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# POLYARCHY AND GEOPOLITICS
# IN INTERNATIONAL SECURITY STUDIES

## Abstract

▸ *Goal* – The aim of the analysis is to answer the question of how to study international relations in the area of security: by highlighting phenomena from the area of geopolitics or through the prism of the polycentric and polyarchic system of international anarchy.

▸ *Research methodology* – The analysis is conducted with a systemic method, understood as an interconnected set of elements, i.e. an international system, by examining the relationships of these elements and their influence on each other and the environment.

▸ *Score/results* – The theory of polyarchy shows the specificity of rivalry between states – the key role of resources (and their accumulation) in rivalry and the process of converting resources into energy used within the group of people to survive and outside to compete with other groupings.

▸ *Originality/value* – The theory of polyarchy examines the historical development of international relations by illustrating the processes of grouping the human species into rival alliances and the emergence of the structure of states. It also explains the mechanisms of their evolution and the evolution of relations between them. Further on, it demonstrates how regional systems were formed and how they disintegrated and evolved, eventually transforming into the global system.

## Keywords: anarchy, polyarchy, system, geopolitics.

## 1. Introduction

In the literature on international relations, there are many comments on the specificity of the primary conditions and dependencies that shape relations between states. Researchers associated with the realist schools draw attention to the "anarchic nature" of the international system [Bull, 1985: 3–52; Holsti, 1996: 7], whereas "anarchic" does not mean "chaotic or fragmented by disorder" [Mearsheimer, 2001: 30]. Anarchy in the international environment is generally perceived as a system in which its actors and participants – particularly states, but also international organizations, multinational corporations, and others – operate within a context of polyarchy, that is, a system lacking a clear state arbiter (hegemon) or any other monopolistic authority capable of resolving disputes and administering justice. In conditions of anarchy, the importance of violence increases and the basic attribute of survival remains the strength/power of a given entity, which also determines its position in the system of international relations. It is difficult to clearly define the parameters of this power. Charles Doran rightly pointed out that "if the essence of international relations is power, power is the essence of relativity" [Doran, 2003: 13–49]. Nowadays, however, there is an emerging (or perhaps re-emerging) journalistic tendency to overemphasise geographical factors, which leads to a renaissance of geopolitics. This approach, however, implies risks that will be discussed in the following article.

The aim of the analysis is to answer the question of how to study international relations in the area of security: by highlighting phenomena from the area of geopolitics or through the prism of the polycentric and polyarchic system of international anarchy.

## 2. Geopolitics: false assumptions and false conclusions

The renaissance of geopolitics, which has been ongoing since the late 1980s, is rather surprising. It might seem that after the experiences of World War II[1] the field will disappear at least from university departments. However, this did not happen. Geopolitics has, in fact, never been entirely subjected to complete condemnation. There have always been ardent defenders or even devoted adherents of

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[1] It concerns mainly the relationship between geopolitics and some German geopoliticians with the ideology and practice of the Third Reich.

geopolitics. Even if it remained a phantom concealed under other terms [Sykulski, 2009: 174], by the early 1990s, it began to fully re-emerge in theories attempting to explain the major political transformations of the late 1980s and early 1990s. To some extent, this is understandable. The dynamics and scale of uncontrolled and unpredictable transformations made it difficult to understand the changing reality. Old concepts and theories developed during the Cold War have proven to be unreliable. There was a growing demand for ideas that could explain the mechanisms of change and show potential alternatives. In interpretations of the new order, there was a temptation to resort to simple tools and straightforward answers. It was precisely on this foundation that geopolitics experienced its re-vival. Contemporary geopolitical visions are an attempt to describe the transfor-mations occurring in international relations. They also serve as a response to the feeling of helplessness in the face of the radical change in the status of individual states and even an expression of nostalgia for the lost greatness of some powers.

The triumphant return of geopolitics observed today also brings back the doubts associated with it [Kuźniar, 2005: 81–88]. They result from two basic premises: 1. Attempts to perceive geopolitics as a scientific discipline [Sykulski, 2013: 9–31]; 2. The extreme determinism that can accompany geopolitical con-cepts. However, the very attempt to define geopolitics may be problematic. It seems that "geopolitics" is one of those concepts used as a catch-all term to explain everything at the intersection of strategy, political science, geography, history, and the broad domain of international relations. Geopolitics is essentially concerned with determining the mutual relations between the natural elements of geography and the politics of states [*Dictionnaire,* 1993: 9]. It is a certain "reflection preceding political acts" [Jean, 2003: 40]. Even if it inspires such efforts, it typically leads to flawed conclusions due to its fundamentally incorrect assumptions.

Geopolitics lacks the characteristics necessary to explain reality in terms recognised as scientific. Primarily, the field lacks the ability to be subjected to critique – it is formulated and presented as a doctrine shielded from any form of criticism. Geopoliticians do not confront their theories with other scientific theo-ries or with facts that are inconvenient for geopolitics. They do not draw upon the findings of social sciences or biological sciences. They have trouble formulating general laws and trends, which is one of the most important theoretical aspects of social science. This seems understandable to some extent – there are no objec-tive "rules" or "geopolitical laws" [Jean, 2003: 40–41]. Geopolitical hypotheses are not neutral. They depend on the adopted attitudes, concepts and values that inspire the assessment of one's own interests, one's own destiny and the assumed

evolution of the international system. Geopolitics represents a mode of thinking rooted in colloquial, more ideological than scientific, terms. It serves to bolster aspirations and validate certain "self-evident truths" that, in reality, are far from evident. It creates false visions and offers inaccurate prescriptions, which are subsequently propagated by laypersons and even within academic discourse. This is both misleading and dangerous, as geopolitics, instead of providing knowledge, offers fantasies that often serve the interests of specific states. Grand geopolitical concepts are, in practice, scenarios for the future, alternative solutions, and their shaping in alignment with predetermined objectives. The fact that geopolitics is not a science is ultimately evidenced by the multitude of geopolitical concepts, which are often contradictory or confrontational, relying on different premises and conditions. Geopolitics can thus be described with the words of Prof. S. Bieleń: "(…) a great latitude in the use of concepts, the creation of various mental constructs (visions, projections, models, myths), which are readily attributed with theoretical value" [Bieleń, 2012: 16].

The second issue that emerges when employing geopolitical doctrines is their determinism. In an extreme case, it may lead to the conclusion that human actions have no influence on international reality, as it is geography that determines the course of events. Certainly, such an approach is unjustified and does not stem from rational premises. Instead, it presents an ideological dimension. Geopolitics focuses on the development of powers within space, but it does not regard space as a neutral platform where relations between social communities unfold. Instead, it views the space as a battleground where the weak must naturally yield to the strong. It excessively elevates the importance of geographical factors – such as resources, location, and strategic points – while marginalising or ignoring other factors that influence a state's power. It fails to recognise that both the factors shaping power and the balance of forces within a given space are dynamic over time and, therefore, do not necessarily result from geographical conditions. It appears to overlook the dimension of time – even if certain geopolitical concepts are justified within a specific period when viewed from the perspective of Braudel's *longue durée*, they reveal themselves to be relatively insignificant episodes.

The claim that certain conditions of the geographical environment must inevitably produce certain political consequences is, at some level, trivial. When examined more closely, it proves to be highly exaggerated. Geographical conditions obviously create situations that are favourable or unfavourable to specific political actions. It is even difficult to conceive of a serious political science analysis of international security that does not take geographical factors into

account. Undoubtedly, the construction and maintenance of roads in Siberian conditions are significantly more costly than on the plains of Central Europe. Managing the vast expanses of Russia necessitates strengthening central authority and excessively expanding bureaucracy, while the lack of access to open seas limits the development of states. Such problems can be enumerated further, with the caveat that they do not necessarily determine whether a given state will become a great power or even whether it will pursue a particular policy. History provides many examples of empires the beginnings of which were very modest and the geographical limitations of which could be considered decisive (Rome, Macedonia, the Mongol Empire). An excessive emphasis on geographical determinism can, in turn, give rise to the temptation of crafting a historiosophy centred on the notion of a "geographical fate." That kind of approach is anti-scientific and ahistorical. The fall of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the 18th century did not result from its geographical location but from the internal decay within the state. The expansion of Russia, even if influenced by geographical factors – such as the political centre of the state being vulnerable to attack, prompting Moscow to enlarge its buffer zone – was primarily a policy aimed at building an empire. Naturally, this expansion was ideologically sanctioned, drawing directly on geopolitical concepts. Russia was thus portrayed as the archetype of a continental empire [Trienin, 2001: 40], an "organism of space and spirit" [Iljin, 1996: 171]. Georgy Gachev asserted that for Russia, "distance and breadth were more privileged than height or depth; the world's horizon mattered more than the vertical" [Gachev, 1997: 622]. Konstantin Leontiev wrote that Russia was doomed by history to grow, even against its will; hence, its territory was perceived as "the earthly environment of the national spirit" [Leontijev, 1996: 158]. Such justification for expansion is a common phenomenon; however, it must be regarded solely in ideological terms.

Specific geographical conditions potentially create situations that are favourable (or unfavourable) to particular social responses. However, they do not determine which reactions must occur, let alone imply that such reactions are predetermined. Geographical determinism fails to account for the "soft" characteristics of the international system, such as connections, culture, dependencies, diplomacy, the role of innovation, and the evolution of political systems, among others. Participants in international relations include not only states but also numerous other social entities. Geopolitics does not take into account the role of individuals in shaping the international system, nor does it consider the impact of technology, capital concentration, international institutions, organisations,

and the role of ideological, political, or religious connections. The part of large corporations in shaping international relations is also omitted. This is particularly problematic given that corporations often define not only economic but also political objectives, which states then follow. This phenomenon has been observable at least since the 16th and 17th centuries when the political objectives of states such as the Netherlands and England began to be shaped in part by trading companies[2]. The contradictions that emerge in international relations are, therefore, not necessarily generated by governments or territorial political communities. Geography does not have to be the axis of these relationships.

Geopoliticians often presume extensive knowledge of the mechanisms underlying security systems; however, their understanding appears to closely align with the extent of their own writings on the subject. One might also get the impression that they are not particularly interested in actual political and social processes. In fact, geopolitical fantasies are primarily embraced by groups struggling to adapt to the evolving role and position of states in the new international reality or by those seeking to justify violence and expansion. Geopolitics itself was originally developed as an ideological foundation for the strategic concepts of great powers – it aimed to justify their dominant position and legitimise their political objectives. It continues to serve political interests, striving to support the notion that the strong will always prevail over the weak. In the long run, however, it is not the strongest who win, but those best adapted to the competition.

## 3. Systemic analysis of polyarchy

Geography is an environment that clearly plays a significant role in the development and competition of human groups, but it is the system that imposes specific behaviours that prove to be key. It is the system that establishes the mechanisms of competition and causes everything to revolve around the conversion of resources into energy. Access to resources is only partly due to geographic location. Geographical constraints are modifiable – both by the properties of the system in which a given community operates and by the organisational and technological capabilities of society. The history of warfare is full of examples of overcoming the

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[2] The first trading companies include the Muscovy Company, established in London in 1553, as well as the Dutch East India Company and the British East India Company, both founded in the early 17th century.

"regime of geography" through organisational and technological superiority. Space was no barrier to the conquests of Alexander the Great, Rome, and the Mongols. Since the 16th and 17th centuries, it has ultimately become clear that geography and the distribution of resources are not barriers to the global development of states. Hence, the rapid development of war and transport fleets, colonialism, international trade, and, consequently, global powers. The key to success here was organisation and technology.

Systemic thinking, and consequently system theories, is particularly important as it eliminates geopolitical fantasies and focuses on realities. In system theory, there is no room for discussions about the "regime of geography" that supposedly determines state policies. Consequently, there is little opportunity for dreaming and building strategies. The latter may be an effect of systems theory, but it does not belong to it. The systemic approach, in turn, provides an opportunity for a comprehensive and relatively objective study of international reality. It reveals the nature and forms of interdependencies among all elements participating in the international relations system, the interweaving of their interests and goals, the character and significance of conflicts arising between them for the overall system, and their actual position and importance from the perspective of politics [Potulski, 2010: 77]. Every system has a natural tendency to maintain balance and to create conditions for stabilising human behaviour. The problem at the research level is to build a comprehensive model of the system. There is no unified characterisation of systemic methods in the study of international relations or international security. The issue lies in conceptual ambiguities at the level of terminology, as well as in a certain arbitrariness in conceptualisation. The choice of interpretative approach is largely a matter of the adopted and consistently applied convention. When faced with a multitude of contexts and definitions, the most reasonable course of action is to designate one as the leading framework. The theory of polyarchy [Skarzyński, 2006], which serves as a typical example of systemic thinking, appears to be an interesting and innovative proposal in this context.

The term "polyarchy" derives from the Greek words *poli* – meaning "many" – and *arche* – meaning "rule" or "power," which can be interpreted as "rule by many." Thus, it is not a form of "democratic regime," as Robert Dahl [Dahl, 2011] argued, drastically altering the term's meaning and stripping it of its original sense. Instead, it refers to a system of multiple power institutions, multiple authorities, or numerous participants in governance. Thinkers of ancient Greece, analysing the relations prevailing on the Peloponnesian Peninsula at the time, observed that it

was a system of political unions interacting with one another. These unions sought to establish a monopoly on legitimate violence within a given territory – monarchies competing for survival or dominance. Polyarchy is a complex structure of relationships among people grouped into a collection of monarchies, which, as distinct political entities, engage in mutual relations while existing in a state not overseen by any third party – in other words, existing among themselves in a state of anarchy. The theory of polyarchy examines the patterns of relationships within the human species that lead to the emergence of territorial unions, which group entire communities and compete for resources. Polyarchy governs the mutual relations of these territorial unions – endowed with the status of political entities, such as states – as well as their interactions and dependencies, forming a stable structure of connections that also defines mechanisms of change. The international system is merely a specific, temporally limited version of polyarchy, arising during the era of nation-state dominance.

Large space phenomena arise as a result of the development of relationships between people. Both monarchy and polyarchy are outcomes of social adaptation and selection. To survive, humans were compelled to cooperate with one another, leading to the formation of social wholes. Initially, these were entities bound by kinship ties, later by shared language, culture, and territory. Cooperation enabled communities to counteract natural limitations and also to resist other similar entities, which exerted increasing pressure on one another. This competition necessitated further consolidation and the formation of increasingly powerful entities. Political powers also had a social character, as they emerged through the aggregation and integration of human communities, which required access to sufficient resources to function, reproduce, and operate across vast spaces [Skarzyński, 2016: 67]. Only consolidation – bringing together large, strong, resourceful, well-armed entities capable of generating sufficient force – enabled survival in confrontations with other such entities. This pressure and rivalry, along with the consequent arms race, led to the formation of great powers. The competition was ultimately won by strong political entities that unified individuals around a sufficiently compelling vision of order and a central authority for managing resources, enacting laws, and enforcing them within the territory under their control. Local polyarchies and their global structure have evolved over the past six thousand years as cities have transformed into entities equipped with visions of a universal order with a more complex territorial and social structure. The division into monarchies was never fixed but it underwent transformations. Processes of adaptation and social selection continue to this day, meaning that

polyarchy is still evolving as its participants change and engage in mutual, temporally reproduced relationships. This implies that over time and in different spaces, new monarchies emerge, adapting to their environments by developing appropriate attributes. Only those entities attuned to their surroundings can function effectively, thereby shaping the current structure of polyarchy. The emergence of political entities that absorbed too many social wholes – empires – inevitably generates problems and internal conflicts. Without a strong governing centre, contradictions in interests and goals become apparent, as does internal competition for resources. Alongside processes of consolidation, there are also processes of polarisation. A clear example regards the increasingly apparent failure of the project for an integrated European state – the European Union. No entity has yet concentrated sufficient power to achieve global hegemony. However, relatively stable regional hegemonies have emerged, such as Russia and China. The United States has developed a unique form of hegemony by creating elements of a global polyarchy through a network of connections and pressures on other states. This polyarchic system is characterised by a framework of rules and principles (primarily economic) that govern the functioning of the current international system.

The system of polyarchy is based on continuous competition, struggles for resources, and the pursuit of hegemony, which enables control over these resources. This competition stems both from human nature, with its intrinsic drive to accumulate wealth, and from an objective necessity – access to resources is essential for survival and participation in further competition. These resources can vary in type and their significance changes over time. In the past, key resources included hunting grounds, pastures, and arable land. For instance, the struggles of the Roman Republic can be traced back to battles for land, while the Mongol expansion was initially driven by access to pastures. With technological advancements, metals and later fuels became increasingly significant. Access to resources became critical for the survival and development of human groups, making the fight for resources – either to protect one's own or to seize those of others – the primary goal of the competition. Technological progress also transformed this competition into a global struggle, particularly involving the protection of communication routes through which resources were transported. In this rivalry, states with a resource deficit but with superior technological and organisational capacities proved to be particularly aggressive and effective competitors. Such advantages formed the foundation of military successes for Assyria, Macedonia, and Rome, as well as for modern powers such as England, France, and the United States. Technology

allowed states to mitigate demographic weaknesses and geographical limitations to a certain extent. Innovation increased efficiency in transforming resources into energy, enabling European states – with relatively limited resources – to conquer and control nearly the entire world during the 19th century. Similarly, innovation allowed the United States to win the Cold War. Powers that neglected innovation and rejected continuous modernisation condemned themselves to failure. This phenomenon is well illustrated by the political decline of China between the 15th and 19th centuries, Japan during the 17th to 19th centuries, and the Soviet Union in the 1980s.

Polyarchy is a dynamically changing system of power exchange in which the "balance of power" plays a crucial role. This balance determines the degree to which each power adapts to the demands of competition, influencing the fall of some and the survival of others. The "balance of power" arises from the interaction of forces generated by the participating social entities, those associated with them, and the natural forces external to the system but influencing its participants [Skarzyński, 2016: 68]. Great powers create global and regional security systems within which they are compelled to coexist. The "balance of power" is the tangible structure of such systems, defining the conditions, possibilities, and rules of competition. The position of each power within this "balance of power" is determined by the resources at its disposal relative to those managed by its rivals. Thus, the "balance of power" is a structure resulting from the mutual interactions of territorial entities, each with its own vision of universal order and striving to establish it. The fundamental characteristic of the "balance of power" is its inherent imbalance, revealed in the varying strengths of the entities within it, their decline, rise, acquisition of dominance, and eventual loss of it. However, such imbalances typically drive gradual changes over long periods, spanning generations. The pace of these changes can vary, sometimes extending over centuries, and they are always tied to the transformative capacities of the social entities generating power and sustaining its specific arrangement within the polyarchic system.

The "balance of power" among sovereign powers forms and operates within its environment but ultimately "rests" upon its participants. It is neither an order nor it requires justification or any normative foundation. Its existence necessitates only the presence of entities operating at their own risk, possessing political status, distinct territories, and the capacity to engage in mutual relations. The unique position of political entities is not a matter of chance but a result of necessity. Over vast spaces and long timeframes, the dominant role inevitably falls to the

"balance of power" grouping entities capable of utilising all available resources, including moral ones, as these enable actions involving truly ultimate means – the mass mobilisation of human life as a tool for conflict. This is the essence of selection. It favours human unions that not only accumulate ever-greater resources but also develop the ability to use them in a coordinated manner to exert influence on their environment.

The stability of the system depends on the determination of states (primarily great powers) to pursue their interests. When a human collective deems, in a manner unacceptable to others, that its development requires additional resources or that the system in which it operates restricts its growth, it seeks to challenge the existing balance of power, leading to a conflict. This dynamics led to events such as World War I and World War II, as well as to the current rivalry between the United States and China. The determination of powers to achieve their goals often depends on religious and ideological visions, though frequently, religion or ideology serves merely as a means of moral justification of the struggle for resources.

## 4. Conclusions

One of the undeniable advantages of geopolitical doctrines is their journalistic appeal, while their drawback lies in a tendency toward fantasising and in the excessive exemplification of geographical factors. The theory of polyarchy, without negating the importance of geography, provides a much more comprehensive answer to questions concerning the mechanisms of international security. This is due to its strong foundation in the social sciences. Sociology, in particular, serves as a critical pillar for the theory of polyarchy. Without knowledge of human relations, micro-social phenomena, the specifics of social interactions, and the functioning of societies, it is impossible to fully comprehend the mechanisms of international relations and security systems [Skarzyński, 2006: 13 et seq.]. Geopoliticians often live under the illusion that certain codes can be easily substituted into a specific equation to produce the desired outcome. However, it seems that this approach relies solely on frameworks that, while useful for understanding certain strategies, simultaneously impose significant mental and analytical limitations. These limitations prevent uncovering the true mechanisms underlying the functioning of international systems.

In this respect, the theory of polyarchy holds a clear advantage. Above all, it provides a historical perspective, illustrating the processes by which the human

species organised into competing unions, the emergence of state structures, and the mechanisms of their evolution, as well as the evolution of relations among them. It demonstrates how regional systems were formed and how they disintegrated and evolved, eventually transforming into the global system. Importantly, it does all this without the ideological overtones typical of geopolitics. The theory of polyarchy is ideologically neutral, offering a comprehensive framework for describing international reality. It allows for overcoming the limitations of a national perspective that is inherently flawed. For example, in 1648 – a year often claimed to mark the beginning of the post-Westphalian era of nation-states – an uprising erupted in Zaporizhzhia, altering the balance of power in Central Europe and, consequently, the history of the entire continent. The national perspective obscures the fact that the era of nation-states is merely one stage in the functioning of polyarchy. Security systems and balances of power formed independently of the development of nation-states and are products of the evolution of human communities, extending far beyond the few centuries during which nation-states have existed.

The theory of polyarchy highlights the specifics of competition among states, emphasising the critical role of resources (and their accumulation) in rivalry as well as the process of converting resources into energy. This energy is used internally for the survival of human communities and externally for competition with others. Paul Kennedy described this process in *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* [Kennedy, 1994], demonstrating that great powers were those states most effective at accumulating resources and converting them into energy. However, Kennedy did not explain how the system of states functions. He focused too heavily on economic resources, neglecting the problem of universal visions of order, which inspire the will to fight for dominance. While such dominance was ultimately unattainable, the pursuit of it led to costly rivalries and devastation.

The theory of polyarchy provides a universal explanation for the functioning of international systems, identifying enduring characteristics and the long-term causes of conflicts. The necessity for monarchies to accumulate resources and to use them to ensure the survival of their community members and to compete with other monarchies is a constant factor. Rivalry is inevitable because resources are always finite, while ambitions are boundless – particularly when shaped by grand visions. Thus, competition and conflict are intrinsic to the nature of polyarchy. Victory in this system belongs to those who can effectively organise social relations within a given territory, thereby gaining greater capacity to accumulate resources and convert them into energy.

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