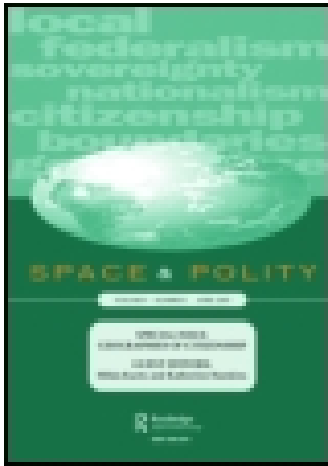


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Introduction to geopolitics: second edition

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BOOK REVIEW

Introduction to geopolitics: second edition, by Colin Flint, Abingdon, Routledge, 2012, 296 pp., £30.99 (pbk), ISBN 978-0-415-66773-9

GEOPOLITICS remains a cornerstone of contemporary human geography, with new introductions on the topic frequently appearing. Among these, Colin Flint's second edition of *Introduction to geopolitics* is distinguishable as a core student textbook which outlines a contentious and frequently esoteric subject with clarity, energetic prose and well-chosen demonstrations of how theory and practice interconnect to shape our world.

Following a refreshingly jargon-free Prologue which establishes the importance of geopolitics and enjoins readers to consider the importance of geopolitics in their own lives and understandings of the world, Chapter 1 introduces core elements of the discipline (with an early discussion of the intrinsic "messiness" of modern geopolitics) alongside key themes such as territory, actors and agency. This latter topic forms the foundation of Chapter 2, with a specific focus on the War on Terror. Chapters 3 and 4 introduce elements of geopolitical coding, using nationalism and national identities to demonstrate how geopolitics is enacted and justified. Case studies for this focus on Arab nationalism and Chechnya, to demonstrate the close intersection between nationalism as *theory* and as *practice* in geopolitical visions and policies. This provides the reader with ample understanding of the interplay between politics and territory to grasp the sophisticated arguments of Chapter 5 on territoriality, illustrated using the classic example of Israel/Palestine alongside a more novel, timely case study in the form of the border between the two Koreas. A natural progression into Chapter 6 introduces the reader to geopolitics beyond state boundaries, with a significant focus on non-state actors and cross-boundary geopolitical activity as illustrated by terrorism, transnational peace movements and cyberwarfare. Having thus challenged the classical notion that geopolitics is restricted to states and government policy-making, Chapters 7 and 8 investigate the power of agency and the role of the biosphere in shaping geopolitical attitudes, visions and attempts to impose politics onto territory. Chapter 9 aptly concludes the work by returning to the Prologue's emphasis on "Messy Geopolitics" (p. 249), presenting an appropriately postmodern twist on how the essentially Victorian concept of geopolitics remains as valid, if not more so, for today's individual as it ever was for statesmen and empire builders. The result is a well-structured, coherent flow between chapters which ensures that pertinent topics are explained not in isolation but with clear connections to each other, reflecting the nuanced and interconnected discipline that is contemporary geopolitics.

The book has a number of key strengths which distinguish it from competitors. First among these is the author's use of contemporary, easy-to-understand case studies which use a spectrum of examples to illustrate diverse themes. Such case studies include traditional foci of geopolitics, such as Israel/Palestine and former Yugoslavia, but alongside examples rarely seen in texts marketed towards students, such as the geopolitics of nation-building in modern Burma and pre-1991 Iraq. Second, and connected to this, is the book's balance between state and non-state actors and

agents. The inclusion of terrorists, environmental activists, peace movements and cyberwarriors not only emphasizes the geopolitical power of agents other than the state, but aptly illustrates discussions of feminist (pp. 109–117), pacifist (pp. 167–174) and “messy” (pp. 249–270) approaches to geopolitics. Third is the author’s research-driven approach. Subtly woven throughout latter chapters is an underlying theme of *pacifist geopolitics*, a refreshing turn in a discipline traditionally preoccupied with war. This illustrates the author’s ability to connect the core elements of geopolitical thought and practice for teaching purposes with emergent expert research – a rare feature of work written for student consumption.

The nine chapters are divided into digestible segments organized by theme, allowing a natural flow of argument within each chapter. Coherence on a broader level is achieved through “*Summary and Segue*” sections at the end of each chapter, allowing the reader to recap the chapter’s content in the context of neighbouring discussions. The division of literature into chapter-specific blocks is a useful strategy and allows student readers to tackle the “*Activities*” – thought experiments which crop up throughout the chapters – with reference to key readings. Helpfully embedded in the text are relevant, up-to-date photographs, diagrams, charts, tables, graphs and maps which illustrate core arguments and empirical case studies in the separate chapters. Text boxes are used to great effect in order to separate case studies from theoretical discussions.

Throughout its varied chapters the book explores terrestrial geopolitics in a myriad of forms, although maritime geopolitics (Steinberg, 2014) receives only a brief mention (Flint, 2012, pp. 154–156), while aerial (Adey, Whitehead, & Williams, 2013) and orbital (Dolman, 2001) geopolitics are absent. Surprisingly for an introduction to geopolitics, there is no discussion of cartography and its power in shaping political attitudes (Foster, 2013) and policies (Monmonier, 1996), despite a large number of maps appearing in the book.

This is clearly a book aimed at educating students, and while the summarized and well-illustrated examples within are valuable in clarifying the diverse themes that populate modern geopolitics, its utility to established scholars is by necessity limited. However, it is in this capacity that the book’s true strength lies. As an introductory textbook with the capacity to explain complicated and obtuse concepts with clarity, Flint has penned a pedagogical work *par excellence*, which will undoubtedly be of limitless value to undergraduate and postgraduate students in a range of disciplines.

Originally published in 2012, Flint’s work predates the 2014 Ukraine Crisis; an event which has had a significant impact upon the understanding and awareness of geopolitics and territoriality in the Eurocentric West. It is anticipated that the events of 2014 will trigger a proliferation of introductory texts on political geography, regionalism, nationalism and territorial conflict (Foster, Edward, & Johnson, 2014). Among this inevitable and imminent surge, Flint’s *Introduction to geopolitics* will remain an extremely valuable text which combines clarity, sophistication, critical insight and a highly readable style: a rare combination which ensures this book’s utility to beginner and advanced students long into the future.

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