

# Geopolitical leadership in the modern world

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**Abstract** This paper focuses on the term "geopolitical leadership". With the world geopolitical landscape becoming more complex as the bipolar (or even tripolar) world order is setting in world politics and economics, the need for true global leaders is becoming more urgent. Quite often, it becomes important to look out of the box of the national interests and to see the global picture, and very few individuals can actually achieve that. The paper reveals the features of a geopolitical leader, differences and similarities of a political leader, as well as the factors leading to the transformation of a national political leader into a global geopolitical leader. Some relevant examples reflecting on the current world affairs are presented and analysed in greater detail. Moreover, the paper reveals the levels and types of geopolitical leadership and well as the main structural components and indicators of geopolitical leadership. In addition, we place the geopolitical leadership into the basis of the current geopolitical process and provide relevant examples from history and politics that might illustrate our points.

## 1 Introduction

One of the main traditional concepts used in modern political science is the concept of political leadership. In geopolitics, which is a subdiscipline of political science, there is a special term for that (i.e. "geopolitical leadership"). The purpose of this paper is to examine in detail the term and the concept of "geopolitical leadership", to reveal its common features and substantive differences from the concept of social leadership that is close to it and the related concept of political leadership.

The concept of leadership is used in various sciences: in sociology, social psychology, political science, management, or energy studies, and has its generic meaning the philosophical concept of the subject (Varanavicius et al. 2017). The term "subject" refers to an active side that affects a passive object in the course of any activity. Subjects can show their activity in different circumstances, in different situations and processes. Still, classical philosophers distinguished subjects of different levels. Thus, Hegel (2014) defined an objective spirit, a subjective spirit, and an absolute spirit. Modern sociology also distinguishes different levels of social subjects: the personal level, the level of the micro-group, the level of the social class, the societal level, etc. In political science, actors-actors of different levels of influence are singled out: on a global scale, the scale of a country, a region, a city, and units of local government.

In geopolitics, there are two aspects of viewing the leadership. The first aspect of geopolitical leadership characterizes the leaders of states aspiring to be international leaders (Cohen 2018). This understanding is related to the personal level of subjectivity. The second aspect is related to the leadership of the states themselves on an international scale. The subject of leadership is the country, state, or region. Most often, the term "geopolitical leader" in this aspect is used in relation to the United States (unipolar world). In modern realities, Russia and other countries aspire to the position of geopolitical leadership. To refer to the leadership of a particular country, the term "leadership trajectory" is often used in the literature (Mercy and Kuo 2017).

Setting the goal of disclosure of the concept of geopolitical leadership, this paper will emphasize on the first aspect. The subject of the leadership is the leader of the country. There are many countries and many leaders. But not every political leader becomes a geopolitical leader.

A political leader is defined as a person capable of influencing political behaviour and political activity of people due to certain personal qualities, authority to them (Host'ovecký and Poláček 2016; or Antal 2017). She or he is typically an outstanding, bright personality, affecting the surrounding. From ordinary citizens or members of the party movement, she or he is distinguished first of all by personal qualities: strong will, the ability to master and orient in complex social situations, conviction and belief in your value system, the willingness to fight and

defend (see Isaev 2007; 2005b). The so-called theory of traits gives the leader such qualities as vigour, strong character, developed intellect, attractiveness, tact, interest in people, or a sense of humour. A political leader may be a politician who leads a party, a movement, a political organization, or a state. In this paper, under the term “political leader”, we will understand the politician who is heading the state.

One can clearly see why a political leader and political leadership should be distinguished from a geopolitical leader and leader. Under the geopolitical leader, we mean the leading leader of the state, that is, the country-actor of geopolitics, based on its power and deciding the main issues of partitioning and redivision of the world, establishing a new world order or maintaining the established regime of international relations. Not every leading leader of the state can become a geopolitical leader, for this, in addition to certain characteristics of the state, certain qualities of the individual are needed.

## **2 Theory of geopolitical leadership**

The international status of a geopolitical leader is derived from the status of her or his country. It is impossible to separate the geopolitical leadership of the country, the state from the geopolitical leadership of the head of state as a person. The geopolitical leadership of the head of state is a function of his country's geopolitical status. If behind a leader has a huge country behind, she or he has the power of this country. Thence, the U.S. President Donald Trump is not a professional politician but an inexperienced businessman who relies on the authority and power of a huge and strong country. Being a relatively weak political leader within his country, he still represents a great country in the international arena and therefore acquires the qualities of a geopolitical leader.

To formulate more clearly the notions of a political and geopolitical leader, we will define the features of geopolitical leadership, which, in our opinion, are as follows:

- Geopolitical leader participates not only in the political process, socio-economic management of the national level, not only in bilateral and multilateral international relations, but also in the global geopolitical process;
- If the status of a political national leader is almost always the highest in her or his country, then her or his status as a geopolitical leader is not necessarily the highest in the world and depends on the country's geopolitical status;
- Geopolitical leader not only promotes the national interests of his power to the international arena, but also solves the global problems of mankind
- Geopolitical leader not only supports the established world order, but also has a clearly formulated plan for the redistribution of the world;
- Geopolitical leader is not only an adherent of a certain doctrine or doctrines in which, within the framework of his power, provisions on national security, foreign, military, and maritime policies are formulated, but also pursues his geostrategy, that is, he implements these provisions in a changing environment, seeks allies, followers and identifies opponents;
- Geopolitical leader not only acts as a national political leader, but also performs functions at the highest, global level of political activity.

The Yalta agreements between Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin are a vivid example of the geopolitical redivision of the world in accordance with the changed balance of power between the leading powers as a result of the WWII. Therefore, Churchill, Roosevelt, and Stalin are undoubtedly geopolitical leaders who determined the content of politics and the structure of the current and the future world order.

The geopolitical leader of his time, of course, was Peter the Great who for 21 years waged wars and asserted the new status of the Russian Empire as a great power with an access to the sea.

Modern society provides the geopolitical leader with a host of other means, in addition to the military, to realize her or his geostrategy. In this sense, Nikita Khrushchev can be considered a geopolitical leader, since under his rule the space industry has made impressive progress, Yuriy Gagarin became the first cosmonaut in the world and the USSR was established as the first space power.

Modern geopolitics is not only a "hard power", but also "soft power" represented by the economic, cultural, information, educational, sports, tourist and other means of influence (Ignatyeva 2011). Nowadays, geopolitics takes place wherever there are spaces corresponding to the above-mentioned means of influence, there is a massive influence on people and a division and redistribution of these spaces and spheres of influence takes place. For example, in the Internet there is a constant struggle between bloggers, columnists of different countries and unions of states for influence on people. This struggle includes public organizations, political institutions, state intelligence, leading politicians, geopolitical leaders. They struggle to transfer their information to as many users as possible. Expansion of his personal influence and the sphere of influence of his power.

Therefore, one can speak about “virtual geopolitical leadership”. This leadership is determined by how geopolitical leaders are perceived in the Internet space. However, in its significance and political consequences, it

is quite real. The image of the geopolitical leader is criticized or raised to a higher level, influencing his rating, his personal geopolitical status, the results of his election and the prospect of remaining a geopolitical leader. For example, such a geopolitical leader as Churchill, having lost his post as Prime Minister of Great Britain as a result of unsuccessful elections for his Conservative Party, also lost his status as a geopolitical leader.

A good example of virtual geopolitical leadership is the activity of U.S. President Donald Trump who likes to use Twitter for promoting his political and geopolitical ideas and goals. In Twitter, he proclaims his goals with respect to Europe, Russia, China, Iran, Syria, North Korea, the restructuring of trade relations, decisions on armed conflicts, changes in the world order. It seemed to be a low-sounding statement (or "tweet") causes substantial changes in the exchange rates, prices of oil, gas, metals, or even causes political and geopolitical changes (Kristensen 2017). All in all, by the order of scale, three levels of geopolitical leadership can be distinguished:

- Global leadership is leadership at the international, world level (for example, leadership of the United States and its president in a unipolar world);
- Regional leadership is leadership in a certain region of the world;
- National leadership - leadership within the borders of the territory of one country. This is what is commonly called political leadership.

By the order and the degree of the influence of a geopolitical leader on international relations, strong and weak geopolitical leaders can be singled out. The qualities of the leader can manifest themselves in different degrees at different levels. Thence, the first Russian President Boris Yeltsin was quite a strong political and national leader in Russia who managed to crush the power of the Communist Party and lay the foundations of a democratic state and a market economy. But as a geopolitical leader, he was rather weak. During his stay in the office, the Soviet Union was dissolved, Russia lost significant territory, and NATO has moved significantly eastward to the borders of Russia.

### **3 Practice of geopolitical leadership**

The image of the geopolitical leader consists of the three main components: internal polity, foreign policy, and geopolitics. The internal political component characterizes the qualities of the leader, reflecting the policy and the place of its activity within the country. The foreign policy component is the characteristics of leadership, denoting its contacts with various states on all sorts of occasions, the diplomatic process. The geopolitical component is the characteristics of the leader's activity, outlining the structure of the world, defining the limits of the influence of his state among other powers. The authority of the leader in this sphere largely depends on the perception of the place and importance of the whole country in the world political process, its course, acceleration and direction. For example, strengthening the image of Russia depends on the political portrait of Russian President Vladimir Putin. His geostrategy in relation to the countries of the European Union, the United States, China, in relations with NATO, the position on the Crimea, Syria, on the Ukrainian issue confirms Russia's geopolitical leadership as one of the leaders of the future multipolar world and outlines the portrait of the Russian president as the geopolitical leader of the global level.

In our opinion, there are two sides of geopolitical leadership: on the one hand, the geopolitical leader, as the head of state, region or other subject of geopolitics, can be considered, first of all, as a separate human person. In this sense, the notion of "geopolitical leadership" has rather psychological roots. In this case, when we say, for example, the leader of a country, we are not talking about the status, not about the post that this subject occupies, but about the subject himself, his personal characteristics, his relationships on a personal level with other personalities, even if this there will be people occupying important posts.

In socio-psychological terms, the geopolitical leader is made a leader by her or his role in geopolitics. That is, her or his activities in promoting his country's geopolitical interests in the world arena, in upholding these interests in the struggle with other world-class geopolitical leaders defending the interests of their countries. Not every leader of the country, region or other geopolitical subject becomes a geopolitical leader, but only the leader who knows how to formulate and put forward, and also defend and promote the corresponding geopolitical interests in the struggle with the same strong in the socio-psychological sense. A geopolitical leader in the socio-psychological terms is a person who adds his personal characteristics to the geopolitical characteristics of his state, strengthening the geopolitical position of his country, is a person who, through his personal qualities, is able to impose his will on other personalities-leaders. The geopolitical leader in the social and psychological terms is the leader among the leaders.

Geopolitics is often compared to a game of chess (Brzezinski 1998). In order to illustrate the social and psychological understanding of geopolitical leadership, one has to imagine that on the chessboard the figures are already aligned in a certain way and the chess game is in progress. The quality and quantity of figures for each party member is the geopolitical characteristics of states, the relative position of the figures is the geopolitical status of states, and the chess players with their intellect, experience and knowledge, psychological stability, their

relationship, the ability to consult and listen to the coach there are various sources of geopolitical information) - these are the geopolitical leaders in the personal, social and psychological understanding of this term.

The other side of the geopolitical leadership of the head of the country, region or other geopolitical subject is directly connected with the place of this country or region and is measured by the geopolitical status of this subject of geopolitics. In this case, the status of a geopolitical leader depends little on his personal qualities. Of course, in geopolitics, as in politics, there is fierce competition and there is a constant "natural selection" of relevant government posts. This selection ensures the employment of high government positions by sufficiently trained people. But selection is selection, and for us it is important to understand how relations develop between the heads of state when solving geopolitical issues of global domination, dividing the world into zones of geopolitical influence, changing the world order, etc. When solving geopolitical problems, the subject is usually a certain state, and the geopolitical leader as a leader is important as a standard bearer of this state, as a bearer of his image, his geopolitical characteristics.

If one takes modern geopolitical realities, she or he should remember that for the entry of any power into the number of geopolitical leaders, not enough outstanding personal qualities of its leader, it is necessary to improve the geopolitical characteristics of the country. Given the immutability of the territory, the practical immutability of the population, the state of borders, subsoil and other geographic indicators, it should be a significant increase in GDP, the military-industrial complex, the qualitative (and quantitative) state and composition of the Armed Forces. Only strong countries with powers are able to withstand geopolitical competition and provide their political leaders with geopolitical leadership. Therefore, from the second, not personal, but state point of view, the geopolitical leader is a representative of the state, relying on its power and geopolitical position, acting primarily as a statesman, and only in the second - as a person having a definite relationship with other personalities (e.g. geopolitical and national political leaders).

However, geopolitical leadership should be distinguished from global domination (Brzezinski 2004). Surely, both leadership and domination mean the predominance of a country over other states. But geopolitical leadership arises naturally, as a result of establishing a "first among equals" type of relations, it does not imply full subordination and is perceived by the led countries as a normal concession to a stronger but polite partner. Global dominance, moreover, assumes a constant emphasis on its dominant position, the compulsion to comply with the indications dominant by all managed countries, includes all kinds of pressures: financial, economic, diplomatic, political, military presence pressure, etc.

In order to study the features of a geopolitical leader as the head of a country, region or other geopolitical subject, one should answer the question: "What are the parts of the geopolitical leader's competence structure?" Apparently from the same parts, of which geopolitics itself consists (Isaev 2016).

Undoubtedly, a geopolitical leader should not only know the components of geopolitics, but also freely navigate in them when dealing with other leaders and making geopolitical decisions. In addition, the very structure of the geopolitical leader should correlate with the structure of geopolitics. We want to say that every component of the geopolitical framework should not only form part of the geopolitical knowledge and practice of a geopolitical leader or geopolitical competencies, but geopolitical leadership itself, as a special sphere of knowledge and activity, should be structured accordingly.

Therefore, we come to the important conclusion that a political leader must have, among other things, geopolitical competences to become a geopolitical leader. We will return to this conclusion when we consider the differences between political and geopolitical leadership.

Thence, by setting one of the tasks of our article to reveal the specifics of geopolitical leadership, we will have in mind all three components of its structure: personal, national, social, and state.

What are the features of the status and activities of the geopolitical leader? What are the differences between a geopolitical leader and a political leader? Under what conditions does a political leader become a geopolitical leader?

A generic concept in relation to the notion of "geopolitical leadership" is the notion of "social leadership", which is used primarily in sociology, but is also basic for such sciences as management and psychology. In different areas of public life, different types of social leadership are singled out: "household type of leadership (in schools there are student groups or leisure associations); social type of leadership (trade union movement or various societies: sports, creative, etc.); or political type of leadership (state and public figures).

In management theory, leadership is interpreted through the prism of "management". In management, the functional approach to leadership is most often used, in which management functions define leadership competencies, the essence of which is planning, organization, motivation, control. Equally relevant for us is the process approach. In this case, leadership is considered in the aspect of so-called connecting processes, such as the adoption of managerial decisions, communication, personnel management, etc., which ensure the interaction of functions.

Finally, in order to classify geopolitical leadership, let us consider the concepts of "political leadership" and "political leader". These concepts characterize the active side of politics, its dynamics, and express the way of implementing political power.

Geopolitical leadership includes all the above-mentioned concepts of leadership, that is, social leadership, leadership and political leadership. The geopolitical leader, of course, acts as a social and political manager. This is the similarity of the terms "political leader" and "geopolitical leader".

The difference is that the geopolitical leader seems to grow out of the political one. This person solves problems of a higher level than national policy, owns a large amount of information, he determines the structure of the world, and the fate of the future world order actually depends on him. To illustrate this phenomenon of the emergence of a political leader in the geopolitical world, it is sufficient to recall the famous Newton's phrase about "standing on the shoulders of giants" (Gallardo-Gallardo and Thunnissen 2016). Most vividly, geopolitical leaders grow "on the shoulders of giants" - political leaders, revealed in the transitional periods between geopolitical epochs. Geopolitical history distinguishes five such epochs: i) Tordesillas (1494 - 1648); ii) Westphalian (1649 - 1815); iii) Vienna (1815-1919); iv) Versailles (1919 - 1945); and v) Yalta-Potsdam (1945-present) (see Isaev 2005a).

In addition to geopolitical epochs, geopolitical history also knows geopolitical images of the world, during which there are no major wars and comprehensive peace treaties, but there are quite significant changes in the world political system, changes that bring forth new political leaders and generate new geopolitical leaders from them. Two or three such pictures of the world form each geopolitical epoch. For example, the Yalta-Potsdam era is made up of bipolar (1945-1991) and unipolar (1991- present) geopolitical images of the world, which also put forward their "rulers of the destiny of the world", or geopolitical leaders represented by the U.S. presidents (Reagan, Clinton, or Bush) and as well as the USSR President Gorbachev, Presidents of Russia Yeltsin and Putin, who in their own way, based on the power and national interests of their states and their own geopolitical competences, are redrawing the world map. Since geopolitics exists at different levels of politics, so do geopolitical leaders that carry out their activities at different levels of leadership. The following levels of geopolitical leadership can be singled out (see Table 1):

- Global level at which geopolitical leaders or a leader (depending on the geopolitical system in which there is a world: one, two or multi-polar) determine or determine the world order and the structure of the world;
- Regional level at which there are regional leaders (Table 1);
- National level of leadership;
- National-regional level of leadership, which means leadership in the scale of the national region, for example, the province or republic in modern Russia or the lands in Germany.

**Table 1.** Geopolitical regions, regional leaders and geopolitical leaders

Geopolitical regions	Regional leaders	Geopolitical regional leaders
European Union	n/a	German Chancellor, British Prime-minister, French President
North America	United States	U.S. President
CIS	Russia	Russian President
South-East Asia	China	Chairman of the PRC
South Asia	India	Indian Prime-Minister
Central Asia	n/a	n/a
South America	Brazil	Brazilian President
Arab countries	n/a	n/a
South Africa	South Africa	South African Prime-Minister
Central Africa	Nigeria	Nigerian President

Source: Own results

In addition, regional geopolitical leadership can be combined with a global one. For example, the U.S. president acts as the regional leader of North America, being, in essence, a global geopolitical leader.

One can see that in the regional geopolitical leaders among countries are emerging among the states that overtake other states of the region in terms of geopolitical indicators. The main geopolitical indicator in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries was the expansion of the territory of the state, the struggle for a more advantageous outline of borders on natural obstacles (river, sea, lake, mountain range, etc.). Therefore, the growth of a political leader in the geopolitical world took place first through his concern for the strengthening of the military industry, the quantitative and qualitative growth of the army, and then by seizing them the lands of neighbouring states.

Therefore, for example, the political leader of Prussia, King Wilhelm II, drilled his army, expanding his state, increasing his international status, himself turned into a geopolitical leader, French political leader Emperor Napoleon, creating a powerful army, expanding the borders of his power and the fate of many European states has become a geopolitical leader not only national, but also European and global scale. To expand Russia's borders and solve geopolitical problems such as reaching the Volga and entering Siberia, the Baltic and Black Sea, the



Pacific, establishing borders with European powers, Central Asian and Far Eastern countries (with China and Japan), the activities of Russian tsars and emperors, or, in terms of our article, the transformation of Russian political leaders into geopolitical leaders of the national (Ivan the Terrible), regional (Peter I, Catherine II, Nicholas I, Alexander II) as well as the global scale (Alexander I).

The main factors in the transformation of national political leaders engaged in solving domestic political problems, at the least - the promotion of national interests in the international arena, into global geopolitical leaders that held the destinies of the world in their hands were the development of navigation and the founding of colonies, the development of industry and the expansion of colonial possessions, ideas, the struggle for expanding the territory of the state, the struggle for redivision of the world, the development of new technologies. The transformation of the national political leader into a global geopolitical leader at the level of the leaders of states depends on the transformation of the leadership of the states themselves (the personal level of the subjectivity of leadership is determined by the objective level of subjectivity).

Nowadays, the struggle between the leading states of the world for global geopolitical leadership has intensified and proxy conflicts have appeared (Lukin 2016; Segar 2018).

The aggravation of the struggle is explained by many reasons: the uneven economic and political development of the leading countries, the lack of resources, the desire for domination, the representation of some nations about their superiority, etc. An important factor in the aggravation of this struggle, as we see it, is the transitional process from the unipolar system of international relations with the unambiguous US leadership to a multipolar system in which the alignment of the leaders is not clearly defined. As we have shown above, the struggle for global leadership is exacerbated during transitional periods. In the literature, the following tendencies are noted: the absence of global leadership, agreed norms or standards, the formation of new geopolitical alliances, growing inequality in the context of globalization (see e.g. Bouzarovski and Petrova 2015; Strielkowski et al. 2016; or Suárez-de Vivero and Mateos 2017). Many publications appear on the topic of geopolitical stress and geopolitical risks (Global Risks 2018).

The struggle for global leadership is especially sharp, when the geopolitical indicators of the leading countries claiming leadership are aligned or become compatible. There comes a situation that resembles a tug of war, when one side is about to win, but the rival is doing his best to preserve the status quo. In the event of a threat of a change in the geopolitical leader on his part, and from the nearest rival (rivals) doing the "last jerk" - this means the tension and overstrain of the economy and public finances, the rapid development of the military-industrial complex and the rearmament of the army, an appeal for help to the allies, threats and sanctions against rivals, intransigence in international relations and the proliferation of armed conflicts. In general, the situation of the "last breakthrough" is expressed by the acceleration of the arms race and the aggravation of international tension.

## 4 Conclusions

Today's aggravation of international tension is due precisely to the fact that the changing world lives not only in the transition period from a unipolar geopolitical system to a multipolar one, but also due to the situation of a change in the role and position of a geopolitical leader. The modern geopolitical leader represented by the United States, more recently (after the collapse of the USSR), the former superpower-plus, became, in Brzezinski's classification today, a superpower-minus, and China and Russia are claiming global leadership in a multipolar world together with the United States.

In addition to the above-mentioned triumvirate, let us call it the first scenario of changing geopolitical leadership, the second scenario is possible, when the leading countries-permanent members of the UN Security Council: United States, Britain, France, China, Russia, under the conditions of a unipolar political system changing to a multipolar, geopolitical leader. In this system of geopolitical leadership, polarization (it already exists in fact) is possible for two poles: the first is the United States, Great Britain, France (to which Germany and Japan will join, outside the work of the Security Council), the second - China and Russia (to which they can also join allies that are not leading countries).

The implementation of the first or second scenario somewhat stabilizes the international situation, but the struggle for geopolitical leadership (single or group) will continue. Geopolitical leadership of the countries will put forward new and new geopolitical leaders.

The struggle for geopolitical leadership between the countries and the constant emergence of geopolitical leaders dividing and dividing the world will be completed only when humanity is aware of its common interests, common threats and will be able to unite all nation states into a single international state of citizens of the Earth. The government of this state will be able to dissolve all the national armies, armies of military alliances, leaving only state forces on state content. The freed resources can be directed to an effective solution of the global problems of mankind. National states with their national leaders will not disappear at all but will become regions of one united planet.

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