowledge. Classical geopolitics, from Mackinder's Heartland thesis (Mackinder, 1904) to Spykman's Rimland concept (Spykman, 1944), proceeded from a broadly positivist ontology: geography was treated as an objective, measurable constraint on state behavior, and historical regularities were held to yield predictive laws. This tradition intersected with classical realism — most systematically developed in Hans Morgenthau's Politics Among Nations (Mearsheimer, 1948) — which posited that states pursue power as a timeless imperative rooted in human nature and the anarchic structure of the international system. For Morgenthau, geography was among the most stable elements of national power, alongside natural resources, industrial capacity, and military preparedness.

Structural realism, most rigorously developed by Kenneth Waltz (1979), refined this framework by locating the source of international political outcomes not in the nature of states or leaders but in the systemic distribution of capabilities. For Waltz, what matters analytically is not the geographic or cultural specificity of actors but their relative power positions within the polarity of the system — whether bipolar, unipolar, or multipolar. John Mearsheimer's offensive realism (Mearsheimer, 2001) extended this by arguing that great powers are structurally compelled to maximize their share of world power, producing a relentless security competition that geography shapes but does not override. These structural approaches provide a powerful baseline for geopolitical analysis but risk underspecifying the role of perception, identity, and domestic politics in shaping strategic outcomes.

Critical geopolitics, from the 1990s onward, challenged positivist premises by arguing that geographic categories are socially constructed and serve particular political interests (Ó Tuathail, 1996; Ó Tuathail; Agnew, 1992). John Agnew's concept of the 'geopolitical imagination' (Agnew, 1998) demonstrated that the framing of world regions — 'the Middle East', 'the Indo-Pacific', 'the Global South' — is never neutral; each frame encodes a political perspective that privileges certain actors, trajectories, and solutions. Critical geopolitics thus performs an indispensable critical-diagnostic function, alerting the analyst to the ideological freight embedded in routine analytical vocabulary.

A workable methodology must navigate between these poles. It should acknowledge the material reality of territory, distance, resources, and chokepoints — factors that constrain strategic choice in ways that are not infinitely malleable — while remaining alert to the ways in which geographic narratives are weaponized in political discourse. Colin Gray's concept of 'strategic culture' usefully bridges the divide: geography provides enduring structural pressures, but their translation into policy depends on historically conditioned ideas, institutions, and perceptions (Gray, 1999, 2015). Carl von Clausewitz's insistence that war — and, by extension, strategic competition — is shaped by a 'remarkable trinity' of rational government, military instrument, and popular passion anticipates this multi-level approach, reminding the analyst that no structural model fully captures the volatility introduced by political will and social mobilization (Clausewitz, 1832/1989).

Practically, this means the analyst should treat geopolitical propositions as probabilistic assessments — 'China is likely to prioritize the Taiwan Strait' — rather than iron laws, and should be explicit about the assumptions on which each assessment rests. The goal is not certainty but calibrated uncertainty: assessments whose confidence levels are proportionate to the quality and depth of the evidence on which they rest.

3 A SIX-STEP METHODOLOGY FOR GEOPOLITICAL ANALYSIS

Having in mind what has been exposed in the previous section I suggest the following six propositions, constituting a structured analytical sequence for geopolitics. While presented linearly, in practice the analyst must iterate between steps as new information modifies earlier assessments. Each proposition is illustrated with practical examples drawn from contemporary cases, that will help to understand the importance of the step.

3.1 Proposition I: define the unit of analysis and the spatial frame

The first methodological task is to specify what is being analyzed and at what geographic scale. Confusion between levels of analysis — global, regional, sub-regional, bilateral — is a primary source of analytical error. Waltz's (1979) foundational distinction between the systemic level (the distribution of capabilities across the international order), the unit level (state characteristics and foreign policy), and the individual level (leadership and perception) provides a useful scaffold, though geopolitical analysis typically operates across all three simultaneously. Analysts should ask: Is this a systemic question about the distribution of power across the international order, or a more bounded question about a dyadic rivalry or a specific corridor of competition?

The choice of spatial frame is not neutral. Mackinder (1904) framed Eurasian competition at the continental scale, identifying the Heartland as the ultimate prize of global power politics. Alfred Thayer Mahan (1890), his great intellectual rival, privileged the oceanic frame: in his reading, maritime power, sea-lane control, and naval presence determined hegemonic outcomes rather than continental land mass. The tension between these two frames — littoral sea power versus continental land power — prefigures contemporary debates about whether the Indo-Pacific contest is fundamentally a maritime competition (command of the South China Sea, the Taiwan Strait, and the first and second island chains) or a continental one (China's overland infrastructure through Central Asia, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, and overland trade routes to Europe).

Brzezinski (1997) used the 'Grand Chessboard' frame to argue that Central Asia was the pivot of post-Cold War strategy, framing Eurasian control as the key to global preponderance. Contemporary analysts examining China's Belt and Road Initiative must decide whether to adopt a global frame (network topology of 140+ partner states) or a corridor-specific frame (the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, the Maritime Silk Road, or the Digital Silk Road). Each frame foregrounds different variables and risks, and each implies a different analytical and policy response. The concept of the 'Indo-Pacific' itself, institutionalized through the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad) and AUKUS, represents a deliberate reframing away from an 'Asia-Pacific'

lens that historically centered the United States and its East Asian allies, toward one that links South Asian and Southeast Asian dynamics to the broader Pacific competition.

Practical example: In analyzing European security after 2022, an analyst using only the NATO frame risks missing the sub-regional dynamics of Nordic-Baltic integration (NORDEFCO) and the separate institutional logic of EU CSDP missions. The Nordic states' accession to NATO — Finland in 2023, Sweden in 2024 — transformed the Baltic Sea from a contested space to a virtual NATO lake, a development with major implications for Russian Baltic Fleet operations that a purely NATO-level frame would assign insufficient weight. Only by nesting frames — global, alliance, sub-regional, bilateral — can the full picture emerge (Biscop, 2018).

3.2 Proposition II: map the distribution of power — material and relational

Classical geopolitics was primarily concerned with material power — territory, population, industrial capacity, and military reach. Contemporary analysis must extend this to relational power: who depends on whom, and who controls the nodes through which others must pass (Farrell; Newman, 2019). This geoeconomic dimension — covering sanctions, export controls, financial chokepoints, and supply-chain dependencies — has become central to twenty-first-century strategic competition (Blackwill; Harris, 2016).

The analyst should produce an explicit power inventory along at least four dimensions: (a) hard power — military capability, nuclear posture, force projection reach; (b) economic structural power — control of critical supply chains, reserve currencies, payment systems; (c) normative-institutional power — the capacity to set the rules of international regimes and define legitimate conduct (Strange, 1994); and (d) soft power — the ability to shape preferences through cultural, ideational, and diplomatic attraction (Nye, 2004). Joseph Nye's subsequent concept of 'smart power' — the strategic combination of hard and soft instruments — captures the integrative analytical requirement: no single power dimension is sufficient, and their interactions frequently produce non-linear outcomes.

The geoeconomic dimension deserves particular attention. Farrell and Newman's (2019) weaponized interdependence framework identifies two key mechanisms through which economic networks are converted into coercive instruments: the 'panopticon effect' (using network centrality to surveil rivals) and the 'chokepoint effect' (using network centrality to deny access). The United States' 2022 CHIPS and Science Act — restricting Chinese access to advanced semiconductor fabrication technology — represents a textbook application of the chokepoint effect, leveraging the US-led position in chip design software (Electronic Design Automation), equipment manufacturing (ASML's EUV lithography), and high-bandwidth memory to constrain China's AI and military modernization programs. Any power map that omits semiconductor value chains, rare-earth processing (dominated by China at over 60% of global refining capacity), or LNG shipping routes will systematically underestimate structural dependencies.

Practical example: Western sanctions on Russia following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine demonstrated the structural power of the SWIFT payment system and dollar-denominated trade finance — effectively severing Russia's major banks from international capital markets and freezing approximately $300 billion in sovereign assets held in G7 jurisdictions. Yet Russian energy exports

to Asia simultaneously illustrated the limits of that power when alternative corridors exist. India's import of discounted Russian Urals crude — rising from near-zero before 2022 to over 1.5 million barrels per day by 2023 — and China's absorption of Russian pipeline gas through the Power of Siberia network demonstrated that the weaponization of Western financial infrastructure accelerated the construction of parallel economic architectures. A relational power map that captured both the dominance of Western financial nodes and the availability of alternative commodity corridors would have produced a more accurate assessment of sanction effectiveness from the outset (Stent, 2023).

3.3 Proposition III: conduct historical depth analysis

No geopolitical situation is intelligible without historical depth. The analyst must trace the long-run forces — imperial legacies, territorial disputes, demographic patterns, infrastructure investments — that constrain current actors. This does not mean assuming the past determines the present; it means identifying which historical structures have proved resilient and which have been disrupted by contingent events (Kennedy, 1988; Kissinger, 1994).

A useful heuristic is the 'three-time-scale' model borrowed from the Annales school: the *longue durée* (slow-moving geographic and demographic structures), conjunctural cycles (economic and institutional fluctuations over decades), and the event level (crises, wars, leadership changes). Geopolitical analysis that operates only at the event level will systematically mistake tactical shifts for structural change (Braudel, 1972). Kennedy's (1988) study of the rise and fall of great powers demonstrated that the capacity for sustained economic growth and resource extraction — measured over centuries — was the most reliable predictor of hegemonic ascent and decline, outperforming shorter-term indicators of military strength or diplomatic skill.

Graham Allison's 'Thucydides Trap' concept (Allison, 2017), derived from the Athenian historian's account of the Peloponnesian War, provides a historically grounded framework for understanding the structural dangers of hegemonic transitions: in twelve of sixteen historical cases where a rising power challenged an established one, the result was major war. Whether the US-China dynamic constitutes a genuine Thucydidean contest is debated, but the historical data series itself imposes an analytical obligation: any assessment of great-power competition must account for the structural pressures generated by power transition, irrespective of the immediate intentions of current leaders.

Historical depth is equally indispensable for regional and bilateral disputes. The South China Sea territorial claims advanced by China rest on historical narratives — the 'nine-dash line' derived from a 1947 Chinese Republican-era map — that conflict directly with the UNCLOS framework and the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling. Understanding the dispute requires tracing the construction and contestation of these historical narratives, not merely the contemporary military balance. Similarly, the Kashmir dispute between India and Pakistan cannot be analyzed without reference to the 1947 partition of British India, the circumstances of Jammu and Kashmir's accession, and three subsequent wars — a historical architecture that constrains the strategic calculus of both states far more powerfully than any bilateral confidence-building measure introduced since.

Practical example: The enduring Russian strategic interest in Ukraine is not reducible to Vladimir Putin's ideology; it reflects longue-durée concerns about buffer zones, Black Sea access, and the geopolitical memory of the steppe frontier that predate the Soviet period and can be traced to the strategic culture of Muscovite expansion from the fifteenth century onward. An analyst who ignored this depth would misread the 2022 invasion as an idiosyncratic decision rather than as a structural-historical trajectory in which multiple Russian leaders — tsarist, Soviet, and post-Soviet — have consistently defined Ukrainian territorial integrity as a threat to Russian strategic depth.

3.4 Proposition IV: reconstruct the actor's strategic calculus

Geopolitical analysis must ultimately explain why actors make the choices they do. This requires moving from structural description to actor-level reconstruction: What are the key decision-makers' objectives, threat perceptions, domestic constraints, and time horizons? Strategic culture theory argues that these factors are not idiosyncratic but are shaped by historically stable dispositions toward the use of force, risk, and diplomacy (Gray, 1999; Johnston, 1995).

Cognitive dimensions of strategic decision-making deserve explicit attention. Prospect theory, developed by Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky and applied to international relations by scholars including Jack Levy, demonstrates that actors weigh potential losses more heavily than equivalent gains, and are more willing to accept risk to avoid losses than to secure equivalent gains (Kahneman, 2011). This has direct implications for geopolitical assessment: a state that perceives itself to be in the 'loss domain' — facing territorial encirclement, economic strangulation, or declining relative power — will tolerate significantly higher levels of risk than a contented status quo power, which a purely capability-based structural analysis will underestimate.

Robert Putnam's (1988) concept of the 'two-level game' provides a complementary framework for understanding how domestic political constraints shape international strategic choices. In Putnam's model, diplomatic outcomes are determined simultaneously at two boards: the international negotiating table, where states interact with external counterparts, and the domestic ratification arena, where leaders must secure sufficient political support for any agreement. The 'win-set' — the range of agreements acceptable to domestic constituencies — constrains what is internationally achievable. This framework has proven particularly illuminating for cases such as the Iran nuclear negotiations (JCPOA, 2015), where the domestic political constraints of both the Iranian leadership and the US Congress shaped the text and durability of the agreement in ways that purely state-centric realist analysis would have missed.

The analyst should apply structured-focused comparison (George; Bennett, 2005): select a small number of comparable cases, hold structural variables as constant as possible, and examine variation in strategic decisions to isolate the role of perceptions and domestic politics. Process-tracing — following the causal chain from stimulus to decision to outcome through documentary and testimonial evidence — is a particularly powerful tool for this step (Beach; Pedersen, 2013). Guarding against mirror-imaging requires deliberate analytical effort: the analyst must systematically ask what the world looks like from the adversary's perspective, taking seriously

the possibility that what appears aggressive from one vantage point may appear defensive or existential from another.

Practical example: Comparing China's assertiveness in the South China Sea under Xi Jinping with the more cautious posture of the Hu Jintao era requires holding structural power growth roughly constant and examining changes in strategic culture, domestic legitimacy needs, and the perceived window of strategic opportunity. Xi's consolidation of personal authority, the removal of term limits in 2018, and the displacement of collective leadership norms suggest that individual-level variables — leadership style, personal historical narratives, and the domestic political uses of nationalist assertion — have amplified structural incentives for assertiveness in ways that the structural model alone cannot capture (Fravel, 2019).

3.5 Proposition V: identify chokepoints, corridors, and critical interdependencies

A distinctive contribution of geopolitical analysis — differentiating it from general IR theory — is its capacity to identify the geographic and infrastructural nodes that confer decisive advantage or create dangerous vulnerability. Alfred Thayer Mahan (1890) first systematized this insight in maritime strategic terms: control of sea lines of communication (SLOCs), coaling stations, and chokepoint straits determined which state could project power globally and which was confined to a regional role. In the twenty-first century, this logic extends well beyond the maritime domain to encompass digital infrastructure, energy pipelines, financial clearing systems, and semiconductor fabrication facilities.

Physical maritime chokepoints — the Strait of Hormuz (through which approximately 20% of globally traded oil passes), the Malacca Strait (80% of China's seaborne oil imports), the Suez Canal (approximately 12% of global trade by volume), the Bab-el-Mandeb (connecting the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden), and the Turkish Straits (controlling Black Sea egress) — concentrate strategic leverage in ways that amplify small territorial or military advantages into systemic influence (Germond, 2015; Kaplan, 2012). The Houthi attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea and the Bab-el-Mandeb in 2023–2024, reducing container traffic through the Suez Canal by over 50% at peak disruption, illustrated how a non-state armed group with Iranian-supplied anti-ship missiles could exploit a single geographic chokepoint to impose systemic costs on global trade — a capability multiplied far beyond the group's conventional military weight.

In the Arctic domain, the GIUK (Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom) Gap has regained strategic salience as Russian submarine activity in the North Atlantic has increased, threatening the transatlantic SLOCs upon which NATO reinforcement and resupply depend. The melting of Arctic ice is simultaneously opening new trans-Arctic shipping routes that could reduce transit distances between East Asia and Europe by 30–40%, creating a new corridor whose control will be contested among Russia, China, and Arctic NATO states over the coming decades.

The contemporary analyst must map three overlapping layers of chokepoints: (a) physical chokepoints — straits, mountain passes, river crossings, polar routes; (b) cyber and digital infrastructure nodes — the approximately 400 submarine cables carrying over 95% of intercontinental internet traffic, tier-1 internet exchange points, and cloud computing data centers concentrated in a handful of jurisdictions; and (c) economic

chokepoints — single-source commodity dependencies, dominant processing and fabrication facilities such as TSMC (producing over 90% of the world's most advanced chips at its Taiwan facilities), and rare-earth processing nodes. The weaponization of interdependence thesis (Farrell; Newman, 2019) provides the theoretical basis for understanding why states increasingly seek to exploit these nodes coercively.

Practical example: The 2021 Suez Canal blockage by the Ever Given container ship, while accidental, illustrated the systemic vulnerability of global trade to a single geographic bottleneck — approximately $9.6 billion in daily trade was disrupted over six days. A vulnerability that adversaries have noted and that has since informed discussions of canal-bypass infrastructure investment, including the proposed Ben Gurion Canal through Israel's Negev desert and Egyptian investments in alternative Nile-Delta port capacity. The incident also accelerated corporate supply-chain resilience reviews that the COVID-19 pandemic had initiated, demonstrating how geographic chokepoint analysis intersects with corporate and financial risk assessment.

3.6 Proposition VI: scenario development and policy assessment

The final step moves from analysis to prospective assessment. The analyst should develop at least three structured scenarios — a baseline (most likely trajectory given current trends), a pessimistic scenario (plausible adverse shift), and an optimistic scenario (plausible stabilizing shift) — and identify the indicators or 'signposts' that would confirm movement toward each (Heuer; Pherson, 2014). This approach, institutionalized in the US National Intelligence Estimates and analogous British Joint Intelligence Committee assessments, guards against the 'creeping determinism' of single-point forecasts. The RAND Corporation's 'cone of plausibility' methodology and the scenario-planning tradition developed at Royal Dutch Shell in the 1970s provide analogous frameworks that have since diffused into governmental, corporate, and academic settings.

The COVID-19 pandemic delivered a globally legible lesson in scenario planning failure. Prior to 2020, pandemic risk appeared in numerous national risk registers and academic scenario exercises — including the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security's Event 201 simulation conducted in October 2019 — yet structural preparedness remained inadequate. The failure was not informational (the risk was known and quantified) but one of policy translation: scenario outputs were not converted into structural investments in stockpiling, surge capacity, and supply-chain diversification. For geopolitical analysis, this case underscores that scenario development is necessary but insufficient; the policy assessment step must explicitly trace the pathway from analytical finding to structural recommendation.

Wargaming — the systematic simulation of strategic interaction under defined rules and constraints — represents a particularly powerful complement to scenario analysis for geopolitical purposes. Wargames allow analysts to test strategic propositions in an adversarial environment, surfacing assumptions that may not survive contact with a sophisticated 'Red Team' and generating emergent dynamics that tabletop scenario planning tends to miss. The extensive wargaming conducted by the RAND Corporation, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and various NATO bodies on Taiwan Strait contingencies has been instrumental in

refining operational concepts, identifying logistics vulnerabilities, and assessing the efficacy of allied coordination under time pressure (Brands; Beckley, 2022).

Policy assessment — translating analytical findings into actionable recommendations — requires the additional discipline of distinguishing between what is analytically likely and what is normatively desirable. The analyst must make explicit the assumptions built into each policy option and estimate second- and third-order effects, particularly in interconnected geoeconomic systems where sanctions, export controls, or alliance commitments produce unintended cascades (Blackwill; Harris, 2016). The imposition of export controls on advanced chip technology has, for example, simultaneously accelerated Chinese domestic semiconductor investment, incentivized the construction of alternative supply chains, and created compliance costs for US and allied firms — a cascade of second-order effects that a policy assessment grounded exclusively in the first-order denial objective would not have anticipated.

Practical example: A scenario assessment of Taiwan Strait dynamics might distinguish: a baseline of 'armed coexistence' sustained by mutual deterrence and economic interdependence; a pessimistic scenario of Chinese grey-zone escalation — combining cyber operations, legal warfare, economic coercion, and naval incursions — leading to semiconductor supply-chain disruption and allied cohesion tests; and an optimistic scenario of reduced tension enabled by US-China crisis communication channels, track-two diplomatic engagement, and mutual restraint on provocative military deployments. Each scenario carries distinct policy implications for the architecture of AUKUS, the Quad, the EU's de-risking strategy, and the contingency planning of TSMC's overseas fabrication facilities in Arizona and Japan. Brands and Beckley (2022) argue that the 'danger zone' for Taiwan Strait conflict is likely concentrated in the late 2020s, when China's relative power may peak before demographic and structural headwinds reduce it — a time-bound scenario assessment with direct policy implications for deterrence investment timelines.

4 CORE COMPETENCIES OF THE GEOPOLITICAL ANALYST

The methodology described above presupposes a distinctive set of intellectual and practical competencies. These can be organized into five clusters, each of which reflects a distinct dimension of the analytical task.

4.1 Competence 1: spatial and cartographic literacy

The analyst must be able to read, produce, and critically interrogate maps — understanding how projection choices, scale selection, and boundary drawing encode political assumptions (Monmonier, 1991). The Mercator projection, for example, inflates the apparent size of high-latitude territories and has historically reinforced Eurocentric geopolitical imaginaries. The choice of map center — whether the Atlantic or the Pacific occupies the midpoint — alters the visual salience of different strategic corridors. Geographic Information Systems (GIS) literacy is increasingly expected in professional settings, as is familiarity with satellite imagery interpretation and open-source geospatial intelligence (OSINT) methodologies. Platforms such as Planet Labs, Sentinel Hub, and commercial providers have democratized access to near-real-time satellite

imagery, enabling analysts to track military force movements, infrastructure construction, and crop yield changes in ways previously confined to classified intelligence communities. The monitoring of Chinese construction activity in the South China Sea — documented by CSIS's Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative using commercial satellite imagery — represents a paradigmatic case of OSINT-enabled geopolitical analysis.

4.2 Competence 2: historical and area-studies knowledge <sub2>

Structural analysis without historical depth produces systematically distorted assessments. The analyst needs working knowledge of the political history, strategic culture, and domestic political dynamics of the key actors in their area of focus. This does not require exhaustive specialization but does require enough familiarity to distinguish genuinely novel developments from recurrent patterns (Kennedy, 1988; Kissinger, 1994). Area-studies depth — including linguistic competency (language is representative of cultural uniqueness rather than as a mere vehicle of communication. Language embodies the images which people have and which the geopolitical analyst should "understand") and familiarity with primary-source historiography — is particularly valuable for assessing strategic culture, since official rhetoric and state narratives about history are themselves geopolitically significant regardless of their empirical accuracy. Russia's official invocation of Novorossiya and the 'historical unity' of Russians and Ukrainians, or China's recourse to 'century of humiliation' narratives, are data points about strategic legitimation rather than objective history, and can be assessed as such only by an analyst with sufficient historical contextual knowledge.

In terms of sources, the knowledge of facts indispensable in Geopolitics is derived from various: materials of physical and political geography; newspapers articles; records and files of public offices and private institutions; political pamphlets and posters; cartoons; book reviews; statistics of all sorts of social data; and wide reading. Field observation in an area of special interest is as a fundamental step upon the background of geographical, statistical, and linguistic studies.

4.3 Competence 3: quantitative and geoeconomic analytical skills

Mapping trade flows, sanctions exposure, commodity dependencies, and financial network centrality requires a minimum of quantitative and data-analytical competency. Familiarity with international economic statistics (UN Comtrade, IMF Balance of Payments data, World Bank indicators, BIS banking statistics) and the ability to interrogate network graphs of supply-chain dependencies are increasingly core skills (Blackwill; Harris, 2016; Farrell; Newman, 2019). Zeihan (2022) has argued provocatively that the demographic and geographic fundamentals underpinning post-Cold War globalization are reversing — driven by ageing populations, capital imbalances, and the retreat of US security guarantees — producing a structural deglobalization that will reward analysts with the quantitative and logistical literacy to map production re-shoring, energy corridor realignment, and food-security dependencies. Whether or not one accepts Zeihan's maximalist conclusions, the underlying analytical point holds: geopolitical relevance in an era of geoeconomic competition requires comfort with supply-chain data, financial network analysis,

and commodity market dynamics that were traditionally the preserve of economic analysts rather than security specialists.

4.4 Competence 4: structured-analytic and intelligence tradecraft

The analyst should be proficient in recognized structured analytic techniques: Analysis of Competing Hypotheses (ACH), Red-Teaming, Key Assumptions Check, and the Indicators and Warnings approach (Heuer; Pherson, 2014). These techniques, developed primarily within the intelligence community, serve the general scientific purpose of making reasoning explicit, falsifiable, and resistant to cognitive bias. Red-teaming — the systematic construction of adversarial perspectives on one's own analytical conclusions — is particularly valuable for countering the mirror-imaging and groupthink that institutional settings tend to reinforce. The post-mortems conducted after both the 9/11 Commission and the Iraq WMD inquiry recommended structured analytic reforms that are directly transferable to academic and policy-oriented geopolitical analysis. The Key Assumptions Check, in particular, forces analysts to make explicit the often-unstated premises on which their assessments rest — premises that, once surfaced, can be tested against evidence rather than accepted as background.

4.5 Competence 5: communication and policy translation

Analytical rigueur is necessary but insufficient: findings must be communicated to decision-makers in clear, structured, and actionable formats. This requires the ability to distinguish 'key judgements' from supporting detail, to calibrate confidence levels transparently (using probability language or, where appropriate, Bayesian estimates), and to present competing assessments where genuine uncertainty exists (Kent, 1964). Sherman Kent's foundational work on words of estimative probability — distinguishing between 'almost certainly', 'probably', 'possibly', and 'unlikely' — established a vocabulary for transparent analytical communication that remains influential in professional intelligence and policy analysis. The ability to present geopolitical findings accessibly to non-specialist audiences — policymakers, legislators, journalists, and the informed public — is also a democratic accountability function: geopolitical analysis that remains confined to specialist communities cannot contribute to the public deliberation that democratic governance requires.

5 CONCLUSION

Geopolitical analysis is not a substitute for strategic imagination or political judgement, but it is an indispensable complement to both. The six propositions offered here — define the spatial frame, map the distribution of power, conduct historical depth analysis, reconstruct the actor's strategic calculus, identify chokepoints and critical interdependencies, and develop structured scenarios — constitute a replicable methodological sequence that can be applied across diverse regional and thematic contexts. Their value lies not in any single analytical move but in their combination: structural analysis without actor-level reconstruction misses contingency; actor-level

analysis without structural context mistakes personality for policy; scenario development without historical depth produces plausible fictions rather than probable futures.

The integration of classical geopolitical insight, geoeconomic tools, and structured-analytic tradecraft provides the foundation for a professional practice that is at once scholarly, policy-relevant, and epistemically responsible. This integration also demands ongoing intellectual humility: the history of geopolitical thought is littered with confident frameworks — from Mackinder's Heartland to Fukuyama's end of history — that proved more revealing of their era's assumptions than of enduring geographic or structural truths. The methodology proposed here is therefore not a closed system but a structured openness: a set of analytical disciplines that prevent the most common errors while preserving the space for genuine strategic insight.

Emerging developments will test and extend the methodology. Artificial intelligence and machine learning are beginning to transform both the production and the consumption of geopolitical analysis: large-language models, satellite image classifiers, and social-media sentiment algorithms offer analytical capabilities that earlier generations could not have imagined, while simultaneously creating new epistemic vulnerabilities — including the risk of AI-generated disinformation that corrupts the open-source intelligence on which geopolitical analysis increasingly depends. Climate change is reshaping the geographic constants that classical geopolitics treated as stable: melting Arctic ice opens new strategic corridors; changing precipitation patterns threaten food-producing regions in ways that will drive resource competition and state fragility; rising sea levels threaten the territorial integrity of low-lying states and the habitability of coastal infrastructure supporting major ports and naval bases. The methodological response to these developments must itself be adaptive: new analytical tools, new data sources, and new conceptual vocabularies will need to be integrated without abandoning the epistemological discipline and structured rigueur that give the methodology its analytical power.

As the international order enters what I have called the "Era of Surrealpolitik" (Carvalho, 2026), a period of intensifying great-power competition, climate-driven resource stress, and technological disruption, the demand for rigorous geopolitical analysis will only increase. The field's credibility — and its utility to democratic governance — depends on its ability to ground its claims in systematic method rather than intuition alone, to communicate uncertainty honestly rather than projecting false confidence, and to integrate the material, relational, historical, and cognitive dimensions of strategic competition in a framework adequate to the complexity of the contemporary world.

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