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Research Article

Modelling neoclassical geopolitics: An alternative theoretical tradition for geopolitical culture and literacy

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Abstract: This paper offers a conceptual and theoretical alternative to geopolitical reasoning. It accepts certain concepts, factors, and variables from classical geopolitics with tested scientific validity and adds to them the awareness and focus on agents contributed, to some extent, by critical geopolitics. Without leaving a soft positivist sphere in which the procedures of the scientific method prevail, the innovative model of neoclassical geopolitics presented here constitutes a two-level approach in which the structural variable of systemic stimuli runs through the dual intervening variable of the geopolitical agent's perceptions and capacities, shaping the state's behavior as the dependent variable. In other words, it is innovatively claimed that examining geopolitical agents' perceptions and capacities often provides valuable input for explaining political outcomes as an object of study in geopolitical research. Through both systemic stimuli and geopolitical agents' perceptions and capacities, geography remains omnipresent with its concepts and approaches. Hence, one of the main objectives of the article is to contribute to the thriving of geopolitical culture and the literacy of decision-makers and the general public.

Keywords: Neoclassical Geopolitics, Power, Potential, Space, Perceptions, Geography, Culture

Highlights:

- Geopolitical agents (i.e., individual decision-makers) are important in geopolitical analyses
- Innovative concepts for geopolitical reasoning (i.e., geomisguidance)
- Geography understood as a set of factors affecting a state's potential and a determinant of systemic constraints
- Joint approach containing geographical and psychological element

1. Introduction

Building on Sukhorukov et al.'s research (2021) about the "phenomenology of space" and the "understanding of the geographical space," as well as on Shoorcheh's paper (2021) on the relevance of space in the production of scientific knowledge, this article aims to answer the question of how to investigate state foreign policy using geopolitical reasoning within the frame of the scientific method. In this context, other sub-research questions to be addressed include: What could the main concepts of such an approach be? Moreover, what would its key variables be?

To answer these questions, I used qualitative content analysis to critically examine the geopolitics literature – both classical and critical geopolitics – in the fields of neoclassical realism, strategic studies, and psychology. The research was accomplished through the deductive method, within the limits associated with a soft positivist approach, maintaining a certain level of abstraction, strictly non-normatively, and trying to provide instruments for prediction.

The article's structure reflects the configuration of the model of neoclassical geopolitics. Section 2 briefly introduces the model; Section 3 explains the independent variable, provides my definition of geopolitics, contextualizes the state's potential and geography as elements of the independent variable, and examines guidelines concerning how to evaluate a state's potential through six geopolitical factors. In contrast, Section 4 describes the vital aspects of the intervening variable of the model, such as how to identify the geopolitical agent and how to characterize them based on their (1) perception of space, (2) coherence of discourse, (3) network of relations, (4) intentions and ambitions, (5) personality, and last, how to relate the geopolitical agent's capacities to other aspects, like the domestic power structure and the relations between former and society.

In line with the standpoints of Varjas (2002) and O'Reilly (2017), my concern with this topic is not only academic but highly pedagogical and educational. Therefore, one of the main objectives of this research is to contribute to developing the geopolitical culture and literacy of decision-makers and the general public to help render them future-ready for challenges that must be faced. For this, I offer an alternative theoretical tradition, materialized in a model that posits a series of theoretical claims based on a set of variables and their concepts. I expect that this approach will become a predominant one in geopolitical research in the future.

2. The Model of Neoclassical Geopolitics

The first step in answering the main research question of this paper is picturing the theoretical-methodological framework of neoclassical geopolitics (Morgado, 2017; 2020), which – in line with other pieces of ongoing research such as those of Kelly (2006), Haverluck et al. (2014), and

Torkameh et al. (2022) – tries to overcome the flaws and inconsistencies of critical geopolitics and its authors, among whom Tuathail (1996), Dalby (2002; 2008), Tuathail et al. (2006), Agnew (2003), and Dodds (2014) may be included.

Apart from the irreconcilable ontological and epistemological assumptions of critical geopolitical and neoclassical geopolitics – a topic outside of the scope of this paper – more immediate methodological problems can be referred to. In these terms, Kelly (2006) mentions “levels of analysis,” “modern vs. post-modern,” and “the focus of the study,” which are radically different in critical and (neo)classical geopolitics. Kelly calls for the systematization of “a comprehensive traditional geopolitical framework” (Kelly, 2016, p. 50), which this paper tries precisely to contribute to. Haverluk et al. (2014) are even more *critical* of critical geopolitics, having elaborated an “anti-science,” “anti-cartographic,” and “anti-environmental” stance and strong normativism regarding “changing power structures” as characteristic of critical geopolitics. In this line, Torkameh et al. (2022) also insisted on the incapacity of critical geopolitics to distinguish between the “objective” and the “subjective.” The present paper is not intended to conclude this topic but merely introduces the contrast between *critical* and *neoclassical*. I plan to publish another paper addressing the problems of critical geopolitics in detail.

If critical geopolitics retains some of the flaws and inconsistencies mentioned above, the model of neoclassical geopolitics offers a more compact alternative within the strict scientific domain. The model departs from treating systemic stimuli as the primary variable of the realist theoretical tradition and progresses by adopting a unit-level variable – the geopolitical agent’s perceptions and capacities – for inclusion in geopolitical reasoning.

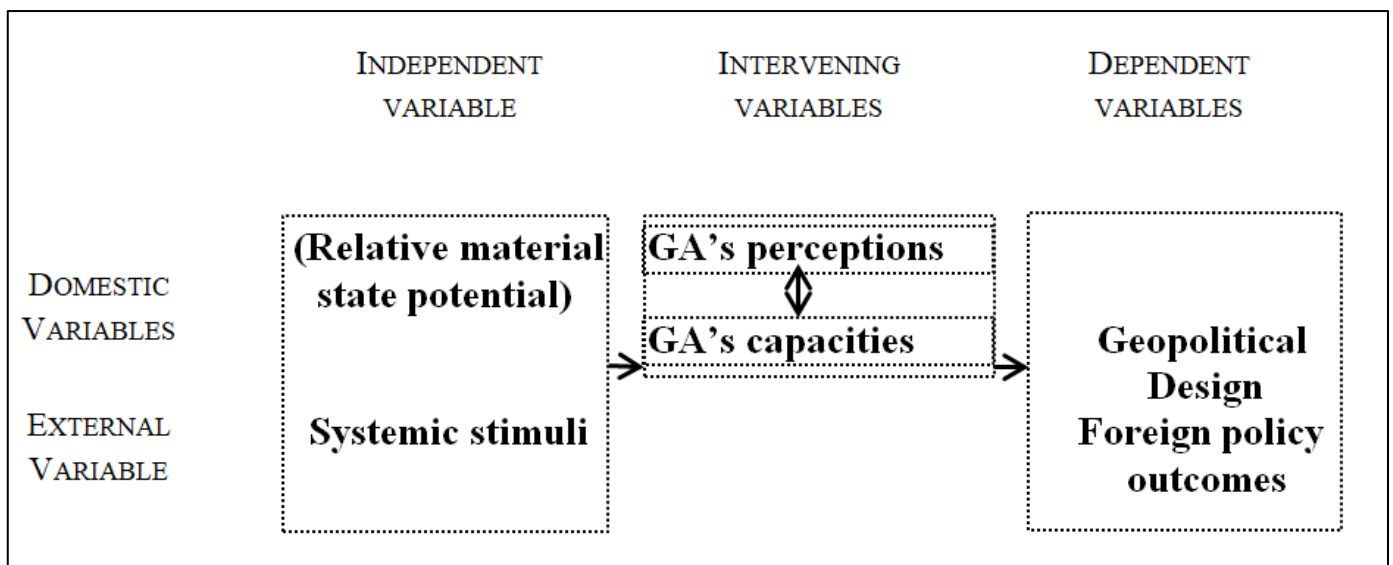


Figure 1. The Model of Neoclassical Geopolitics (Morgado, 2020: 151)

In this way, the independent variable of neoclassical geopolitics is the international system, as it is with neoclassical realism, too (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell, 2016). This means, consequently, that listing the *capabilities* of each country (cf. geopolitical factors, see below) under study becomes the first step in understanding the wide-ranging *distribution of capabilities* – at the regional or world level, depending on the scope of the research.

The intervening variable of the model is also dual yet welded together, as effective *action* cannot exist without accurate *perception*. Thus, *capabilities* will not be put to use. I will come back to this point below.

Among the basic concepts of this novel theoretical framework, one encounters both classical and innovative concepts: (a) “territoriality,” defined as “a primary geographical expression of social power. It is the means by which space and society are interrelated” (Sack, 1986, p. 5)¹; (b) “the international system,” which refers to the interstate political system characterized by an anarchic ordering principle (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell, 2016, p. 43); (c) the relative material state potential that designates “the capabilities or resources... with which states can influence each other” (Wohlforth, 1993, p. 4); (d) “strategic culture,” which corresponds to “...a set of inter-related beliefs, norms, and assumptions...” that establish “...what are acceptable and unacceptable strategic choices...” (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell, 2016, p. 67); (e) the “perception of space” that signifies what meaning the geographical setting’s incentives have for the geopolitical agents (assuming that the geopolitical agents are aware of these incentives); (f) “ideology,” which refers to a set of logical ideas that aim to explain the world, but, most of all, to change it in favor of the aspirations of a group, class, culture, or state (Tannenwald, 2005, p. 15) – consequently, the ideology is normative, since it implicates pursuing what is desirable (i.e., *what should be*); (g) “geopolitical design,” meaning both a list of state objectives (national objectives) and their hierarchy (Chauprade and Thual, 1998, pp. 486-487); (h) “geoconjunctive maneuver” refers to the state’s cooperative behavior in the domains of applied geopolitics and foreign affairs,² – thus, is a concept in logical opposition to “potential for conflict” as a theoretical principle of geopolitics (Morgado, 2020, pp. 133-134). Finally, (i) “geopolitical continuity” occurs as a “dynamic of continuity” that can be deduced from the durability of specific objectives – or, as Chauprade and Thual put it, “geopolitics considers the importance of the fact in relative terms, including that fact in durable dynamics” (1998, p. 483).

¹ For an excellent analysis of the concept of territoriality and its implications, vide O’Reilly (2019, pp. 29 - 55)

² I have already worked with the novel concept of “geoconjunctive maneuver” applied to the South American regional integration maneuver, as the priority for Brazilian foreign policy (Morgado, 2022).

3. The Independent Variable

3.1. Potential and Power: bringing Geography in

The fundamental assumption of the model of neoclassical geopolitics (cf. Figure 1) is that the causal logic between (i) the geographical setting and the international system – which constitute systemic stimuli – and (ii) the geopolitical design and foreign policy outcomes of a state is, in certain circumstances, obscure and difficult to trace without (iii) an inquiry into the perceptions and capacities of geopolitical agents.

In other words, the key theoretical point seems to be that structural or systemic approaches in geopolitics – which claim that the behavior of the state in international relations is exclusively and directly determined by systemic imperatives, such as promoted by Kissinger (Isaacson, 1992), Brill (2008), and Friedman (2010) – frequently do not have satisfactory explanatory power when applied to the medium- and long term.

The model of neoclassical geopolitics can therefore be a remedy to that problem. I have developed the model based on the Type III Neoclassical Realist Model (Ripsman Taliaferro, and Lobell, 2016, p. 34), building up a two-level approach that covers international and domestic dimensions. This approach appears to be much broader, more complete, and better systematized than the alternative theories and approaches in the field. Consequently, it also suggests more substantial explanatory power over the mentioned time horizons, especially when compared to the systemic approach.

The model is a schematic representation of my definition of geopolitical studies as “a descriptive-analytical approach that aims to explain the impact of the geographical setting and other elements of potential, filtered by the geopolitical agent’s perceptions and capacities, on foreign policy and, by extension, on the international system” (Morgado, 2020, p. 131).

Systemic stimuli (the independent variable) are common to both the “systemic” and this novel “two-level” approach in geopolitics. In other words, the starting point in geopolitical analysis is twofold: (1) assessing the “strength” of a particular state (i.e., a state’s relative *potential*) and (2) measuring the distribution of capabilities in the international system. The two tasks are deeply intertwined and should be seen as the bread and butter of any geopolitical study (and any foreign policy planning).

These ideas bring us to the necessity of identifying and defining the concepts of *potential*, *power*, *systemic stimuli*, and *distribution of capabilities* and the *international system*.

Potential. *Relative material state potential* designates, as already mentioned above, “the capabilities or resources... with which states can influence each other”³ (Wohlforth, 1993, p. 4). These resources comprise both material and non-material aspects. In these terms, *potential* can be grasped as a possibility. Potential is “force” or something capable of being or becoming. Philosophically, it may correspond to Aristotle’s concept of “*potentiality*” (*dunamis*) (Aristotle, 2006).

Power. *State power* is understood as “... the relative ability of the state to extract and mobilize resources from domestic society...” (Lobell et al., 2009, p. 38). Hence, one apprehends *power* as a real capacity or ability that produces effects and possesses objectives. Calling on Aristotle again, some resemblance to his concept of “*actuality*” (*entelecheia*) may be pointed out (Aristotle, 2006).

Accordingly, *power* and *potential* are two different concepts. *Power* depends on *potential*; i.e., *power* is “inferior” to *potential* in the sense that there will always be a waste of, or mismanagement of, resources in the process of their extraction and operationalization. Consequently, *power* is the revelation of *potential* in a particular space and time. It follows that if the assessment of *potential* is demanding, the full-scale apprehension of *power* before it is revealed in its course of action is virtually unachievable.

Although criticized for being too simplistic, the following characterization of *power* may still be accepted: “...an actor controlling another to do what that other would not otherwise do” (Barnett and Duvall, 2005, p. 39). This quote clarifies that *power* is about an “ability,” whereas, as it is argued, *potential* is about “resources.” So, *power* as “ability” without resources does not produce effects, and resources can scarcely be fully optimized without the ability to manage or make use of them. *Power* – “the fundamental concept in social science [is Power] in the same sense in which Energy is the fundamental concept in physics,” according to Bertrand Russell (2004, p. 4) – is then downstream from *potential*.

Therefore, if *potential* corresponds to an exhaustive list of capabilities – or resources, or assets – of a state, defining the state’s strengths and weaknesses, *potential* then becomes a *means of action*. In this manner, studying *potential* also becomes a predictive tool, taking into account the fact that whereas a state that has specific *means of action* may or may not behave in a certain way, another state that does not have relevant *means of action* is definitely unable to behave in specific ways. This reduces *ab initio* the number of possibilities and future scenarios, thus reinforcing the importance of measuring *potential*. Summing up, the state’s choice of behavior largely depends on the *means of action*.

Systemic Stimuli and Distribution of Capabilities in the International System. *Systemic stimuli* and *distribution of capabilities* can be understood through Brill’s formulation (1994, p. 179), namely, the “position of the country in terms of Space-Power-Constellation,” or as Rose (1998, p. 146) designated, “the place of the state in the international system.”

Three basic premises can be accepted as characterizing the international system: (1) international politics are viewed as a never-ending struggle for power and influence (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell, 2016, p. 43); (2) as Waltz (1979) discussed, the international system certainly imposes constraints on states; although (3) those constraints do not dictate exactly how the state will react or behave (as anarchy is merely a permissive condition). It is the third premise that challenges structural realism and structural geopolitics.

It is certain that, to Waltz, the distribution of capabilities is a causal variable. Still, much has been the progress in realism since Waltz. For example, Snyder (1996) innovated with the concept of “structural modifiers” to operationalize the “distribution of capabilities.” Structural modifiers are systemic variables that tend to modify the international structure. Military technology and the geographical setting are examples of structural modifiers. Although these structural modifiers are “inside” of states, they cannot be simply estimated “domestically” since they impact the international system in its totality. Their appearance or existence can cause deep changes in the international system by determining opportunities and threats or changing the number of poles in the system. A threat may exist, for example, on the level of nuclear powers and the polarity of the system, which changes automatically according to the number of nuclear poles.

In this milieu, geography can be brought in. Physical distance, strategic depth, and the existence or lack thereof of topographical barriers are some of the geographical characteristics that shape the security environment of a state. Hence, the relevance of geopolitical studies also lies in its approach and skill at measuring capabilities (i.e., *potential*), being an essential means of identifying a state’s internal strengths and weaknesses and assisting in measuring external opportunities and threats (the well-known SWOT analysis as a complementary tool). How to study geography to measure a state’s relative potential is the topic of the next section.

³ Wohlforth gave this definition for state *power*. However, I consider it more appropriate for state *potential*.

3.2. Considering Geography in Measuring State Potential: research traces

The assessment of a state's relative potential within the systemic environment must always be framed in comparative terms for academic or politico-strategic purposes. As explained, the evaluation of the distribution of capabilities in the international system necessarily means a comparison of capabilities.

I now proceed to address *how* to assess a state's relative potential. The classics in the literature offer many means of accomplishing that endeavor – for example, Couto (1988), Couto e Silva (1980), Cline (1977), Fucks (1965), Morgenthau (1948), and Spykman (1938). However, because elsewhere I have elaborated a diagram for geopolitical analysis built upon the most recent developments (Morgado, 2017), I will depart from my results to develop this research agenda further. I have elaborated a schema of six geopolitical factors: (1) geographical space, (2) geographical position, (3) circulation/transportation, (4) resources, (5) psychosocial projection on the territory, and (6) politico-military structures, which I will develop further in this paper.

The evaluation of the geographical space refers not only to the extension or size of the territory from which its strategic depth and defensive value can be deduced but also to the shape or configuration of the territory and its strengths and weaknesses. Concerning the former, one can refer to the examples of the territorial vastness of Russia, which, allied to other factors, makes penetrability of the territory difficult, or the historical case of Portugal relocating its capital to Rio de Janeiro in the nineteenth century to avoid coming under the control of Bonaparte's *Grande Armée*. As for the latter, it is more advantageous to have a compact shape, like Poland for example, than a fragmented shape, as Greece has, whereas the ideal shape seems to be as close as possible to a circle with the capital in the center, in a way as to exert equal pressure on all borders (Sicker, 2010, p. 95). In the case of the existence of coastline(s) (i.e., non-landlocked countries), observations on the characteristics of the coastline itself (e.g., areas of landing or inaccessible terrain), as well as the sea (e.g., the configuration of the sea [open, closed, or semi-closed], depth, navigability [e.g., the existence of ice at certain times of the year, problematic currents]) are also required. Borders have long been one of the main topics of geopolitics. Thus, the analysis of borders also finds its place in the research (e.g., type of borders, density of occupation, whether they are borders between civilizations, level of conflict and quotient of pressure, militarized or de-militarized, customs control or free circulation). The evaluation of geographical space should continue with the study of the natural landscape, geomorphology, and topography, which allows for the measurement of the quality of soil (e.g., for food supply and transportation) and notes on the existence of important rivers and their orientation, understanding of relief of land (e.g., altitude [mountains make circulation more difficult, and tend to isolate populations, unlike plains and lowlands], drainage [e.g., a swamp can be one of the safest borders], flora, and the type of climate [which influences the quality of the soil too]). As valleys are axes of communication and consequently tend to be of economic significance (e.g., the Wipptal Valley or Ferghana Valley), states may be inclined to expand their control over valleys – and the same applies to river basins and/or river mouths (Vives, 1972, p. 112). At this point, an evaluation of the political space can be relevant, identifying geohistorical nuclei (Vives, 1972, p. 130), tensions and frictions, and the historical steps of expansion or retraction.⁴ This task can put under the spotlight internal lines of division of the territory (e.g., political, cultural, ethnic, religious), as well as help to measure the level of integration (the center-periphery of the territory). Identifying centers of gravity (the capital or other centers such as a state's *ecumene* or critical areas) is crucial since, for example, an internationally important canal, like the Suez or Panama Canal, constitutes an attraction force.

Geographical position is the second geopolitical factor. Locating the country in terms of its latitude and longitude (Mattos, 1975, p. 18) (Backheuser, 1948) strengthens inferences about the type of climate, which has due implications for the quality of soils and food production, as stated. The geohistorical method can assist in assessing the traditional orientation of politics concerning the country's position, allowing inferences about whether a country has been predominantly oriented around *telluropolitics* (land) or *thalassopolitics* (sea). Furthermore, contrasting that historical information with the present permits the identification of cycles of continuity or change. For example, an island can either isolate itself or open up and project power overseas – for example, looking to control or influence the coastline on the opposite side of a sea. The case of Japan – contrasting the seventeenth and eighteenth-century Tokugawa Era with the nineteenth-century Meiji Era – can be considered paradigmatic. In addition, the factor of position also involves determining the accessibility of the territory (e.g., extreme cases like Panama versus Nepal), the existence of external pressures (e.g., Russian pressure in Ukraine since 2014), and litigation zones (e.g., Crimea). All these research steps comprise a strategic assessment that tries to estimate the value of a position, both at the regional and world level, and the identification of shatterbelts (Kelly, 1986; 1997), vital spots such as choke points (Mahan, 1890), or gateways (Cohen, 2009, pp. 50-53), or other less central locations such as “geopolitically neutral areas” (Castro, 1994, p. 48). Ultimately, a geopolitical inquiry into position should highlight a country's proximity to or distance from leading centers of power, locate it among lists of allies, enemies, neutrals, or buffers, and clarify its level of dependence, agency, or subjection to another country's sphere of influence (Brill, 2008, p. 41), concluding with considerations about how location affects that country in the international cultural and strategic environment.

The third geopolitical factor involves circulation or transportation. Conventional wisdom in geopolitics asserts that states tend to dominate routes (e.g., on land [roads, railways], rivers, sea lanes, pipelines, or air corridors of strategic relevance) (Vives, 1972, pp. 152-154). Routes constitute lines of communication, information, and, ultimately, the circulation of people, raw materials, goods, and forms of capital (including cash). In contrast, sea lanes are the most important lines of transportation in international trade – consequently, states struggle to obtain one or more access points to the sea – while the most recent issue with regard to this factor is key “choke points” in cyberspace. I mean by this that, as hardware is geographically located, and without hardware there is no cyberspace, the control of “choke points” guarantees a certain degree of control over cyberspace.

Resources are the next factor. Before anything else, a state must guarantee the conditions for producing food (e.g., cereals, fish, livestock) – which depends on the quality of soils and climate – and drinkable water. Without them, human life is not possible, thus, any dispute is finished even before it starts. Energy (e.g., oil, gas, coal, renewable energies) and any strategic resources and significant raw materials (e.g., iron, aluminum, niobium, copper, gold, silver) come next. Once identified, the resource's nature, relevance, quantity (production and reserves), location, and self-sufficiency must be determined. Apart from this, the research remains incomplete without an explanation of the economic structure of the country, meaning: (a) classification of the state in accordance with its economic capacity (world ranking); (b) reference to the major economic indicators such as GDP, GDP per capita, economic growth (inflation rate), the balance of trade, the balance of payments, government debt, government budget, foreign-exchange reserves, national savings, unemployment rate; (c) reflection upon the dynamics of the economy (e.g., *what* does the

⁴ Chauprade and Thual (1998, p. 567) wrote about detailed phases for the territorial appraisal and threats to territorial integrity.

country produce [e.g., does it have relevant industry?], stability, technology, laws, foreign dependence, and future perspectives); (d) the geographical distribution of wealth; and, (e) the economic projection of the country in the international arena.

Psychosocial projection on the territory is the geopolitical factor that comprises the demographic and identity-related dimensions of the relative state's potential. First, this requires a description of the population in quantitative terms (e.g., number, geographical distribution, population dynamics – growth or decrease, age, and migration). Second, it entails collecting further details about the structure of society – for example, the organization of society, relations between the geopolitical agent and society (e.g., Schweller [2004] emphasized the topic of state-society relations, and Taliaferro [2006, p. 486] suggested examining the existence or lack thereof of state-sponsored nationalism), the capacity of association of members of society, levels of welfare and health, social tensions, and ideologies (e.g., investigating the presence of [anti-]statist ideology in the geopolitical agent – another of Taliaferro's methodological hints [2006, p. 467] – which stretches, however, to involve aspects of the intervening variables of the model – cf. Figure 1). Concerning additional identity aspects, four dimensions are regarded as significant: (a) a description of culture and national character, its basic elements, relevant historical habits and traditions, national aspirations (from which stem national interests), patriotism, internal cohesion (in racial or ethnic terms, language, and religion), capacity to act collectively, adaptability of the population(s), beliefs and motivation behind public opinion, national willpower, and military capacity; (b) cultural projection of the country in international politics (aspects of Nye's soft power [2004]); (c) homogeneity of the population in general terms and reference to minorities; and (d) other significant issues, such as the level of education, or the society's technological level concerning its scientific, economic, and military weight.

The last geopolitical factor comprises the crudest forms of power – bureaucracy, law enforcement, and physical violence – the politico-military structures. Describing the political structure means scrutinizing the division of power and the state's sovereign structure organization, the efficiency of the administration, the quality of diplomacy and diplomatic relations, political stability, cohesion in the political class, and pointing out diplomatic and intelligence objectives (part of geopolitical design). All this gives a general picture of the political potential as a whole (the political use of technology and the military, economy, and culture). As for the military structure, the research requires first understanding the strategic concept and listing the military agreements (distribution of allies and enemies and accounting for threat perception). After this, describing the percentage of GDP committed to defense and its evolution, workforce, quality of command, quality of weaponry and equipment (e.g., nuclear weapons, export/import of weaponry, and capacity for technological development), type of recruitment, logistics system, levels of training and readiness, the morale of soldiers and international prestige of the armed forces. What are their limits to action, and which military and intelligence objectives are at stake (the remaining part of the geopolitical design). To conclude this factor, an analytical overview of both (i) the political-diplomatic and (ii) the military projections of the country in the international arena.

Although the above-mentioned characterization of geopolitical factors was relatively detailed, this type of exercise is not without complexities and limitations. I will address five of them.

First, the volatility of international relations. For many reasons, it is a common understanding that international relations exist in a less-than-stable environment. One of the most relevant of these is the clash of irreconcilable objectives. States (and other international actors) have specific aspirations that generate particular interests. When the geopolitical agents – correctly or incorrectly – perceive these interests and make policy out of them, the interests become national objectives. As the pursuit of those objectives often demands the use of means of coercion, this does not contribute, in general, to the stabilization of international relations – and it is in this volatile setting that the evaluation of the state's relative potential takes place. Second, the task under scrutiny can also end up both incomplete and missing vital information or become too exhaustive and only a little better than a catalog of data with unimportant added value. Third, an aspect already referred to is measuring a state's relative potential, which cannot be accomplished in absolute terms but only in relative terms. In other words, comparison is needed for a more accurate understanding. Fourth, there is the need for incessant updating of information. Not only is the international environment volatile, but the exercise of the evaluation of state potential is volatile itself. In fact, a new event, a new weapon, a new ally, a new resource, or a new form of financial support can diminish the significance of the researcher's analysis. Finally, validity. Like in any other field that uses the scientific method, this type of study's conclusions must have validity and be as objective as possible, avoid wishful thinking, be highly flexible, and not look for a single cause or mechanical doctrines to fit universal explanatory formula.

4. The Intervening Variable

Unlike Flint (2006, pp. 24-27), I define the geopolitical agent preferentially as the flesh-and-blood decision-maker. Identifying geopolitical agents involves selecting heads of state or heads of government, ministers of foreign affairs, ministers of national defense, and other specific ministers who constitute the foreign policy cabinet.⁵ Depending on the caliber of the geopolitical agents, the staff and teams of institutional technocrats, clusters of foreign affairs-, defense-, and intelligence experts who provide reports and advice may also be influential in the decision-making process.⁶

This preference for individual decision-makers – instead of other actors – is justified by the assumption that individual leaders may radically shape policy depending on the agents themselves and the circumstances. This assumption aligns with research results from neoclassical realism (Ripsman et al., 2016). Still, I am very aware of the theoretical fragility that might be added to the model when considering psychological and *sui generis* elements (Waltz, 1979). This can be corrected in the future while testing the model and perfecting the set of theoretical formulations.

4.1. The Geopolitical Agent's perceptions of potential and the international system

Concerning the geopolitical agent's perceptions, the (1) perception of space may come first. Hence, the old Ratzelian concept of *Raumsinn* re-emerges. For the purposes of this type of research, *Raumsinn* is understood as the sense, or the perception, of space that the geopolitical agents have concerning their own country, i.e., how far can they discern or ignore the implication of the geographical setting's incentives in geostrategic formulation and foreign policy conduct. Therefore, it is assumed that the perception of space may shape the geopolitical design and other foreign policy outcomes.

⁵ The geopolitical agents or the "foreign policy executive" are "...the top officials and central institutions of government charged with external defense and the conduct of diplomacy" (Taliaferro, 2006, p. 470).

⁶ Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell (2016, p.124) called them the FDIB – Foreign, Defense, Intelligence Bureaucracy.

If the geopolitical agent is not fully aware of the findings of geopolitical studies⁷ and accumulates observable failures in foreign policy conduct,⁸ they may be considered “misguided in terms of sense of space” or *geomisguided*. *Geomisguidance* – a concept I earlier coined (Morgado, 2016, p. 171) – characterizes this precise geopolitical agent’s *Raumsinn* in circumstances in which they are unaware or misunderstand the geographical setting’s incentives or even consciously refuse to take advantage of them. Couper (2015, p. 98) argued that “places and identities are experienced...”⁹ This is precisely the issue of the geopolitical agent’s perception of space.¹⁰ It becomes eminently a methodological benchmark in neoclassical geopolitics. Besides, in the understating of this line of research, it is at this level that the “system of ideas and representations,” formulated by Chauprade and Thual (1998), fits into the neoclassical geopolitics model. The model posits that the mentioned system will assist in explaining the geopolitical design, its antecedents, and causes.

The (2) analysis of the coherence in the discourse of the geopolitical agent includes the evaluation of their ideology (statist or non-statist, as mentioned). Furthermore, this factor influences the geopolitical agent’s capacities to extract resources. For example, an individual with a strong belief in the state’s interest will be more capable of extracting more, better quality resources to promote that state’s interest than another individual without that strong belief.

The (3) network of relations of the geopolitical agent is central, too. Their perceptions are generally shaped by consultation with business-people, the military, parliamentary commissions, or engagement with specific national or international organizations. The latter may even establish a direct link with international constraints, which may determine the agent’s behavior and, consequently, the direction of the foreign policy outcomes.

The (4) examination of the geopolitical agent’s intentions may be conjoined with an (5) exploration of the geopolitical agent’s personality. The methodological procedures include the study of biographies, speeches, behavior, and foreign policy outcomes aimed at deepening understanding of the geopolitical agent’s perceptions. The technique of political personality profiling, which gives coordinates for the assessment of psychobiography, may be extremely useful, too.¹¹ Other psychological models also assist in this type of analysis, such as George’s (1969). Bessa also contended that the geopolitical agent’s “personal and psychological parameters” are essential since they impact political decisions.¹²

Although the structuralist approach to geopolitics refuses to look at the agents, focusing almost exclusively on the general international distribution of power, I am convinced that the part played by the perceptions of agents is not a minor one and should not be disregarded, as geopolitical agents’ perceptions often play a determining causal role in the final foreign policy and international outcomes.

Still, in this domain, Frankl’s logotherapy is a precious contribution with the *search for meaning* at its core. Not only do Frankl’s ideas efficiently associate with neoclassical geopolitics’ theoretical fundamentals of *possibilism*, but they also impact the matter of the geopolitical agent’s perceptions. Therefore, they have methodological consequences as well.

Concerning the former aspect, it refers to the fact that Frankl considered radical human freedom – in the sense that man is not a slave of his surroundings and can always make “a choice of action” (2006, p. 65) and that humans are “not free from conditions” but free to “take a stand toward the conditions” (2006, pp. 130-131) –, together with an emphasis of *will to meaning* in man, instead of *will to power* (2006, p. 99), as theoretical principles.

Regarding the methodological consequences, according to Frankl, it is worthwhile integrating facts in “man’s experiences” with “a certain scientific detachment” (2006, p. 6), typical of the phenomenological method. To Frankl, it is possible to methodologically study “meaning, and its perception” (2006, p. 144) because “perception of meaning...boils down to becoming aware of a possibility against the background of reality or, to express it in plain words, to becoming aware of *what can be done* about a given situation” (2006, p. 144).

Another significant theoretical and methodological contribution to the study of the geopolitical agent’s perceptions can be found in Carvalho’s approach with the concept of the “consciousness horizon.” This concept denotes the mindset of the geopolitical agent, meaning that the researcher is required to delimit the contours of the cognitive dimension of geopolitical agents, identifying precisely *what they ignore* (Carvalho, 2018). The link between that and *geomisguidance* becomes self-evident.

The integration of both Frankl’s and Carvalho’s ideas into geopolitical reasoning, which this paper makes, should not surprise. In fact, it mirrors, to some extent, Taliaferro’s endeavor of creating “balance-of-risk” theory (2004), which connects neoclassical realism with psychology, focusing on élites’ perceptions.

4.2. The Geopolitical Agent’s capacities for managing resources

The resources allocated to foreign policy and their optimization depend not only on the geopolitical agent’s perceptions but also on their suitable abilities, which are constrained by the power structure. As Desmaele reminded us (Meibauer et al., 2021, p. 274), “domestic institutions affect a state’s *ability*.”

In this way, foreign policy outcomes also depend, in a causal chain, on the geopolitical agent’s ability to manage resources. This argument is not new (Zakaria, 1998). Furthermore, with respect to the security policy domain, for example, Christensen (1996, p.11) already contended that “national political power” depends on élites’ capacities. In addition, the relation between the geopolitical agent and the nation must be recaptured too (e.g., Taliaferro’s methodological hint on nationalism and statism) since democratic regimes generally do not allow so much freedom to the geopolitical agent due to the required democratic accountability to *the people*.

Schweller (2004) approached the problem before and from another angle. He noted that it is important to consider the relations between the society and élites since, in general conditions, when society and the geopolitical agent form a homogeneous mass, the state is more likely to approach the form of a unitary actor (“coherent actor”), in the manner of structural realism. However, in short, all these relations can be included

⁷ The geopolitical studies’ results arise from the dialectic comparison between the geohistorical approach examining past policies and the geopolitical design studying the present ones and future scenarios.

⁸ *Vide*, for example, my studies on the cases of Portugal (Morgado, 2021) and Brazil (Morgado, 2022).

⁹ *Vide*, for example, Margariti’s interesting literary study about Skala on North Lesvos, Greece (2022).

¹⁰ *Vide* also O’Reilly (2020)

¹¹ Jerrold Post has an interesting chapter introducing this technique (Klotz and Prakash, 2009, pp. 131-150).

¹² Bessa extended the scope of the topic much beyond the limits of this paper, giving examples of sickness, old age, pusillanimity or cowardice, bravery (Bessa, 2012, pp. 118-119).

in Taliaferro's recommendation to look not only for state-sponsored nationalism but also for statist ideology in the positioning of the geopolitical agent (Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro, 2009, p. 38)

Geopolitical studies do have a word to say concerning the assessment of the geopolitical agent's capacities. In fact, the geopolitical agent's capacities can also be constrained by a geopolitical continuity, i.e., a "long-term dynamic" (Chauprade and Thual, 1998, p. 483), which can be deduced from the endurance of a particular grand strategy or objective (e.g., the struggle of the Russian state to obtain access to warm seas, or Brazil's efforts to promote South American integration under an ideological directive).

To finalize the topic, and put it simply, it is largely through the geopolitical agent's capacities, as an element of the intervening variable, that the above-mentioned conversion of *potential* into *power* takes place.¹³ Moreover, last, one may well perceive and be *capable of acting* well per se, yet may not have the necessary freedom from the *domestic power structure* or another type of *net of political relations* to act. In addition, once again, the predictive element is added – the magnitude of relative material state potential is ultimately connected to the variable the "geopolitical agent's capacities" (i.e., a state cannot *act* beyond its *capabilities*).

5. Conclusions

Most scholars and experts in geopolitics have reached some consensus about the idea that geopolitics disregards the role of individual decision-makers. The main argument of this paper challenges this view, contending that the behavior of the state may be understood as nothing but a result of flesh and blood decision-maker choices.

The paper offers methodological steps on how to assess (1) systemic stimuli directly (distribution of capabilities, opportunities, and threats) and indirectly (relative material state potential based on a six-geopolitical-factors research outline); and (2) geopolitical agents' perceptions and capacities, namely by identifying *geomisguidance* in their perceptions of the geographical setting; or locating the geopolitical agent's capacities within the domestic power structure. Whereas the first variable is over-researched and, therefore, what I have offered here is merely a systematization for creating insight into these "international systemic constraints," the second is definitely a novelty in (neoclassical) geopolitics.

Therefore, the objectives are conceptual and operational. In addition, there are also pedagogical and educational objectives, as I aspire to contribute to increasing the geopolitical culture and literacy of decision-makers and the general public, including enhancing student, teacher, and lecturer competencies and skills with the goal of promoting more democratic societies.

One of this paper's key innovative contributions is how it simultaneously identifies geography as a set of factors affecting a state's potential and a determinant of systemic constraints – the latter meaning the limitations imposed by geography. On the other hand, the incentives provided by geography are not seen as determinant, but merely make room for the broader effect of the intervening variables in the model of neoclassical geopolitics – the geopolitical agent's perceptions and capacities.

Apart from these innovative aspects, including Olavo de Carvalho and Viktor Frankl in the geopolitical reasoning is also an absolute novelty. The core notion at this level is the "perception" or "meaning of space," which brings geography and psychology together in order to increase the explanatory power concerning the dependent variable of the model – the state's behavior or preferences, which can range widely, as noted by Fiammenghi, for example (2018, 193-195).

Although a healthy skepticism about any grand theory should be conserved in geopolitical studies – thus, this paper does not aim at presenting any – an analytical model can be constructed and applied to unpack a state's foreign policy outcomes on a case-by-case basis, and from their interaction, arrive at a better understanding of the international system. Hence, addressing this topic is essential for geography as a forward-looking science and its role in preparing international political society for the future.

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¹³ Taliaferro (2006, p. 486) called this conversion "state power" or "the relative ability of the state to extract or mobilize resources as determined by the institutions of the state".

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