

## Nayef Al-Rodhan: Meta-Geopolitics: A holistic approach to geopolitics

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The Baltic Sea region has become a focal point of the spiking tensions between Russia and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). To improve understanding of current geopolitical dynamics in general – and the Baltic Sea region’s contemporary strategic significance in particular – we require a new analysis method which I refer to as “[Meta-Geopolitics](#).” Moving beyond the classic geopolitical focus on territory and resources, “Meta-Geopolitics” is concerned with a wider range of variables that interact with geographical factors in shaping international relations. These include a country’s (1) societal structures, (2) economic power, (3) domestic politics, (4) environmental/geographical conditions, (5) human potential and science and technology capabilities, (6) military capabilities and security issues, (7) and engagement in international diplomacy.

Geopolitics was traditionally understood as the study of how geographic environments (such as boundaries, or natural resources) influence international relations. However, thinking about geopolitics has evolved over the years, giving rise to various interpretations that elude key assumptions of classical geopolitics (such as the problematic conception of geography as deterministic, or the exclusive focus on states as geopolitical actors). Not only are geographical entities and relationships subject to interpretation, as highlighted by critical geopolitics. Moreover, territorial fixation appears no longer timely in a world marked by [de-territorialised threats \(e.g., cyberterrorism\)](#) and [transnational challenges](#), such as [space debris](#) or [pandemics](#). Clearly, geographical conditions provide powerful opportunities and constraints that influence political action. However, focusing on them alone produces too simple a vision of the world to guide sound

foreign policy making. Seeking to provide a more holistic and accurate method of analysing international relations, “Meta-Geopolitics” focuses on the interplay between the above-mentioned seven geographical and non-geographical factors, which I refer to as “[state capacities](#).”

It is widely recognised that domestic conditions influence a state’s foreign policies. For example, when faced with domestic unrest, state leaders may engage in hostile foreign policies to deflect from domestic problems. Many domestic challenges – such as demographic issues – are impacted by geographic location. For instance, rapid population growth is highly problematic in places where water and arable land are scarce. Similarly, public health issues are heavily affected by environmental circumstances, including environmental degradation and climatic conditions. Public health emergencies and social issues such as unfavourable demographics have the potential to significantly curtail a country’s economic power, which is of immense geopolitical importance. Among other things, a thriving economy depends on the quality of a country’s human resources as well as its technological development. In short, unstable domestic conditions, or the lack of economic and technological development can prevent resource-rich states from fulfilling their geopolitical potential and turn them into relatively weak actors in the international arena.

“Meta-Geopolitics” thus enables us to comprehend international relations as driven by a wider range of variables than traditional geopolitical theories allowed for. Hence, it can contribute to a broader yet more nuanced understanding of geopolitical developments, including those in the Baltic Sea region. The outbreak of war in Ukraine has increased the region’s geopolitical significance and that of the rest of Europe as a whole. The region’s energy landscape is transforming with significant investments in both traditional and renewable solutions and plans for a new nuclear energy infrastructure. New tensions arise as political disagreement over nuclear power persists within and between neighbouring countries. Soaring energy prices (resulting from geopolitical tensions, lack of investments in traditional energy resources and refining capacities) and rising cost of living have a profound impact on not only national economies but also social inequalities. In fact, they disproportionately affect the most vulnerable populations, which have already suffered most from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent global inflation. This is how economic, environmental, social, and public health factors converge in creating a tense situation, which is further exacerbated by security concerns linked to current geopolitical / geoeconomic tensions. The balance of power in the region will further shift with Finland’s and Sweden’s accession to NATO. The regional picture painted above is not exhaustive but suffices to illustrate how the seven “state capacities” interact in shaping a region’s geopolitical dynamics.

To navigate today’s geopolitical landscape successfully, state leaders need to adopt the innovative yet pragmatic paradigm, “[Symbiotic Realism](#),” in their conduct of international relations. “Symbiotic

Realism” requires us to escape the zero-sum logic according to which one side has to lose for the other side to win. Instead, it stresses the importance of win-win solutions, non-conflictual competition, and absolute rather than relative gains. In fact, we will all suffer if the international community fails to collaborate on counteracting global challenges such as pandemics, global warming, transnational crime, cyber-challenges, rogues states and violent non-state actors, the proliferation of nuclear weapons or [space debris](#). Hence, we must focus on promoting symbiotic (mutually enriching) interstate relationships. This will also require us to redefine global security as multi-dimensional involving national, transnational, human, environmental and transcultural security. Safeguarding national securities of states as well as their meta-geopolitical power will thus require abandoning zero-sum thinking in favour of a multi-security paradigm, which recognises that the security of all states is intertwined in today’s globalised and deeply interdependent world. Put differently, only when the security needs of all states, cultural groups and individuals are sufficiently satisfied can we aspire to attain sustainable international peace and prosperity. Such a multi-sum security approach is better suited than the zero-sum paradigm for navigating the complex nexus of economic, social, political, and energy challenges and great power competition and potential conflict in the Baltic Sea region and beyond.

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