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Research Article

The National Interest in the Formation of Geographic Mental Maps: A Conceptual Framework Illustrated by Mahan and Spykman

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Abstract: Contributions to the study of geographic mental maps include various definitions of the concept, but most of them do not analyze the role and impact of the national interest in shaping these maps, despite the importance of this notion in leaders' reasoning during the foreign policy-making process. Instead, factors such as past experience, ideas, political context, and culture are considered in these works. This article aims to analyze the role of the national interest in the formation of geographic mental maps. To this end, it seeks to develop an analytical framework that conceptualizes the interactions between the national interest and other variables involved in the formation of geographic mental maps and their impact on foreign policy. As a conceptual contribution, the article identifies and defines the main variables involved in this process and specifies their interrelationships. The geographic mental maps of Alfred T. Mahan and Nicholas J. Spykman are used to illustrate the application of the proposed framework rather than to test its explanatory validity. The national interest guides geographic perception and geopolitical codes toward places and threats relevant to state security. Geographic mental maps represent the resulting geopolitical vision through which leaders interpret international events and assess foreign-policy options. The framework clarifies how geographic mental maps are formed and shows, for political geography, that material constraints shape but do not determine strategic choices.

Keywords: national interest; geographic perception; geopolitical codes; geopolitical vision; geographic mental maps; cognitive geography

Highlights:

- National interest shapes which geopolitical possibilities become strategically salient.
- National interest guides selection of security-relevant geographic information.
- Geographic mental maps apply geopolitical vision to foreign policy-making.

1. Introduction

Geographic mental maps offer a way to examine how spatial interpretations inform foreign-policy reasoning. Yet explaining their formation requires specifying how material geopolitical conditions become relevant to political actors, rather than assuming the direct, deterministic link to foreign policy found in some classical geopolitical accounts. Research has examined the roles of experience, ideas, political context, and culture in shaping these maps (da Vinha, 2010; Casey & Wright, 2008, 2011, 2015), but the contribution of the national interest to the selection and organization of geographic information remains underexplored.

This article aims to clarify how the national interest contributes to the formation of geographic mental maps and how material geopolitical factors condition its substantive priorities. It asks three questions: How does the national interest intervene in selecting information from the geographic environment that shapes geographic mental maps?

How does the national interest contribute to organizing the information selected from the geographic environment into political-geographical reasoning? How do material geopolitical factors condition the national interest, and how does the national interest convey their influence on geographic mental maps and foreign policy-making?

Drawing on neoclassical realism and cognitive geography, the article contributes a conceptual framework that distinguishes the permissive role of material geopolitical factors from the national interest's security-oriented influence on geographic perception and geopolitical codes. It specifies how these processes shape the geopolitical vision represented in geographic mental maps, clarifying for cognitive geography how spatial information is selected and organized and for political geography how material constraints acquire strategic meaning without determining foreign-policy choices.

The structure of the article is as follows. Section 2 presents the theoretical approach and research design, including the relevant literature, the conceptual method, and the rationale for selecting Mahan and Spykman as illustrative cases. Section 3 addresses the general process by which geographic mental maps take shape, identifying the main concepts and variables. It discusses the mechanisms and elements that are part of this process and outlines the definition of the concept of geographic mental maps within the context in which it emerged and examines their application to foreign policy analysis. Section 4 examines the concept of national interest by clarifying its distinctiveness and relating it to geopolitical conditions. Section 5 specifies the role of the national interest in the formation of geographic mental maps and applies the proposed framework to Mahan's and Spykman's geographic thought. Section 6 positions the framework in relation to closely related work, considers its limitations, and suggests directions for future research. Finally, Section 7 presents the conclusions.

2. The theoretical approach and research design

The introduction of mental maps as an analytical concept in international relations (IR) has its roots in cognitive approaches to the study of foreign policy. Some of the earliest systematic applications of psychological approaches to international politics appeared in the 1930s (Goldhamer, 1934; Waltz, 1959, pp. 43–45). These contributions proved to be quite unsatisfactory in explanatory terms due to the lack of understanding of international politics, which drew substantial criticism (Waltz, 1959; Holsti, 1976, pp. 18–20; Jervis, 1976, pp. 3–10). Later, during the second great debate in IR, the introduction of behaviorist approaches contributed to the development of psychological perspectives in IR with a focus on analyzing how the ideas and mental images held by statespersons impact the formulation of foreign policy (Brecher et al., 1969; Kelman, 1965; Jervis, 1970).

Thus, from the 1960s onward, the first cognitive studies emerged focusing on the images of political elites, particularly in relation to war and the image of the enemy (Holsti, 1962, 1968; Bonham et al., 1979; Herrmann, 1985). Following these investigations, there were studies that analyzed the beliefs of statespersons through the use of cognitive maps. These maps represent a specific set of beliefs and their interconnections as they exist in the minds of political decision-makers regarding certain aspects of the environment in which they operate (Axelrod, 1976; Shapiro & Bonham, 1973; Bonham & Shapiro, 1976). However, despite the notable developments in this field, cognitive factors took a back seat in international studies for a long time, and most of these studies are unrelated to the notion of a mental map or cognitive map as an analytical concept, as they are based on other lines of research in psychology (Rosati, 1995). The main contribution of the cognitive research agenda to IR lies in problematizing the relationship between policymakers and the information they receive from a complex environment, as well as the limited capacities of statespersons in processing information (Hudson & Vore, 1995, p. 211; Golledge & Stimson, 1997; Holsti, 2006). These circumstances explain why decision-makers in foreign policy resort to simplified images of the international environment to make decisions (Voss & Dorsey, 2019; Cashman, 2014, pp. 84–88). In this way, cognitive concepts and structures, such as cognitive maps, images, stereotypes, schemas, and so forth, were introduced (Tetlock & McGuire, 1986).

It was in the early 1980s that the analytical concept of geographic mental maps originated, resulting from the incorporation of a spatial dimension into the cognitive psychology concept of mental maps (Henrikson, 1980). This concept was applied to the study of U.S. foreign policy, re-emerging in IR with a spatial focus. Alan K. Henrikson (2002) further developed this concept, delving into its influence on how statespersons think. John O'Loughlin and Richard Grant (1990) also contributed by analyzing the mental maps of U.S. presidents through their State of the Union speeches.

The theoretical and empirical development of the concept of geographic mental maps has been discontinuous due to the different definitions that have been given to it, as well as the various methodological approaches that researchers have employed in its study (da Vinha, 2010, pp. 60–61). Thus, both in geopolitics and IR, a considerable amount of research can be found that does not always use the concept of geographic mental maps but instead resorts to other

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terms referring to cognitive geographical frameworks operating as references for foreign policy. Examples include concepts such as "cognitive geopolitics" (Criekemans, 2022), "geopolitical images" (O'Loughlin & Grant, 1990), "geopolitical codes" (Dijkink, 1998), "geopolitical imaginary" (Latham, 2001), "geopolitical imagination" (Agnew, 1998), "geopolitical scripts" (Ó Tuathail, 2002), "imaginative geographies" (Bialasiewicz et al., 2007), and "metageographies" (Lewis & Wigen, 1997).

Within this broader literature on geographical cognition in IR, some studies maintain a regional focus (Latham, 2001), while other studies adopt a global perspective (Bialasiewicz et al., 2007). In other cases, works concentrate on the study of foreign policy, utilizing geographic mental maps (Henrikson, 2008; Casey & Wright, 2008, 2011, 2015; Erforth, 2016; da Vinha, 2011, 2017; Downs & Stea, 2011; Criekemans, 2022). Overall, the contributions of these studies to the theoretical definition of the concept of geographic mental maps vary considerably.

Geographic mental maps are not confined to political officeholders. Advisers, scholars, and other strategic thinkers can also articulate spatial interpretations relevant to foreign policy debates. This article examines Mahan and Spykman in that capacity: their writings and maps allow us to reconstruct the geopolitical visions they expressed, but do not provide direct evidence of policymakers' own mental maps or cognitive processes.

In order to answer the research questions, this article develops an analytical framework that distinguishes between the defining orientation and the substantive content of the national interest. State survival provides its defining orientation, whereas material geopolitical factors condition its specific content, scope, and priorities. This is because the state is a territorially organized political entity whose security requirements depend on its geographic location, physical configuration, and material capabilities relative to those of other states. The national interest, in turn, operates as an intervening variable in the formation of geographic mental maps of policymakers and other strategic thinkers.[1] At the cognitive and interpretive stage, it provides a security-oriented criterion through which policymakers assess the relevance of geographic information, thereby influencing geographic perception without altering the material conditions from which that information arises. The selected information is subsequently organized through geopolitical codes, which identify spatially defined threats, opportunities, allies, adversaries, and appropriate responses. The integration of this political-geographical reasoning shapes geopolitical vision, which geographic mental maps represent cartographically. When held by policymakers, these maps provide a spatial framework through which leaders interpret systemic pressures in foreign policy-making. Material geopolitical factors and the national interest therefore perform analytically distinct but connected functions: the former delimit the range of possible security requirements, whereas the latter shapes their cognitive and spatial interpretation.

It is worth noting that critical geopolitics and the mental maps research program share common ground in that both emphasize the representational dimension of geographic phenomena in foreign policy while also acknowledging the subjective nature of geographic knowledge itself. Critical geopolitics conceptualizes geopolitics as discourses, meanings, identities, views, etc., which depict an image or gaze of the world (Agnew & Corbridge, 1995, p. 47; Ó Tuathail, 1996; Dalby, 1991; Agnew, 1998). However, it has rejected the use of the concept of geographic mental maps. This is evident in Klaus Dodds' critique of Henrikson's work, arguing that it fails to consider the possibility that the observer is actively involved in the observations made (Dodds, 1994, pp. 196–197). This objection to geographic mental maps stems from the problematization of the process of theorization by critical geopolitics, which holds that spatial representations constitute space. In this way, critical geopolitics addresses the justification and legitimation that elites provide for certain policies through their representations (Flint & Taylor, 2018). Nevertheless, research on geographic mental maps explores how geographic representations influence the decision-making process in foreign policy. Additionally, geographic mental maps and critical geopolitics have differing intellectual backgrounds. In this regard, critical geopolitics is rooted in constructivism and postmodernism, while geographic mental maps belong to an intellectual stream rooted in cognitive and behavioral geography, as well as in cognitive psychology (da Vinha, 2012, 2019). An intellectual genealogy of the roots of geographic mental maps would show their links with those approaches centered on geographic experience and the human–milieu relationship that emerged in France at the beginning of the twentieth century (Vidal de la Blache, 1922, pp. 3, 12–15, 200–204).

[1] In this article, an intervening variable is understood as a factor that has its own effects on the relationship in which it operates, rather than merely serving as an intermediate link that transmits the influence of a condition variable. Its specific function must therefore be established in relation to the variables and analytical level under examination (Van Evera, 1997, p. 11; Creswell, 2014; Götz, 2021). The term is used at two nested analytical levels: the national interest intervenes in the formation of geopolitical vision and geographic mental maps, whereas geopolitical vision intervenes in the broader foreign policy-making process.

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There is an incompatibility at the ontological level between the stance of critical geopolitics toward spatial representations, discourse, and geopolitical reasoning and the behavioral assumptions underlying geographic mental maps. In this respect, critics have argued that critical geopolitics' emphasis on the representational, cultural, and interpretive dimensions of geopolitics has left its treatment of materiality and objective geographic conditions underdeveloped (Kofroň, 2012; Squire, 2015). From a classical-materialist perspective, Kelly (2006, pp. 47–49) argues that critical geopolitics has insufficiently addressed the continuing influence of geographical position and other material-spatial conditions on foreign policy. More specifically, the effort of critical geopolitics to distance itself from the environmental determinism of classical geopolitics has been said to understate the continuing relevance of physical geography (Haverluk et al., 2014; Kurfürst et al., 2024), a limitation also acknowledged from within the field itself (Toal, 2021, p. 201). The present study instead focuses on the role of the national interest in the formation of geographic mental maps and its relationship with material geopolitical factors. In doing so, it examines how material conditions influence perceptions and interpretations of the international environment in foreign policy-making without treating those conditions as determinative.

The theoretical foundations of the analytical framework in this study combine the literature on geographic mental maps with neoclassical realist approaches to the national interest. The neoclassical realist perspective warrants further discussion to clarify its implications, especially regarding the assumptions that underpin this study. In this respect, it is important to mention that neoclassical realism is a variant of structural realism and, as such, it assumes the analytical framework formed by the first, second, and third images developed by Kenneth Waltz (1959). Insofar as neoclassical realism is structural in its approach to international relations, it considers the systemic level decisive for explaining foreign policy. However, neoclassical realism seeks to overcome the explanatory weaknesses of neorealism (Rose, 1998) by incorporating factors from the unit level, that is, the first and second images. In this way, neoclassical realism explains foreign policy based on the interaction between external pressures and the variables of the first and second images (Ripsman et al., 2016; Lobell et al., 2009). These variables influence the mediating process between systemic stimuli and the policy response, and in doing so they filter systemic pressures. Thus, domestic political processes work as a conveyor belt of external forces (Schweller, 2004), and systemic pressures are translated into the unit level through these intervening variables (Rose, 1998, p. 146).

In this study, attention is focused on the role of the national interest in the formation of geographic mental maps. This analytical concept is related to the role of perception in foreign policy-making and the intervening variable of leader images that neoclassical realism includes in its analysis (Ripsman et al., 2016, p. 81). Leader images encompass psychological models that identify a wide range of cognitive constraints on how decision-makers process information. Among these models are operational codes and the beliefs and images of individual decision-makers. In this way, neoclassical realism incorporates variables from other paradigms in its analyses, such as constructivism, while privileging realist variables (He, 2017; Kitchen, 2012; Meibauer, 2020). Neoclassical realist scholarship has examined the role of leaders' perceptions in translating systemic and material conditions into foreign-policy choices (Wohlforth, 1993, pp. 26–28; Friedberg, 1988, pp. 14–17; Taliaferro, 2004, pp. 40–47; Leffler, 1992; Christensen, 1997; Zakaria, 1998). However, the cognitive-spatial organization of such perceptions through geographic mental maps has received limited systematic attention. Building on this insight, this article addresses how the national interest influences state leaders' perceptions through geographic mental maps in the foreign policy-making process. In doing so, it takes into account the impact of material geopolitical factors on configuring both the national interest and the formation of leaders' geographic mental maps.

Since this article is intended as a conceptual contribution, its methodology therefore consists of identifying and defining the main concepts and variables involved and specifying the relationships among them. To this end, the article draws on the literature on cognitive geography and cognitive behavioralism to conceptualize how geopolitical factors influence the formation of geographic mental maps. It also engages with realist scholarship to clarify the distinctiveness of the national interest, its role as an intervening variable in this process, and its relationship with geopolitical factors as a condition variable.[2]

[2] A condition variable is understood here as a background variable that frames the context within which relationships among other variables operate. It defines the opportunity structure and delimits the range of possible outcomes without independently determining them. Material geopolitical factors comprise antecedent conditions insofar as they analytically precede the cognitive and interpretive processes examined in the framework and establish the material environment within which these processes operate. Thus, the condition variable denotes the broader analytical category, whereas antecedent conditions refer to the specific prior constraints encompassed by that variable. Their antecedent status

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Alfred T. Mahan and Nicholas J. Spykman were selected because their writings provide a clear link between the material geopolitical conditions of the U.S., interpretations of its national interest, spatial priorities, foreign policy prescriptions, and cartographic representations. They therefore illustrate how the proposed concepts and relationships can be applied to the interpretation of particular geographic mental maps. Their focus on the same state in different historical and geopolitical contexts also provides comparative utility, showing how a relatively stable territorial configuration can acquire different strategic meanings. Both also provide maps alongside sustained strategic arguments, so their cartographic priorities can be interpreted in light of their own reasoning. The contrast is substantive as well as historical: Mahan emphasizes maritime routes and overseas naval positions amid imperial competition, whereas Spykman foregrounds the Eurasian rimland and the prevention of a hostile hegemon.

3. The formation of geographic mental maps

Critical geopolitics has made an important contribution by demonstrating that geopolitical representations and discourses participate in the production and legitimization of power relations. However, the present article addresses a different analytical question by examining the influence of material geopolitical factors in the formation of geographic mental maps. Accordingly, it deliberately distinguishes material geopolitical factors from approaches that conceptualize power primarily in relational, social, and ideational terms (Ó Tuathail, 1996; Agnew, 1998; Agnew & Corbridge, 1995; Dalby, 1991; Dodds, 2005; Barnett & Duvall, 2005). This distinction reflects the specific purpose of the article, which focuses on the material dimension of geopolitical power rather than on its discursive production or social constitution. In this article, material geopolitical factors refer to physical geography together with the material dimensions of power, including national capabilities. Analytically, material geopolitical factors are conceptualized as a condition variable that defines the opportunity structure within which leaders perceive, interpret, and evaluate the geopolitical environment. As such, they operate in the background as permissive conditions influencing leaders' geopolitical vision, which geographic mental maps represent cartographically. The role of these factors is to establish a range of possibilities for foreign policymakers, but not to determine their behavior or course of action. In this respect, the article adopts a possibilist approach based on Paul Vidal de la Blache's (1911) contribution, emphasizing, from a non-geodeterministic perspective, the constraining role of physical geography in shaping how leaders experience and perceive the geopolitical landscape.

These geopolitical factors can be broken down into two levels of analysis. On the one hand, the geopolitical-system level includes the international power structure, characterized by anarchy—the absence of a central authority above states—and an unequal distribution of national capabilities. Additionally, physical geography at this level considers the distribution and layout of landmasses. On the other hand, state-level factors comprise the resources within a state's territory, its geomorphology, and the organization of its domestic space for resource extraction and mobilization. These factors constrain leaders' geopolitical vision (Figure 1).

However, the constraining role of geopolitical factors is not direct but rather mediated by a series of variables that transmit their influence. These mediating variables are the geographic perception and the geopolitical codes of state leaders. Their significance lies in how they select and process information from the external environment and how leaders use this information to develop geopolitical reasoning for interpreting international reality. All of this highlights the importance of geographic cognition in shaping leaders' geopolitical vision. Understanding this mediation requires examining how information from the operational environment becomes part of leaders' psychological representations.

The ecological framework developed by Harold and Margaret Sprout constitutes the point of departure for understanding the relationship between the geopolitical environment and foreign policy decision-making. Nevertheless, subsequent research further developed this perspective by drawing on developments in cognitive psychology, social psychology, and foreign policy analysis to explain in greater detail how policymakers process information and construct representations of their environment. Rather than replacing the Sprouts' ecological insight, these studies specified the cognitive mechanisms underlying the formation of the psychological environment. These developments include research on information processing and problem representation (Vertzberger, 1982, 1990; Sylvan & Voss, 1998), perception, cognition, and threat assessment (Jervis, 1970, 1976; Holsti, 1976, 2006; Tetlock & McGuire, 1986; Herrmann et al., 1999; Tetlock, 2000; Yarhi-Milo, 2014; Stein, 2023; Landau-Wells, 2024; Pomeroy, 2025), and more recent work on cognitive biases, motivated reasoning, and elite decision-making (Davis & McDermott, 2021; Herrmann, 2017; Hafner-

indicates analytical priority rather than deterministic causation and does not imply that each condition is individually necessary or sufficient for a particular outcome.

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Burton et al., 2013; Kertzer et al., 2020; Kertzer & Tingley, 2018). In parallel, research on geographic mental maps and cognitive geopolitics has examined how cognitive schemas, identities, and interpretive frameworks shape spatial representations and geopolitical reasoning (Casey & Wright, 2008, 2011, 2015; da Vinha, 2011, 2019; Erforth, 2016; Criekemans, 2022).

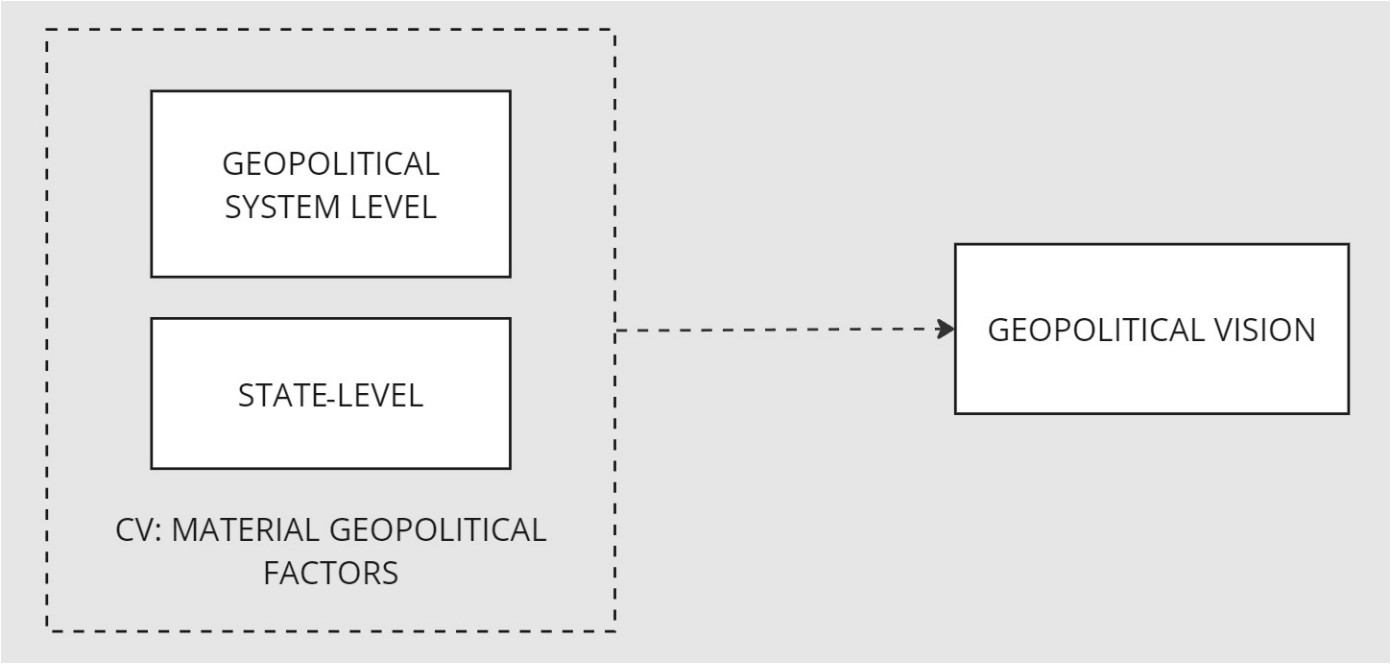

Figure 1. Disaggregated levels of material geopolitical factors and their influence on geopolitical vision. CV: Condition variable. Source: Author's own elaboration. Note: The dashed enclosing box groups the components of the broader category of material geopolitical factors, while the solid boxes identify its constituent analytical levels. The dashed arrow indicates a relationship of influence.

The Sprouts' ecological approach starts from the limits of policymakers' knowledge of their environment. The milieu in which they operate includes human and non-human, tangible and intangible elements (Sprout & Sprout, 1965, p. 27). The Sprouts distinguish between the operational environment, where decisions are implemented, and the psycho-milieu, the decision-maker's image of the situation (Sprout & Sprout, 1957, pp. 327–328; 1968, pp. 33–34). Policymakers act on this image rather than on complete knowledge of actual conditions. Those conditions nevertheless constrain what their decisions can accomplish (Vidal Pérez, 2024a).

For the Sprouts, leaders' geographic perception comprises the ideas and images they form of their surroundings. It emerges as sensory information is interpreted in light of values, memories, and experiences stored below conscious awareness (Sprout & Sprout, 1965, p. 28). Values, psychological predispositions, and prior experiences therefore act as filters when leaders make policy: some features of the milieu attract attention and prompt a response, while others are given less weight. Leaders interpret reality through this selective perception (Sprout & Sprout, 1965, pp. 118, 133). The filters also shape their geographic conceptions, which influence later perceptions and provide a mental framework for decisions (Vidal Pérez, 2024a).

Subsequent research developed this insight by examining in greater detail the processes through which the psychological environment is constructed. Among these contributions, Vertzberger's (1982) typological framework for the analysis of misperception is particularly relevant. Vertzberger retains the Sprouts' distinction between the operational and psychological environments, while providing a more differentiated account of the information-processing mechanisms connecting them. His earlier framework distinguishes between environmental constraints, the specific content of the environment, and the decision-maker's frames of reference (Vertzberger, 1982). He subsequently develops this approach by explaining how incoming information is categorized by issue-area and object, hierarchically ordered according to goals and interests, and interpreted through pre-existing beliefs, values, stereotypes, and cognitive schemata

(Vertzberger, 1990). These processes determine which information receives attention, how its relevance and importance are assessed, and how it becomes integrated into the decision-maker's representation of the environment.

More recent research demonstrates the continuing relevance of the Sprouts' contribution in two different respects. Aran and Yishayahu (2022) explicitly employ the distinction between the psychological and operational environments to explain how Israeli decision-makers interpreted the Mavi Marmara flotilla through a subjective representation that connected it to broader threats to the state's core interests, rather than solely through its material characteristics. Landau-Wells (2024), although not explicitly positioning her work as an extension of the Sprouts' ecological approach, addresses the broader problem underlying it by specifying the cognitive processes through which potential dangers in the external environment are perceived and acquire significance as threats. Taken together, these contributions demonstrate both the continuing applicability of the Sprouts' original distinction and the enduring relevance of the broader problem they identified: foreign policymakers respond to cognitively mediated representations of external conditions rather than to those conditions as such.

Recent behavioral research also demonstrates that material conditions can shape the cognitive mechanisms through which policymakers interpret the international environment. Pomeroy (2025) shows that relative material capabilities can generate a subjective sense of power that encourages intuitive information processing and increases reliance on heuristics and prior beliefs, thereby inflating threat perception. His "first image reversed" argument is relevant to the present framework because it treats decision-maker psychology not simply as an exogenous filter but also as an outcome influenced by material power. Although this mechanism does not directly address the national interest or geographic mental maps, it supports the broader premise of this article that material geopolitical conditions can indirectly shape strategic interpretation by affecting the cognitive processing of geographic information.

Once geographic perception has selected and processed information from the geopolitical environment, that information must subsequently be organized into political-geographical reasoning about the state's security and external environment. This reasoning is articulated through geopolitical codes (Flint, 2022, pp. 50–55). Geopolitical codes articulate a context-specific definition of the national interest by organizing selected information into perceived threats, opportunities, allies, adversaries, and appropriate responses to protect or advance that interest (Taylor, 1988, p. 22; 1990, p. 13). Analytically, the national interest supplies a security-oriented criterion for this organization; the completed code expresses a spatial specification of that interest, which may subsequently inform further interpretations of the external environment and assign strategic meaning to places, actors, and spatial relationships. By organizing and interpreting the international environment, geopolitical codes reveal how a state orients itself toward the world. They establish a hierarchy of places according to their relevance to the national interest and define whether those places are perceived primarily as sources of threat, opportunity, influence, or strategic projection.

Geopolitical codes and geopolitical vision refer to different analytical levels. Whereas geopolitical codes operate at the level of political-geographical reasoning about particular issues, regions, or strategic relationships, geopolitical vision refers to the broader and more integrated spatial worldview that results from the integration of this reasoning into a coherent understanding of the international environment. This article therefore defines geopolitical vision as the relatively coherent spatial worldview through which state leaders make sense of the international environment. Although Gertjan Dijkink (1996, p. 11) originally introduced the concept from a constructivist perspective, it is employed here in behavioral terms concerning a state's geopolitical environment. A recent application to Chinese foreign policy illustrates this relationship by showing how geopolitical codes operating across different functional fields and geographic scales—particularly the Belt and Road Initiative and the active defense doctrine—can be integrated to reconstruct the broader geopolitical vision of Chinese leaders and represent it through a geographic mental map (Vidal Pérez, 2026).

Within the process examined here, material geopolitical factors influence leaders' geopolitical vision through two successive steps: geographic perception selects and processes information from the geopolitical environment, and geopolitical codes organize that information into political-geographical reasoning about security (Vidal Pérez, 2024a; Figure 2). The national interest supplies a security-oriented criterion for this selection and organization, as Section 5 explains. Geographic mental maps spatially organize and represent cartographically the resulting geopolitical vision by depicting the hierarchy of places, actors, and spatial relationships that leaders consider strategically significant. In foreign-policy making, these maps provide a framework for interpreting systemic pressures (Figure 3).

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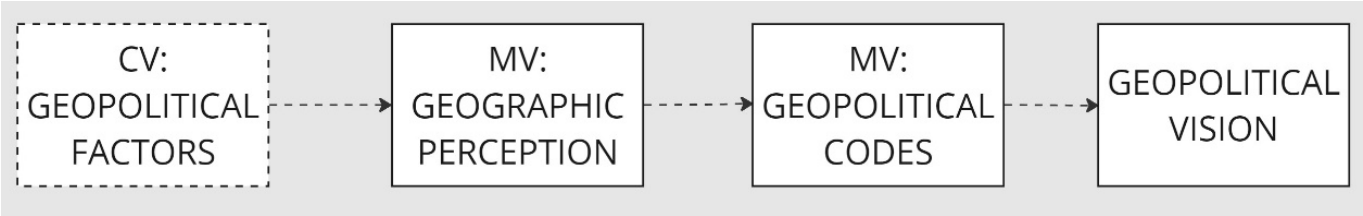

Figure 2. The process through which geopolitical factors influence leaders' geopolitical vision. CV: Condition variable; MV: Mediating variable. Source: Author's own elaboration. Note: Dashed boxes delimit broader analytical categories or conditioning variables, while solid boxes represent their individual components. Dashed arrows indicate relationships of influence.

Geographic mental maps are understood here as internal cognitive-spatial representations that simplify the complexity of the international environment by organizing the relative importance of places and the relationships among actors. These representations may be inferred from written and cartographic materials. Accordingly, Figure 5 reproduces a map from Mahan's work, and Spykman's map is referred to in the text (Spykman, 1942, p. 180). Both are used as evidence of the geopolitical visions articulated in those texts, rather than as direct reproductions of their internal representations.

Human limitations explain the *raison d'être* of geographic mental maps. In this regard, no individual or group is capable of encompassing the complexity of the world in its entirety, requiring the creation of cognitive spatial constructs that simplify reality and facilitate decision-making processes (Golledge & Stimson, 1997; Holsti, 1976; George, 1969; Sapienza, 1987; Barr et al., 1992; Lowenthal, 1961; Tetlock & McGuire, 1986; Stein, 2016). Statespersons and bureaucracies, in general, face external pressures and often find themselves managing situations with either insufficient time and incomplete information (Schub, 2022) or, conversely, an overload of information that is challenging to process adequately. These maps are a spatial mental framework guiding leaders' conduct in foreign policy. Mental maps, then, influence the representation of the problems that statespersons must face (Sylvan & Voss, 1998) and thus constrain the possible responses to challenges and opportunities in the geopolitical environment (Breuning, 2007, pp. 68–70). Furthermore, they are shared within the foreign policy executive and are the result of the interactions among its members (McComb, 2007; Mohammed et al., 2010; Vertzberger, 1990). For this reason, studies focused on the geographic mental maps of specific individual leaders provide a narrow view of foreign policy (Casey & Wright, 2008, 2011, 2015), since foreign policy decisions commonly emerge from group dynamics rather than from a single individual acting in isolation (George, 1980; Ripley, 1993; da Vinha, 2019, p. 79; Kertzer et al., 2022; Jost et al., 2024).

Geographic mental maps constitute a useful analytical concept for studying geopolitical vision because they help clarify which places have strategic importance. They serve as a framework through which leaders interpret and filter systemic pressures, thereby influencing their perceptions and possible responses to them (Ripsman et al., 2016, p. 59). In this way, geographic mental maps contribute to the formulation and adjustment of foreign policy, which reflects a country's vision of its place in the world, its national interest, and the strategies for defending it (Morin & Paquin, 2018, p. 3). Erforth (2016), for example, shows how decision-makers' geographic mental maps influenced France's military operation in Mali in January 2013. Similarly, the Russian elite's geographic mental map influenced how Russian decision-makers perceived Ukraine's westward alignment and formed part of the interpretive context in which the February 2022 invasion was launched (Vidal Pérez, 2024b; see also Götz & Staun, 2022; Ortmann, 2023). In the same way, the Carter administration's geographic mental maps impacted its Middle East policy (da Vinha, 2017). Therefore, the relevance of geographic mental maps lies in shaping foreign policy options and determining where the state projects its power and influence (Figure 3).

At the foreign-policy level, geopolitical vision functions as an intervening variable through its application in geographic mental maps (Figure 3). Before examining how the national interest guides the selection and organization of geographic information, the next section clarifies its meaning and distinctiveness.

4. The national interest from a realist perspective

Although theories of international relations differ over the meaning of the national interest (Burchill, 2005), realism assigns it a central role. The concept cannot, however, be reduced to an aggregation of particular economic interests: it must be considered in relation to the state and the international system in which it operates.

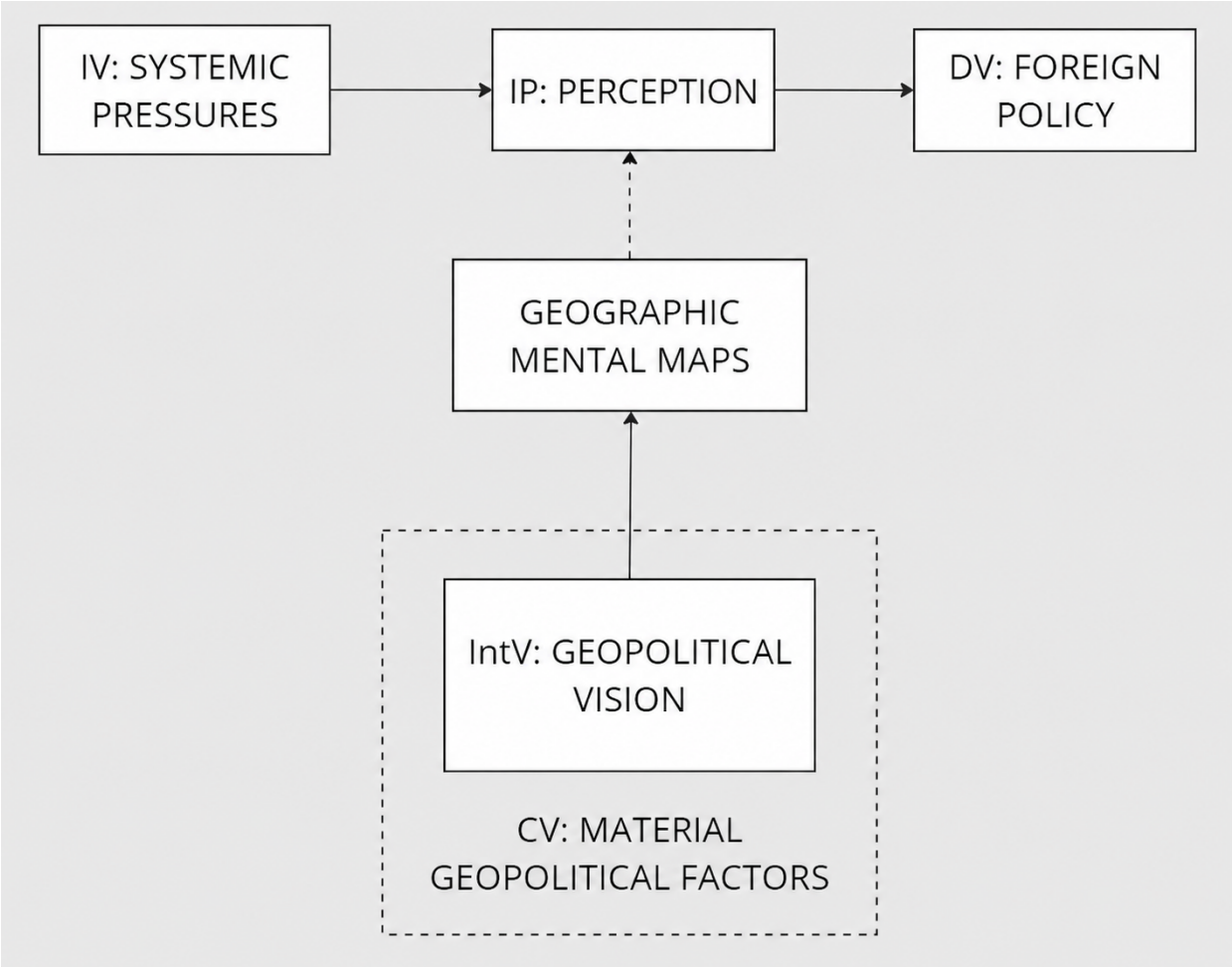

Figure 3. The operational role of geographic mental maps in applying geopolitical vision to foreign policy-making. IV: Independent variable; DV: Dependent variable; IntV: Intervening variable; CV: Condition variable. IP: Intervening process. Source: Author's own elaboration based on Ripsman et al. (2016, pp. 32, 60–62). Note: Dashed boxes delimit broader analytical categories or conditioning variables, while solid boxes represent their individual components. Dashed arrows indicate relationships of influence, whereas solid arrows indicate direct causal relationships.

The national interest has undergone significant theoretical development in IR over the past several decades. In this regard, contemporary debates have addressed the construction, contestation, and evolution of this concept from divergent theoretical perspectives. This is particularly true of approaches that stress the contingency of the national interest. Donald Nuechterlein (1978), for example, conceptualizes the national interest as the perceived needs and desires of a sovereign state in relation to its external environment, rather than as an objective or fixed reality. He argues that national interests emerge through a political decision-making process. Although Nuechterlein's approach was not constructivist, his emphasis on perceived needs and political decision-making anticipated later accounts that treated national interests as interpreted rather than simply given. Constructivist approaches subsequently argued that the national interest does not exist as an objective fact independent of political interpretation. Instead, they are socially constructed through the representations and discourses produced by political elites (Weldes, 1999) and through the international norms and social interactions that shape state purposes and preferences (Finnemore, 1996). More recently, Mokry (2024) has operationalized this constructivist perspective by examining how Chinese and U.S. foreign policy elites construct and hierarchically organize different components of the national interest in their grand strategies.

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Other approaches have highlighted the domestic and ideological contestation involved in defining the national interest. From a domestic distributional perspective, Lee (2024) shows that whether an international issue is perceived as a national interest depends partly on how its benefits are distributed across society and whether it can credibly be framed as serving the nation as a whole. Related contributions in strategic studies likewise emphasize political interpretation. Brands (2014) shows how democratic politics complicates the identification of a single national interest and the sustained pursuit of long-term strategic priorities, while Mead (2002) examines the ideological traditions that have generated competing interpretations of the U.S. national interest. Trubowitz (1998) further shows that such interpretations have a spatial dimension: uneven regional development and the differing effects of international change shape competing definitions of the U.S. national interest through domestic political coalitions.

These perspectives have substantially enriched the study of the national interest by demonstrating that it is neither self-evident nor immutable, but rather subject to political interpretation, contestation, and change. The present framework takes this insight into account by treating the security relevance of geographic information as something political actors assess and may revise. At the same time, it retains the realist emphasis on material constraints: geopolitical conditions delimit the range of plausible security requirements and feasible foreign policy options without dictating a single interpretation or course of action. Within those limits, the national interest influences which information geographic perception selects and how geopolitical codes organize it into spatial priorities.

This materialist understanding of the national interest, however, is not uniform across realist theories. Two main approaches can be distinguished. Both perspectives reflect their common materialist ontology but stem from different lines of reasoning. Classical realism bases its reasoning on human nature and the competition between states with differing interests. As a result, the national interest is defined in terms of power, as outlined in Morgenthau's (1985, pp. 10–11) six principles of political realism. Although the national interest is considered a permanent condition that provides foreign policymakers with a rational guide and transcends changes in government, it is also shaped by the political and cultural context within which foreign policy is formulated. Regardless of the objectives defined by the national interest, the will to power is the driving force behind the state's pursuit of these objectives (Morgenthau, 1946, p. 194; 1985, p. 208). Indeed, the pursuit of power is an immediate need to achieve whatever objective. Morgenthau (1951, p. 172) underscored that the invariable component of the national interest refers to national security, namely, the physical, political, and cultural entity called the nation. Therefore, territorial integrity, political institutions, and cultural mores are not affected by contingency of time and place and constitute the core of the national interest (Morgenthau, 1952).

In contrast to the previous perspective, neorealism's line of reasoning differs significantly from the classical realist approach, although their conclusions regarding the national interest are ultimately the same. Neorealism builds its concept of national interest on the anarchic nature of the international system, where the unequal distribution of national capabilities results in an international power structure (Waltz, 1979). The structure of the international system shapes the national interest by imposing impersonal constraints. Thus, the national interest is primarily dictated by the system and not the result of decisions made by foreign policymakers. In this system of perpetual competition among units, where no central authority exists above states, survival becomes the national interest and, at the same time, the prerequisite for achieving other goals (Waltz, 1979, p. 134). Therefore, what defines the national interest is its security requirements. Foreign policy is the result of calculated decisions aimed at preserving the state's survival based on the situation in which it finds itself. Consequently, the national interest is primarily a consequence of international anarchy. In this sense, neorealism views the concept of national interest as something exogenous that does not vary between states, as their domestic sphere is irrelevant to survival.

Within the realist perspective adopted here, state survival is treated as the defining orientation of the national interest, understood minimally as the preservation of political autonomy and territorial integrity. This analytical premise does not imply that every foreign-policy objective is a survival requirement or that political actors agree on which threats matter and how to address them.

National interest is not an isolated factor in foreign policy because every state is a territorially organized political entity, and this territoriality gives its security requirements a geographic dimension. As a result, there are two analytically different stages when addressing geopolitical factors and survival: material geopolitical factors delimit what state survival requires under particular spatial and strategic conditions, whereas the national interest provides a security-oriented criterion through which policymakers assess the relevance of geographic information. In this way, state survival provides the defining orientation of the national interest, whereas material geopolitical factors condition its specific

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content, scope, and priorities. Although all states pursue survival, what this objective requires varies according to their geographic location, territorial configuration, and material capabilities relative to those of other states.

The relationship between the national interest and material geopolitical factors also involves a further conceptual challenge. In this case, this relationship operates differently depending on what function each variable plays. Material geopolitical factors constitute antecedent conditions that constrain the state's international behavior and delimit the range of interests it can realistically pursue. The national interest, in turn, influences how policymakers select and interpret information about those conditions without altering their material existence. These relationships operate at analytically distinct stages: geopolitical factors condition the formation of the national interest, whereas the national interest, at the interpretive stage, shapes policymakers' cognitive engagement with those factors. This relationship provides the national interest with a material and non-arbitrary foundation.

This perspective contrasts with the argumentation of classical realism, which posits that power defines the national interest, despite the contingent nature of power and the difficulty of objectively delineating and quantifying it, as well as the constraints imposed on state power by the international environment. Additionally, group interests challenge Morgenthau's unitary conception of the state in defining the national interest. Moreover, the assertion that the national interest is somehow more than the sum of its parts remains unsupported, given the competing sectional interests that influence foreign policy (Snyder, 1991; Ripsman, 2009). In contrast, neorealism incorporates a geopolitical dimension into its analysis by adopting a structuralist approach to the national interest. Consequently, the unequal distribution of national capabilities and the resulting power relations that organize the international system shape the national interest and provide it with a material foundation. While neorealism acknowledges the conditioning role of these factors at the systemic level, it overlooks their influence at the state level.

Realist theories consider the state as the main unit of analysis in international relations, which has significant implications from a spatial perspective. From the viewpoint of the geopolitical system, the state is part of a broader network of relations that shape the environment in which it operates. As a result, the national interest is influenced by the constraining effects of this system, which establishes the possibilities for the state's foreign policy. This level of analysis includes both the international power structure and physical geography. These factors relate to the state's relative power and its interactions with other countries, influencing the organization of international space and the definition of national interest. Additionally, the distribution and configuration of landmasses affect the state's geographic location, further constraining its possibilities in the international arena and having implications for the national interest.

The state represents another level of analysis to elucidate the constraints on the national interest. Classical realism considers the various elements that constitute national power. This includes geography, which is viewed as the most stable factor upon which the power of the state depends (Morgenthau, 1985, pp. 127–129). In this framework, geography is linked to the strength and capacities of the state, but not directly to the definition of national interest. However, as this article argues, the state also acts as a constraining factor from a geopolitical perspective due to its different constitutive elements, such as physical geography, which encompasses both the material and human resources within its territory, and the domestic organization of space for mobilizing and extracting these resources. While classical realism does not infer the effects of national power in the definition of national interest, neoclassical realism, by contrast, holds that relative material power shapes the geographic scope and ambition of a state's national interest. Thus, state power shapes the national interest and, ultimately, its goals in the international sphere (Rose, 1998, p. 146; Zakaria, 1998).

For the purposes of this article, an interpretation of the national interest is identified in the explicit reasoning of the author under analysis about how particular geographic conditions bear on the state's security, political autonomy, or territorial integrity. This does not presume that the author under analysis has identified the state's objectively necessary interests. National objectives, by contrast, refer to the policy outcomes or strategic goals proposed in response to that interpretation. The distinction allows the analysis to examine how geographic conditions acquire strategic significance before particular objectives are formulated.

5. The national interest in the formation of geographic mental maps

This section integrates the preceding discussions by examining how the national interest intervenes between material geopolitical factors and the mediating variables involved in the formation of geographic mental maps. It seeks to clarify how it conveys the influence of material geopolitical factors to this cartographic representation of leaders' geopolitical vision. Whereas geopolitical factors delimit the available possibilities for foreign policy, the national interest

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influences which of them become cognitively and operationally relevant through geographic perception and geopolitical codes.

As established in Section 3, foreign policymakers cannot process all the information received from the external environment and therefore construct a selective geographic perception of it. The national interest contributes to this selection by directing attention toward geographic information considered relevant to the state's security and survival. It thereby narrows the range of environmental possibilities that becomes operationally relevant to foreign policy.

Although the Sprouts identified culture and past experience as filters of environmental information, their cognitive-behavioral framework does not provide a general theory of political motivation or specify the principle according to which environmental knowledge becomes relevant to foreign policy (Sprout & Sprout, 1957, p. 314). Indeed, environmental data acquire political significance only in relation to particular goals (Sprout & Sprout, 1965, pp. 215–216). Their "policy-contingency frame of reference" therefore makes the relevance of such information dependent on previously specified strategies and objectives without identifying a more general principle that organizes its selection and interpretation.

The framework developed here does not treat the national interest as the sole or necessarily predominant filter of geographic information. Ideology, strategic culture, domestic politics, bureaucratic interests, and prior experience can shape both what policymakers notice and how they interpret the security requirements associated with the national interest (Mead, 2002; Trubowitz, 1998; Schub, 2022; Jost et al., 2024; Gomez & Whyte, 2022; Sprout & Sprout, 1965, pp. 28, 118, 133). The specific function attributed to the national interest is narrower: it provides a security-oriented criterion through which geographic information is selected and assessed in terms of its relevance to state survival, political autonomy, and territorial integrity. Its added analytical value therefore lies not in displacing alternative explanations, but in specifying a spatially oriented mechanism that connects material geopolitical conditions with the security priorities represented in geographic mental maps. Therefore, explaining how the relevant beliefs and interpretations are socially produced and contested lies beyond the scope of this framework.

The information selected through geographic perception provides the raw material for geopolitical codes. The national interest contributes to organizing this information around security priorities by establishing a hierarchy of places and events and identifying current or potential allies and adversaries. The national interest shapes a series of political-geographical assumptions about the security of the state that constitute the geopolitical codes, while also serving as a reference point for calculations that inform foreign policy. In this way, it gives spatial expression to the objective of state survival and helps orient foreign policy.

Through its influence on geographic perception and geopolitical codes, the national interest indirectly shapes the geopolitical vision represented by geographic mental maps. These maps translate the resulting hierarchy of places, threats, and opportunities into a spatial framework for establishing foreign policy priorities. In this way, the national interest does not engage directly with systemic pressures. Instead, geographic mental maps mediate this relationship. Thus, the function of national interest is to establish the criteria for defining foreign policy priorities, while geographic mental maps provide the necessary spatial perspective.

The relationship between the national interest and geographic mental maps may also involve feedback over time. Policymakers do not encounter material geopolitical conditions without cognitive mediation but interpret information about them through pre-existing geographic mental maps, which may influence how they understand threats, opportunities, and the substantive requirements of the national interest. Once formulated, the national interest provides a security-oriented criterion that contributes to the selection and organization of new geographic information, thereby reinforcing or modifying those maps. This recursive relationship does not alter the material existence of geopolitical factors or their role as antecedent conditions. Rather, it reflects the dynamic character of geographic mental maps and the cognitively mediated process through which policymakers engage with the geopolitical environment.

Within the formation of geopolitical vision and geographic mental maps, the national interest functions as an intervening variable between material geopolitical factors and the mediating variables of geographic perception and geopolitical codes. It does not merely transmit the conditioning influence of material geopolitical factors but has a specific effect of its own: it provides a security-oriented criterion through which policymakers select, assess, and organize information about those conditions. In this way, the national interest influences how material geopolitical conditions are cognitively incorporated into geopolitical vision and geographic mental maps without altering their material existence (Figure 4).

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The relationships involved in the formation of geopolitical vision and geographic mental maps should be understood as relations of influence rather than as causal relations that directly explain foreign policy. They interact with the causal factors that bear the primary explanatory burden and help establish the cognitive and spatial conditions under which causal processes operate. Within the broader foreign policy-making process represented in Figure 3, however, geopolitical vision functions as an intervening variable: through its operational application in geographic mental maps, it influences and filters leaders' perceptions of systemic pressures and contributes, alongside those pressures, to the formulation of foreign policy (Ripsman et al., 2016).

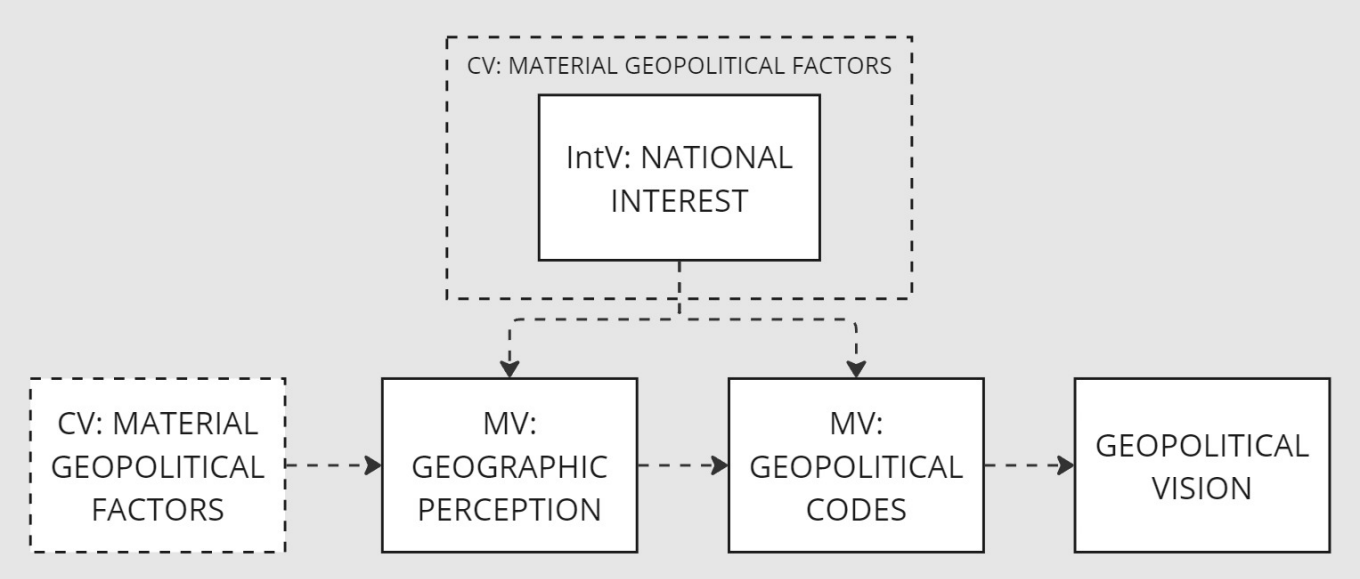

Figure 4. The intervention of the national interest variable in the formation of leaders' geopolitical vision. CV: Condition variable; IntV: Intervening variable; MV: Mediating variable. Source: Author's own elaboration. Note: Dashed boxes delimit broader analytical categories or conditioning variables, while solid boxes represent their individual components. Dashed arrows indicate relationships of influence.

In the present framework, the national interest is not posited as an independent or primary cause. Its intervening role consists in providing a security-oriented criterion that influences which implications of material geopolitical conditions become salient through geographic perception and geopolitical codes. Additionally, it is important to note that intervening variables may have different potential effects. One of these effects is when they serve as moderating factors that influence the strength of the relationship between two variables (Götz, 2021; Creswell, 2014, p. 68). In this analytical framework, the national interest is an intervening variable with a moderating effect: it influences which possibilities established by the condition variable become operationally relevant to foreign policy. At the same time, it remains constrained by the material geopolitical factors identified in Sections 3 and 4. Its content is therefore not arbitrary: while geopolitical factors delimit the range of possible security requirements, the national interest interprets those constraints from the perspective of state survival and conveys their influence into the formation of geographic mental maps.

An observable implication follows from this distinction. A future study could identify decision-makers' interpretations of security requirements in statements or deliberations independently of the geographic priorities expressed in their geopolitical codes and maps. Under comparable material conditions, evidence that those interpretations help explain why some plausible locations or threats are prioritized over others would support a distinct moderating effect. In a transmission-belt account, by contrast, an articulated interpretation of the national interest would convey the security requirements attributed to material geopolitical conditions to geographic perception and geopolitical codes without a separately identifiable reordering of materially plausible priorities. Researchers could trace this conveyance from the articulated interest to the codes' spatial hierarchy of locations, threats, allies, adversaries, and responses, and then examine its expression in geographic mental maps and foreign-policy priorities. These observations would support the transmission pathway but would not alone establish the additional moderating effect.

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The geographic thought of Alfred T. Mahan and Nicholas J. Spykman illustrates how the proposed framework connects material geopolitical conditions, interpretations of the national interest, spatial priorities, and foreign policy prescriptions within particular geographic mental maps.

Alfred T. Mahan analyzed the international landscape of his time and the geopolitical position of the U.S. to infer its national interest and determine the most suitable foreign policy to protect it. Mahan emphasized the importance of sea power for gaining international relevance and linked this factor with the geostrategic location of the U.S. to justify building a strong navy to command the seas, protect its merchant fleet, and facilitate the expansion of U.S. interests, thus becoming a great power (Mahan, 1897, pp. 6, 12–16, 25–26, 80–81). Mahan paid particular attention to maritime trade routes and strategic areas critical to the U.S. national interest, such as the Isthmus of Panama (Mahan, 1897, pp. 12–15, 44–45, 82–85) and the Hawaiian archipelago (Mahan, 1897, pp. 31–32, 39–48), as well as the need for overseas outposts to supply its navy (Mahan, 1897, pp. 15, 26, 48). From his perspective, this was the best way for the U.S. to enter the age of empires, where it had lagged behind European powers.

Viewed through the proposed framework, competition among the imperial powers and the geopolitical position of the U.S. constitute the material antecedent conditions of Mahan's analysis. His interpretation of the national interest directed attention toward maritime commerce, strategic routes, the Panama Isthmus, Hawaii, and overseas naval positions. These spatial priorities were organized into a geopolitical code favoring naval expansion and were integrated into a maritime geopolitical vision of the U.S.'s place in the world, which the geographic mental map presented in Figure 5 represents cartographically.

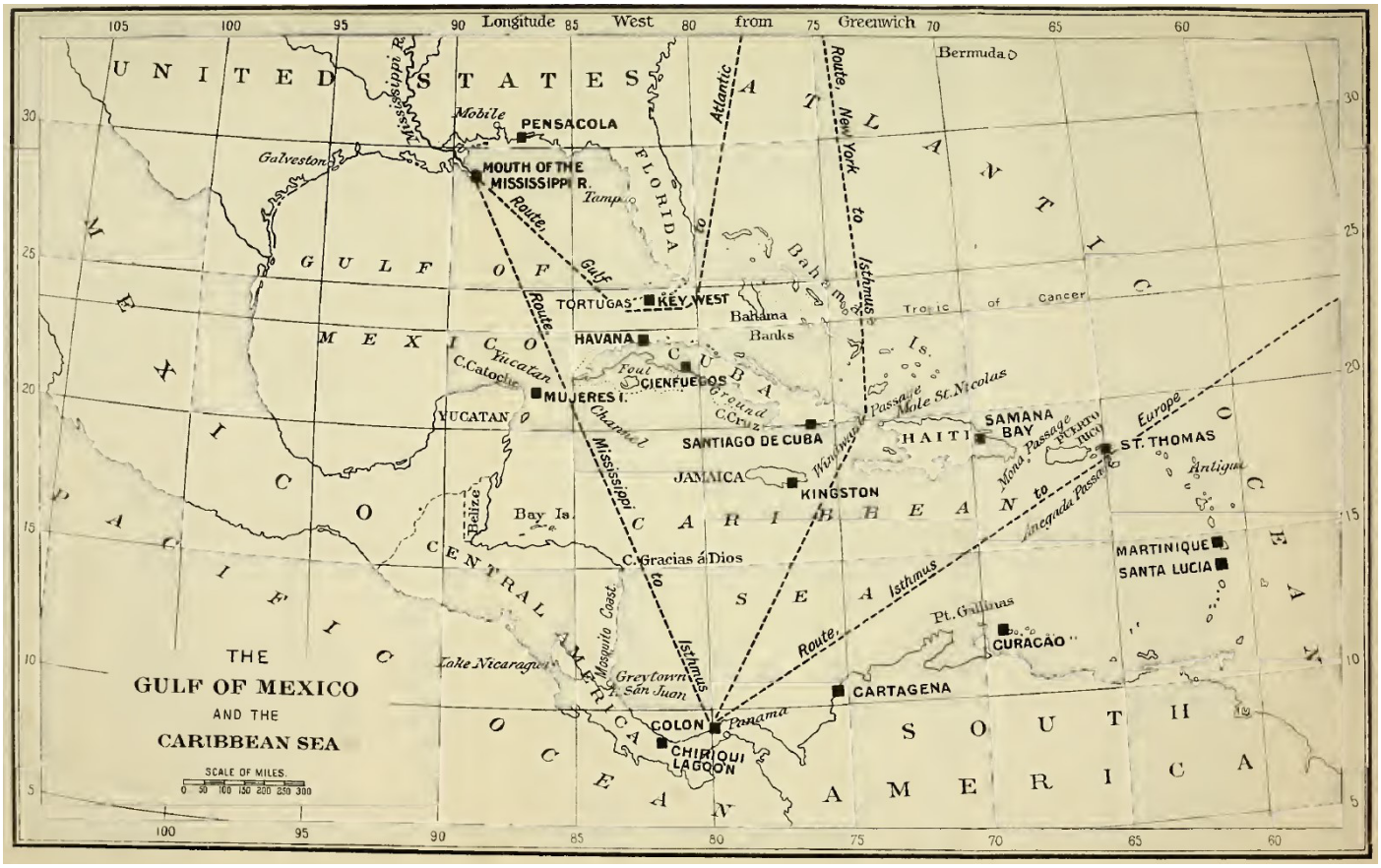

Figure 5. Different maritime routes in the Caribbean Sea converging at the Panama Isthmus. Source: Reproduced from A. T. Mahan, *The Interest of America in Sea Power, Present and Future* (Little, Brown, and Company, 1897), p. 271. Image: Internet Archive.

Another case that illustrates the points discussed so far is Nicholas J. Spykman. Spykman (1938, p. 29) explicitly argued that foreign policy must be aligned with the geographic conditions of the state, as geography is the most stable

factor. This intellectual stance led him to infer the U.S. national interest from its geographic location in relation to Eurasia—the World Island (Spykman, 1944, pp. 18, 33–34, 43). According to Spykman, the U.S. occupies a peripheral position, isolated by two vast oceans to the west and east (Spykman, 1944, pp. 18, 33). From this geographical reality, he concluded that the U.S. national interest lies in preventing the rise of a hegemonic hostile power or the formation of any hostile alliance on the World Island that could threaten its security (Spykman, 1944, pp. 34, 44, 60). To achieve this, he argued that U.S. foreign policy should focus on maintaining the balance of power in Eurasia by projecting its power and influence onto the rimland of the continent (Spykman, 1944, pp. 53–55, 57–58, 60–61).

Viewed through the proposed framework, the international distribution of power and the U.S.'s two-ocean position constitute the material antecedent conditions of Spykman's analysis. His interpretation of the national interest directed attention toward Eurasia and its coastal periphery, while his geopolitical code identified domination of the Old World by a hostile power or coalition as the principal threat and the maintenance of the Eurasian balance of power as the appropriate response. These spatial priorities and strategic relationships were integrated into his geopolitical vision of the encirclement of the Old World, which he represented cartographically in a world map showing the Eurasian rimland encircled by lines of potential power projection from the New World (Spykman, 1942, p. 180).

The comparison also illustrates the framework's possibilist assumptions. Mahan and Spykman both began from the U.S.'s territorial configuration and two-ocean position but assigned different strategic significance to these relatively stable features under different distributions of power, levels of U.S. capabilities, and geopolitical circumstances. Mahan emphasized maritime commerce and overseas naval positions amid imperial competition, whereas Spykman prioritized Eurasia and the prevention of a hostile hegemon. Their divergent codes and maps illustrate how the strategic meaning assigned to physical geography varies with geopolitical conditions and interpretations of the national interest. These conditions delimit plausible responses without prescribing a single geopolitical vision or foreign policy.

Although Mahan and Spykman presented their interpretations of the U.S. national interest in environmentally deterministic terms, this determinism belongs to their historical arguments rather than to the proposed framework. Mahan's strategic ideas, disseminated through his connections with influential U.S. figures such as Theodore Roosevelt, John Hay, and Henry Cabot Lodge, are often seen as having helped provide an intellectual justification for naval expansion and the more assertive overseas policies pursued during the McKinley and Roosevelt administrations (Ekirch, 1966, p. 90; Turk, 1987; Zimmermann, 2002, p. 11; Rofe, 2008). Spykman's emphasis on the balance of power in Eurasia anticipated a strategic concern also present in early Cold War containment, although this parallel does not establish that his writings directly influenced its architects (Kennan, 1947; Leffler, 1984, p. 356; Holmila, 2020; Rudolf, 2021).

6. Discussion

The proposed framework is closely related to Morgado's (2023) model of neoclassical geopolitics, in which geographical and systemic stimuli are filtered through geopolitical agents' perceptions and capacities before shaping geopolitical design and foreign-policy outcomes. Both approaches reject a direct link between material conditions and state behavior. Whereas Morgado's model also examines agents' capacity to act, the present framework addresses a more specific question: how interpretations of the national interest guide the selection of geographic information and its organization into geopolitical codes, contributing to a geopolitical vision represented in geographic mental maps. It thus specifies a cognitive and spatial process through which material conditions acquire strategic significance.

This conceptual focus has limitations. Mahan's and Spykman's writings and maps illustrate relationships among material conditions, interpretations of the national interest, and spatial priorities. They do not provide direct evidence of policymakers' cognitive processes, establish the framework's empirical validity or generalizability, or demonstrate continuing influence on contemporary U.S. policymakers. Moreover, the framework does not establish that the national interest predominates over other influences on geographic perception, such as ideology, strategic culture, domestic politics, or prior experience. It also does not explain how interpretations of the national interest are socially produced and contested.

Future research could apply the framework to policymakers in different periods or comparable states. Statements, internal deliberations, strategic documents, and maps could be used to identify interpretations of security requirements independently of the spatial priorities expressed in geopolitical codes and to trace their relationship with foreign-policy choices. Under comparable material conditions, researchers could then assess whether differences in those interpretations help explain why some plausible places and threats are prioritized over others.

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7. Conclusion

Regarding the first research question, the national interest guides geographic perception in selecting information relevant to state security. The framework explains this selection by conceptualizing the national interest as a security-oriented criterion that directs attention toward geographic conditions bearing on state survival, political autonomy, and territorial integrity. Regarding the second, it helps geopolitical codes organize that information into spatial priorities concerning places, threats, opportunities, allies, and adversaries, shaping the geopolitical vision represented in geographic mental maps. The framework explains this organizational role by showing that geopolitical codes use the national interest as a reference point for ranking locations and actors and linking them to appropriate responses. Regarding the third, material geopolitical factors delimit plausible security requirements and thereby condition the national interest, which influences how those conditions are interpreted through geographic perception and geopolitical codes. The framework explains this linkage by assigning material factors a conditioning role and the national interest an intervening role: the former delimit plausible security requirements, whereas the latter makes some of their geographic implications more salient than others. The resulting maps help leaders interpret systemic pressures in foreign policy-making.

State survival remains the national interest's defining orientation, while material geopolitical conditions give substance to its security priorities. Over time, pre-existing maps may shape interpretations of the national interest, which can in turn reinforce or revise those maps as geopolitical conditions change.

The framework contributes to cognitive and political geography by specifying how interpretations of the national interest direct attention to particular places and organize geographic information into spatial priorities, while showing that material geopolitical conditions delimit plausible strategic interpretations without determining a single geopolitical vision or policy response.

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