

Book Review

John Agnew

**Hidden Geopolitics:
Governance in a Globalized
World**Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham / Boulder /
New York / London, 2023, 199 pp.

In a world where everything seems to be geopolitical, the very concept of geopolitics risks losing its meaning through overuse. This is not a new phenomenon – it has happened before, and the danger is that it may happen again. John Agnew's *Hidden Geopolitics* therefore arrives as a timely reminder: it clarifies what geopolitics truly is, what it is not, and what it might become. The author who warned us of the *territorial trap* more than three decades ago now issues another caution – this time concerning the *hidden* dimensions of geopolitics.

But how can geopolitics be hidden when it reappears everywhere in contemporary world politics, entering through both the front and back doors? It seems to leap from media headlines and populist political speeches alike. Everyone speaks of the “return” of geopolitics – yet did geopolitics ever really leave? If it departed, where could it have gone? Perhaps the answer lies in Agnew's suggestion that geopolitics was not absent, but well concealed – obscured beneath the surface of globalization discourse, shaping political realities even when unacknowledged. Or, perhaps more precisely, geopolitics is always present –

even in periods that appear stable or non-turbulent. What changes is not its existence, but its visibility, and the discursive forms through which the world operates. This, in essence, is John Agnew's central reminder in these turbulent and uncertain times of world politics: that geopolitics endures as a structural and interpretative framework, even when it seems to fade from view. As he claims: “I label this *hidden geopolitics* simply because it escapes the gaze of those either enamoured of the older classical meaning or who do not see anything geopolitical about globalization” (p. xii).

The main message of the book (p. 3) is that global complexity is not easily reduced to the Great Power Game in terms of classical geopolitics. Not really naming it critical geopolitics, but writing from its perspective, Agnew claims that geopolitics is much more than “heavyweight strategic insight, if usually on behalf of one country or another, or regarded as an atavistic term linking reactionary politics in the past to contemporary right-wing populism” (p. 4). Through a series of case studies, the author tries to explain where and how geopolitics is hidden and how many layers it has.

As John Agnew aptly observes quoting Alfred McCoy (p. 4), “countless scholars, columnists, and commentators have employed the term *geopolitics* – or the study of global control – to lend gravitas to their arguments. Few, however, have grasped the true significance of this elusive concept. However else the term might be used; geopolitics is essentially a methodology for the management (or mismanagement) of empire.” McCoy's warning resonates strongly today. The word *geopolitics* has become a convenient rhetorical device,

often invoked to dramatize global events or to endow vague political narratives with an air of intellectual authority. In this process, geopolitics is not only misused but also, metaphorically speaking, *misspelled* – its meaning distorted, its analytical precision lost amid populist, journalistic, and even academic overextension. A brief survey of public and scholarly discourse reveals a striking surge of interest in the term over the past few years – an interest that is not necessarily a reflection of a deeper understanding of geopolitics, but rather of its inflation as a catch-all label for global complexity. A few years ago, I conducted research on the misuse and overextension of the term *geopolitics* in Croatian public discourse. The study, presented at the conference *National Minorities, Migration and Security* (2022), revealed a dramatic increase in online searches for the term – in all its linguistic forms in Croatian – following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. A complementary analysis of the excessive and often incorrect use of the term within the proceedings of the Croatian Parliament, presented at the *Croatian Political Science Talks* in 2022, confirmed a similar pattern of conceptual inflation. The remaining step for my research is a systematic examination of its representation in the media, though the expected outcome seems almost self-evident: *geopolitics* has become a universal explanatory label, a word applied to everything until it ultimately comes to explain nothing. This phenomenon is not limited to Croatia. Globally, the renewed association of the term *geopolitics* with security and strategic issues evokes the very fears and connotations that burdened it in the past. It is also not limited solely to the public

sphere. A brief glance at the program of this year's conference of the leading International Political Science Association (Seoul, 2025) reveals that the same trend extends into academia itself. While established research committees such as RC15 (*Political and Cultural Geography*) and RC41 (*Geopolitics*) have long provided space for the systematic study of geopolitical questions, it was striking to see the term *geopolitics* resonate across a wide range of conference panels – often outside these formal domains. As expected, the most substantial and conceptually grounded discussions of geopolitical issues emerged precisely within the panels of these committees, whereas elsewhere the term seemed to function more as a compelling rhetorical device. In this sense, John Agnew's book can also be read as a subtle, yet urgent *appeal for clarity* – a small cry for help against the reduction of geopolitics to a vocabulary of conflict and/or synonym for abusive domination. Through a series of carefully selected examples, Agnew reminds us that geopolitics is not confined to what is immediately visible: it is not merely about power struggles, spheres of influence, or the realist logic in international relations. Rather, it extends into the hidden structures, everyday practices, and interpretative frameworks through which global space is continuously produced and understood.

Geopolitics – and geopoliticians themselves – also bear part of the responsibility for this situation. Caught in a long-standing clash between classical and critical approaches, the field has remained intellectually fragmented for nearly three decades. Little has emerged to reconcile these opposing visions, neither of which offers a

fully satisfactory explanation of the actual state the world is in or of how it functions. This disciplinary stalemate has contributed to the conceptual confusion that now surrounds the term, leaving geopolitics suspended between analytical rigor and rhetorical overuse. For that reason, this latest Agnew's attempt can also be seen as an effort to rebrand the field – by introducing new labels or prefixes intended to soften existing disagreements and avoid further divisions. Such terminological adjustments, while often presented as innovations, may gently blur rather than fully resolve the underlying tensions within the discipline. However, Agnew brings recognition to a completely neglected area of International Relations and Geopolitics – non-state actors. As he puts it: “Yet there is a distinctive geography to the fragmented territoriality of world politics as it actually exists and the flows through networks (of trade, capital, messages, and people) that bind this world together. This is the world of hidden geopolitics. This focus attends to the messiness of the world rather than to simple nostrums based on its presumed simplicity” (p. 6).

The book is organized into five sections, with the final one offering a short conclusion. The first section explores the various dimensions of hidden geopolitics. Its opening chapter presents the conceptual framework of the book, situating geopolitics within a globalized context. It begins by examining the long-standing interconnections between geopolitics and globalization. Then it outlines the book's three main areas of focus: the geopolitics of globalization, the geopolitics of development, and the geopolitics of global governance. The key in relations between globaliza-

tion and geopolitics lies in three Agnew's arguments – how the USA has facilitated the opening up of the world economy on the global level; national levels that try to enable this pursuit; and “the increasingly complex system under globalization of what can be called ‘low geopolitics’ or the economic-regulatory activities carried out by relatively independent private and public agencies and the emergence of intermediary jurisdictions, particularly tax havens and global financial centres in world cities through which the invoices of world trade and investment increasingly circulate. In total, this is geopolitics without the drama of military strategies involving carrier task forces and so on but with real impacts on everyday lives around the world” (p. 26-27). Here Agnew wisely combines geopolitics with what some may call geoeconomics, bringing to a close yet another old debate about whether geoeconomics has supplanted geopolitics and whether geopolitics is (or is not) being killed by globalization. The problem with this debate from the very beginning was that both geopolitics and geoeconomics based their presumptions on the states as containers of power, which Agnew successfully circumvents by granting a well-deserved position to non-state actors.

The remaining two chapters in this section explore how hidden aspects of geopolitics have been overshadowed by the persistent focus on territorialized approaches. They also examine the frequent reliance on historical comparisons – often misleading – to emphasize continuity over change in the functioning of the geopolitical order. He explains that this persistent focus on territorialized approaches aims at replication of territoriality in labelling places/

spaces. Although Agnew falls in *the Balkan trap* here (overusing the term while explaining it from outside the region), towards the end he points out that “the Macedonian syndrome and balkanization analogies implicitly carry with them models of the Balkans that are then imposed elsewhere. Crucially, in a geopolitical context this means identifying *local* actors as those entirely responsible for whatever conflict the actual usage is connected to. Ironically, Great Power geopolitics has long been oriented to seeing both interstate conflict as the singular centre of world politics and the locals as invariably pawns in the larger game” (p. 70).

The next section explores US involvement beyond its borders, resulting in the 2018 US-Mexico border crisis, alongside China’s novel contributions to the global order, highlighting both as key to discerning the likely contours of future international dynamics. The first example explains the border crisis. The externalization of US politics towards the global also brought an internalization of national practices towards the local, explaining that the place of the US in the world has had its consequences “back home” (p. 75). The second example describes what China possibly brings to the table other than the classical geopolitical either/or discourse. Agnew suggests there are four currently popular international relations narratives in China whose provenance and “jockeying for influence over China’s foreign policy provide a better basis for understanding *China in the world* than simply importing a singular perspective from elsewhere. In a simple compass, these are the Pacific Rim, Confucian–New Orientalist, *geopolitik*, and International Relations with Chinese

characteristics narratives. It is the politics around these narratives that will determine what kind of knowledge about international relations and political practice China will contribute to the wider world” (p. 92). He predicts this will be the future of *China’s hidden geopolitics*.

The rest of the case studies/chapters examine how states navigate, compete, and manage their domestic affairs within the broader global geopolitical order. They consider how different levels of government respond to major crises, from the 2007-2008 financial collapse to the challenges faced by the US federal government during the 2020-2021 pandemic, highlighting the tensions between national-populist pressures and effective governance. The analysis then turns to global regulatory mechanisms that underpin the current international system, including the role of credit-rating agencies in sovereign bond markets and the European Union’s response to the Eurozone crisis, illustrating how institutional mediation shapes contemporary geopolitical dynamics in new ways. The key to understanding links between these chapters and cases Agnew provides is in taking into account the existence of non-state actors, which are entering the equation of world power. “This perspective on hidden geopolitics draws attention to the differences between the present and the past by being attentive to the vital roles of new non-state actors” (p. 146).

The final part tries to summarize the world we live in describing it as “an in-between world where Great Powers joust over their relative superiority but at the same time all sorts of hidden geopolitics is actually what is driving much of how

the world works. Some of this confusion is down to what Hannah Arendt called ‘the tragedy of the nation-state’ which is the overinvestment in a political form that usually fails to live up to promise in practice” (p. 166). But can we really say that superpowers are the ones to blame for the revival of classical definitions of geopolitics? Partly. Most of them act as Empires, and therefore there is that gap between nation-state-logic and empire-state-of-mind (or actions). We live in the reality of *rough superpowers* of middle-range possibilities, trapped in the past while hidden geopolitics overlap and intervein, leading them towards one-step-behind dynamics. And, as Agnew says: “There can be no singular national-geopolitical victors in a world of hidden geopolitics at the planetary scale” (p. 169). The obsolete mechanisms of action and conceptualizing the nation-state as the only actor offer little help in vivid realities of parallel worlds we live in and in the layered levels of existing battlefields. All those battlefields are primordially geopolitical, but not all of them admit it – indeed, they try to hide it! This is the reason why geopolitics sometimes remains well-hidden and the reason why the term will continue to be misinterpreted, misused, and overused.

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Book Review

Carl Benedikt Frey **When Progress Ends: Technology, Innovation, and the Fate of Nations**

Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, 2025, 529 pp.

Carl Benedikt Frey is already an important author. His work on technological change and labour market effects of automatization and AI is quite influential and broadly cited. He is, in fact, one of the preeminent authorities on the subject. His new book, *When Progress Ends: Technology, Innovation, and the Fate of Nations*, was published in September 2025 and is best understood as a further development of ideas from his influential 2019 book *The Technology Trap*.

The book contains an immense wealth of information on technological progress in large economies and their crucial transformative periods. The central thesis is simple enough. The kind of progress that requires constant incremental breakthroughs requires decentralization and absence of overly pressing overarching control. However, the kind of progress that requires a massive implementation, or scaling, of new technology benefits from a different institutional footing. It needs a strong bureaucratic control and state capacity in fostering a focused development. Both tendencies therefore have a crucial role to play in maintaining progress. This