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Transformation of the political and geographical space of the Arctic: an approach of postcritical geopolitics

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Abstract. The article deals with the transformation of the space of the Arctic. The authors revealed differences of the concepts of “territory” and “space” in geography and geopolitics. It is underlined that sociocultural and ideological aspects of the territory development are not taken into account, which leads to the formation of ineffective long-term state policy. The authors formulated the definition of “regional geopolitical space” based on post-structuralism ideas. Borders nowadays are becoming much more “porous” in some areas and for some groups, while they are securitized for other flows of goods, people and ideas. Along with political geography as a whole, critical geopolitics argues that spatiality is not limited to territoriality. The authors also describe the correlation between economic, ideological power of the state and its ability to form and fulfill geographic and geopolitical space. Based on the postcritical paradigm, the authors identified and described key trends in the development of the Arctic region. Critical geopolitics argues that the emerging forms of global governance do not “smooth out” space, but, on the contrary, increase spatial differentiation. The territory and space of the Arctic is extremely fragile and sensitive for external interaction not only in matters of economic development, but also of political and ideological.

1. Introduction

Per se, the term space is often correlated with or used instead of the term territory, which is not entirely correct. Space characterizes, among other things, the social reality on a certain physical terrain. It is this that allows the globalization to shape the economical, political, cultural, legal, information and any other space. Territory can be defined as a part of the physico-chemical environment that allows for the existence of certain species of life on it, capable of providing such a life with the necessary and accessible resources. A space, in turn, organizes the territory for specific forms of life.

In modern science, various approaches are applied to the analysis of the concept of “space”: a systems approach, transnationalism, institutionalism, constructivism, a communicative approach (also cognitive theories), and organizational theory. Thus, supporters of a systems approach emphasize the designated effect of globalization. The adherents of social constructivism emphasize the personality, identity issues, suggesting space as “as a social entity”, from which the territorial link already comes. Supporters of the institutional approach consider space in the categories of political management and organization of such management. Representatives of organizational theory view organizations and spaces as social organisms, which makes it possible to study non-traditional actors of international relations.



For example, when we discuss the fragmentation of geopolitical space in the Arctic, we imply not the separation of continents, but the disunity and differentiation of human activities.

During a long time, these two terms used to coincide and, in some sense, the theory did not catch up to the process of emergence of new spaces, as only the territorial delimitation of different organization and forms of arrangement (from principalities to present-day states) was taken into consideration. However, in actuality, the spatial approach allows to see the intricate organization of relationships between territories with different spaces existing due to human presence on that territory.

For long, two activities were main at the territory: economic development and redistribution of territories through warfare and, consequently, diplomacy. Moreover, most shifts in international relationships in the second half of XX – beginning of XXI centuries occurred in the spatial not territorial sphere. Exclusions are the fall of USSR and the upcoming redistribution and development of oceans, started in fact in the Arctic between 2007 and 2009.

A significant contribution to theory of space was made by the German geographer and one of the pioneers of geopolitics, Friedrich von Ratzel, who formulated the seven laws of the spatial growth of the state. Ideas of Ratzel are usually thought to be the basis of classical geopolitics, which has been developed since the beginning of the 20th century. This process had several dimensions. First, a rethinking of geography was required: the spatial organization of the world and international relations to a certain extent determined the development of physical and social processes. Later theories consider the strengths and weaknesses of a state based on its geographic location, territory, resources, etc. Therefore scientists divided "land" and "sea" and highlighted of geopolitically strategic territories ("Heartland"). Then the ideas of evolution were transferred to social objects and international relations. The result was the expansionary strategies for state development. At the same time, within the framework of the theory of struggle for existence, geopolitics initially pointed to the need for territory management, since it cannot fully determine the position and power of the state in the international relations.

2. Critical geopolitics understanding of «space»

In order to understand the intellectual and politic problems of critical geopolitics, we are to briefly overview problematic relationships between academic geography and the classic geopolitical thought.

Classical geopolitics, accepted as a static, Europe-centered conception of world politics balance, which dominated for the most part of the twentieth century, is intensely interlinked with the subject of geography. John A. Agnew considered geopolitics a certain method of studying how the political geographers spatially represent, divide and classify the world and organize it in a hierarchy of more and less important territories.

Classical geopolitics conceptualized politics as a territorial practice in which states and nations compete for power over territory and resources, quite similar to the evolutionary struggle. Thus, it justified interstate rivalry throughout the XX century. However, the convergence of geographic knowledge as technology and power as its result caused a critical analysis of the discipline itself at the end of the XX century.

Thus, the rationale for expansion and space management led geopolitical ideas to the crisis after World War II. However, after its completion, two geopolitical paradigms arise: revisionist and critical geopolitics.

Revisionist geopolitics, as well as classical geopolitics, advocates the idea of the influence of physical space on international relations. However, now more attention is paid to the balance and balancing of power - not only as a static state (balance of power), but also as a dynamic process (balancing of power) [1]. In other words, revisionist geopolitics somewhat softened its approach. For example, N. Spikeman has already stated that geography does not predetermine, but only creates conditions and offers opportunities, and spatial factors should be considered causing, not determining [2]. By the end of the twentieth century there was criticism of the revisionist paradigm, since it also considered only the current situation in the world and was significantly subjective.

At the end of the twentieth century geopolitics was affected by the postmodernist shift: a direction has emerged that has turned to an analysis of how concrete geopolitical ideas are formed. Its representatives suggested that the geopolitics of states is not formed under the influence of fundamental natural laws and structures of space, but by means of «geographical imagination» and spatial myths, i.e. under the influence of the ideal, not the material. This direction has received the name of critical geopolitics.

Critical geopolitics has moved away from political theory due to more sustainable interaction with political economies and the study of power relations.

However, critical geopolitics is not a single research program. It is rather a set of approaches. In a broad sense, critical geopolitics tends to differ from other areas of critical science, such as Marxism, Foucault's theories. Like most post-structuralist ideas, critical geopolitics pays more attention to lower levels of government than to the macro level or global economic processes.

Critical geopolitics focuses not so much on sources and power structures, but on everyday techniques of power relations. While classical geopolitics proclaims an understanding of “geographic facts”, but in reality it is removed from geographic difficulties in favor of simplified territorial demarcation, then critical geopolitics creates new space for discussion and action.

Along with political geography as a whole, critical geopolitics argues that spatiality is not limited to territoriality. State power, as shown by critical geopolitics, is not limited or does not rely on the territory of the state. The argument is not that geography or borders no longer matter. Critical geopolitics argues that the emerging forms of global governance do not “smooth out” space, but, on the contrary, increase spatial differentiation throughout the world.

Research should now take into account the growing complexity of regional integration and differentiation. This is not about such entities as the European Union. Rather, it refers to multi-layered socioeconomic and cultural processes through which “regionality” occurs and develops, as is the case, for example, in the Arctic.

This approach is associated with an increased interest in the phenomena of subjectivity and identity. The assumption that international politics is fundamentally territorial (as opposed to spatial) government policy is closely linked to the hypothesis that the conditions are the main subjects of international politics. Critical geopolitics is moving away from both these assumptions. It does not consider personalities or actions; it explores the processes by which political actors are formed. This shows that state identity and national interest do not precede foreign policy, but are reinforced by foreign policy practice.

Due to such attention to identity politics, that is, in the geographical sense of demarcation into “our” space and “theirs,” critical geopolitics is sometimes accused of overestimating cultural aspects.

Thus, critical geopolitics sees the origins of geopolitical conflicts primarily not in objective geographical differences or in permanent struggle for strategically important territories, but in certain ideas and notions of political elites or particular communities (for example, ethnic communities) that are able to actualize the importance of certain territories in the public views, which often have a strong symbolic value, or to form ideas about certain threats to security. The latter can also be one of the foundations for the formation of a certain geopolitical identity.

In 2014, in the journal «Geopolitics» was published an article, which posed the task of achieving methodological synthesis in geopolitics that would allow combining revisionist and critical geopolitics to create a unified view on the influence of space and territories on political and geographic processes. In the article the authors proposed the name of the new direction of neoclassical geopolitics - “postcritical”.

Thus, at present, the category “geopolitical space” is actively used in political science discourse. The structure of geopolitical space in the framework of postcritical geopolitics is formed from two interacting foundations: material-physical and ideological. Within the first lies the territory of the state with all its inherent characteristics and parameters, based on the natural geographic environment. The ideological one is based on the communication interaction of non-material fields of influence in the form of informational, ideological, spiritual, and the whole range of public interests and relations.

Based on the aforementioned, the geopolitical space can be defined as a systemic, multi-level entity that has the length of its structure, non-linearly developing in historical time through the communication interaction of the socio-political sphere with the “natural-geo-environment”. Geopolitical space is an environment or field that influences the formation of relations between states.

The concept of "space" formed the basis of many economic theories of space. This category appears in the writings of thinkers of the XVII – XVIII centuries: J. Stuart, A. Smith, D. Riccardo. The abovementioned ideas of Ratzel influenced the development of German economists of the XIX - early XX centuries. (J.H. von Thünen, C. Launhardt, A. Weber, etc.). Concept of “economic space” was introduced in 1950 by F. Perroux, who wrote that “the space of the national economy is not the territory of the country, but the zone of action of the economic plans of the state and individuals”. Therefore economic space could be wider than territory of the country according to international law.

In the 1940s. A. Lösch studied the problem of “central positions”, suggesting a hierarchical structure of economic space at the regional level. In his work “Spatial Organization of the Economy”, the concept of spatial economic balance was first introduced. Space properties vary from region to region and even within a region.

Russian scientists conducted research in the field of the theory of spatial development under the sign of the integration of various branches of knowledge: regional economics, regional studies, economic geography, territorial strategic planning [3].

The basic logical and methodological paradigm of the spatial approach to Russian territory economic development was formulated by A.G. Granberg: “Russia's economy is not a single object, but a spatial (multiregional) organism functioning on the basis of vertical (center - regions) and horizontal (interregional) economic interactions and included in the system of world economic relations” [3]. We can exemplify the Chinese project of Economic Belt of the new Silk Road. According to the assurances of the Chinese side, transport routes will be accompanied by financial flows. Consequently, they will be provide cultural and ideological extension of China. In essence, China is creating a geopolitical corridor to Europe through this project, integrating the Central Asian market on the way.

Researcher B. Zhikharevich proposes the following definition: “The socio-economic space of a region is a combination of the properties of the socio-economic environment of a region in which economic activity and people's life take place” [4]. In other words, the socio-economic space of a region is the regional environment in which the life of the regional community takes place. Such a space has property groups (layers). The first group of properties - physical (natural) properties: landscape, climate, water, air (taking into account anthropogenic influence). The second group of properties is engineering (infrastructural) properties: housing, public spaces, transport, communications, energy, heat, water supply. The third group of properties - institutional properties in a broad sense: culture, traditions, customs, language, politics, regulatory environment, etc.

The concept of "border space" is also important. The frontier position of the region is one of the essential factors of the socio-economic development of the region. Border territories act as natural bridges of economic cooperation between neighboring countries. Such a formulation of the question is of particular importance for the border regions of the Arctic.

In the context of globalization and regionalization, affecting the current state of international relations, the state's ability to create conditions for its own stable development illustrate its ability to monitor changes in the market, transport routes and logistics infrastructure, and most importantly - the effectiveness of measures taken to ensure security. Reclaiming space involves various forms of control over it. For Russia, the most pressing issue is the development of its geopolitical border fields, including the Arctic region.

3. Deterritorialization of geopolitical space

Modern boundaries have several functions: they still serve as barriers, but they also have a throughput function. Borders do not just differentiate space. State borders are becoming much more “porous” in some areas and for some groups, while they are securitized for other flows of goods, people and ideas.

It is possible to consider three areas of political geography, where the topic of deterritorialization finds diverse resonance: geography, globalization, and geopolitics — each of which saw major new publications in the early twentieth century. The term “deterritorialization” means spatial issues caused by the contraction of the temporary space. Deterritorialization is best interpreted through issues related to the status of a territory, its expansion, a territorially introduced understanding of geography, management and geopolitics of states, globalizing trends, etc.

The deterritorialization of geopolitics has become a well-known topic in contemporary debate on international affairs as part of the discussion of post-territorial “dangers” (environmental degradation, infectious diseases, cybercrime, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, global networks of terrorism, etc.)

However, territory and territoriality are not discrete ontologies, but social constructions related to technological capabilities, transport vehicles, military logistics, social institutions, political power and economic networks. Human society produces, processes and otherwise destroys territory and territoriality.

Critical geopolitics rejects traditional binary oppositions and, taking into account globalization, proposed a unifying approach for the interaction of spaces, thereby showing that it forms an independent paradigm for the interpretation of international relations - spatial, evolved from H. Mackinder – K. Haushofer geographical determinism to P. Vidal de la Blache human geography liberalism, from N. Speakman neorealism revisionist geopolitics to J. Toal critical geopolitics. Upon evolving, geopolitics reconsidered its main category – the space.

A new stage in the development of critical geopolitics was the work of F. Kelly "A critique of critical geopolitics", who said that a comprehensive review of traditional and critical geopolitics was necessary [5]. For example, in classical geopolitics, the strength of a state and its development depend on geographical factors, which predetermines the advisory function of geopolitics to develop a course taking into account the use of existing objective and material advantages.

After comparing traditional and critical geopolitics, F. Kelly concluded that the two approaches in geopolitics can complement each other, which will allow us to talk about the transition of Western geopolitics to a new phase of development - the postcritical, in which the traditional subject of geopolitics (geography of international relations) is considered taking into account the criticism of deterministic ideas characteristic of critical geopolitics. In the postcritical geopolitics, universal concepts of geopolitical arrangement of the whole world are no longer built, but a transition is underway to the analysis of the spatial factors that determine the development of political processes [6].

4. Transformation of Arctic territory and space: analysis of tendencies

Climate change on the planet, as well as the exhaustion of easily accessible hydrocarbon deposits, have actualized the development of deposits located in difficult climatic conditions. On the other hand, the change in the international political balance of power in the world, the redistribution of financial, commodity and other flows between the West and the East at the beginning of the XXI century made one of the most important issues of revising the directions of strategic transport arteries [7]. In this regard, it can be stated that the Arctic and the adjacent sea routes (the Northern Sea Route, the Northwest Passage) are of strategic importance and appear to be the center of the world-wide confrontation at the beginning of the 21st century [8].

Now, when people rushed to the Arctic in the hope of earning from the discovery of mineral deposits, in many regions of the North there is a significant change in the balance between the newcomer and the indigenous population. For Arctic states, for example Russia, this region has become the long-term driver of development [9].

The observed transformation of space in the Arctic is manifested in several trends:

1. Expansion of the Arctic territory - geographically distant states proclaim themselves as a “near-Arctic”, “Arctic stakeholders” or claim that they have an Arctic identity;
2. Separation of identities from territories, strengthening the role of "spatial myths";

3. Fragmentation of the political-geographical space;

4. Strengthening the imbalances in the political-geographical and economic development of the Arctic.

As it can be seen, the first and second theses refer to the positions of postcritical geopolitics, which was mentioned above. A striking illustration of these tendencies is the self-proclamation by Canada, the USA, France, Great Britain, Japan and a number of other countries as “polar powers” or “countries with an Arctic mentality”. At the same time, Western scientists note that more than half of the population of the Arctic lives on the territory of the Arctic zone of Russia.

From the point of view of apologists of postcritical geopolitics, non-arctic countries turn to the history of the exploration of the polar spaces to justify their belonging to these territories. In other words, they intentionally expand the “symbolic landscape” of the Arctic.

Under the conditions of aggravation of territorial claims of some countries on the Arctic spaces, the role of such a symbolic landscape is increasing, as it is used to ensure consolidation in the region.

In the postcritical geopolitics, the macro-region is considered as a territorial space, separated not so much by borders, as by communication systems, common cultural memory and “view on the world”. The general model of economic activity and the history of the development of territories overlap administrative boundaries [10].

In this regard, we can record the attempts of foreign countries to “withdraw” the Arctic from the Russian space of common meanings and histories. Myths about the alleged conquest of the peoples of the Russian North are created and maintained, centrifugal political forces are supported in the regions of the Arctic. Under these conditions, programs of assistance in obtaining European or American education by residents of the Arctic zone of Russia acquire a strategic, geopolitical sense (for example, German foundations for supporting schoolchildren of Yamal).

It is also worth emphasizing that, despite the formation of interstate and supranational platforms that integrate the Arctic into a single space, its fragmentation is observed at several levels. For example, the Scandinavian countries in the strategic documents isolate the Nordic region, essentially a sub-region, from the Arctic. Fragmentary vision of the Arctic is seems to be typical for Ottawa.

Besides, according to the official Canadian strategy, the Arctic is considered as a set of subregions located in the “areas of responsibility” of the circumpolar states. Moreover, there are already studies in geographic science in which two subregions the “Asian Arctic” and the “European Arctic” are compared and analyzed.

Coupled with the growing imbalances of development, it leads to the fact that the geopolitical space of the Arctic losing its coherence, becomes disintegrated in some sense. As you can see, in reality only the Arctic Council ensures inclusive cooperation, while there is still a block opposition in it.

Given the heterogeneity and inconsistency of the ethnic and cultural contexts of the region, a special role is played by the organizations of the indigenous peoples of the North. However, it is necessary to note the limitations of these organizations by the borders of sovereign states. A small number of cross-border associations of indigenous peoples of the Far North emphasizes the continuing fragmentation.

As noted above, in the modern world, economic and ideological expansion allows us to expand geopolitical spaces without changing the official state borders. In this regard, it is natural that the largest economy in the world - China - is one of the most active Arctic players. Moreover, Beijing is seriously thinking about the formation of a whole cluster of Asian states in the Arctic, which do not have territories, but have access to the Arctic spaces.

These trends lead to a fundamental transformation of the Arctic space. As a result, it differentiates, becomes multi-level.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the authors suggest to emphasize the following points:

1. The focus of the researcher solely on "geographical facts" leads to a simplified understanding of territorial demarcation. In this regard, the approach of critical and postcritical geopolitics creates a new space for discussion and research programs.

2. It is necessary to study the space of the Arctic having in mind both classical and poststructuralist theories, which allows to cover a more complete list of territory development factors. The postcritical paradigm is a synthesis of ideas from the above directions.

3. In the modern world, borders do not simply differentiate space. State borders are becoming much more “porous” in certain areas and for certain groups. Moreover, economic influence provide extension of the territories de-facto but not de-jure. The underestimation of the cultural and ideological features of the territories leads to increased instability and turbulence in the development of the region.

4. The trends in the development of the Arctic space identified in the work are long-term and fundamental. The formation of the symbolic space of the Arctic and the inclusion of non-Arctic states into its development has become a specific theme of research.

5. The territory and space of the Arctic is extremely fragile and sensitive for external interaction not only in matters of economic development, but also of political and ideological.

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