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Geopolitical Tropes and Popular Geopolitics: The Great Game and Historical Narrative in Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* (1901)

Rabia Mansoor*

Abstract

This article attempts to show the significance of the 'geopolitical tropes' in shaping the mind of people. It explores how public discourse and diplomacy are moulded with these tropes. The focus of the study is the trope of "Great Game" which was originally used to describe the 19th-century rivalry between the British and Russian Empires. This trope was amplified in general by mass media and literature. It functions as a cognitive shortcut as only a contest. While compressing the complex multilateral political and social dynamics in Central Asia into a simple, zero-sum binary match. These tropes make global affairs accessible and popular. The stories embedded with these tropes often obscure ground realities, reinforcing the deterministic views of international relations.

*In order to understand the mechanics of the trope which is essential for deconstructing how popular culture influences a country's foreign policy. This paper puts forward the notion of "Great Game" as a simplified mindsets, that still persists from its 19th-century origins into the 21st century. To analyze this, this research adapts a dual framework integrating Critical Geopolitics and Narrative Theory. Using Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*, as a primary case study, the article demonstrates how these tropes are encoded in literature, circulated through popular culture, and implanted in the collective consciousness.*

Keywords: Geopolitics, geopolitical tropes, Critical Geopolitics, Narrative Theory, Popular Geopolitics, Roland Barthes, Rudyard Kipling, *Kim*

* Ms. Rabia Mansoor is an Independent Researcher, based in Karachi. Email: srabiam@gmail.com.

Introduction

We are living in the midst of an era where information is saturated. This information data is also controlled by the algorithm. Understanding how individuals grasp complex global affairs is very complicated. Tracing the pathways of individuals and how they comprehend the information of world affairs is difficult. Because the comprehension rarely starts from academic journals or diplomatic cables. Instead, people encounter world politics through a wide range of media. Usually they are educated through the mainstream film landscape. As well as by bestseller novels and books. Sensational headlines, video games and social media are also part of this list. Audiences hardly see full geographical and geopolitical intricacies but the side of the story they are shown. They recognize the recurring narratives, metaphors, and stereotypes that structure international politics. These constructed representations are not neutral. They merely depict specific power setup, and rearranged geographic space. They also evoke particular affective responses too.¹

The geopolitical maps for the public are rarely drawn by policymakers, diplomats, or any military strategists. Instead, these are vividly illustrated by the storytellers, regardless of their medium used. Popular entertainment provides a primary resource through which people undergo geopolitical enculturation. When engaging with fictional media, audiences do more than just *suspend disbelief*.² They actively absorb a carefully constructed spatial understanding of the world around them. Through heroes and villains these storytellers dictate who is to be feared. The stories a society consumes quietly lay the invisible groundwork for what the masses will accept as necessary statecraft, effectively manufacturing consents long before a political speech is delivered.

To understand this phenomenon requires an examination of Popular Geopolitics, a recently developed sub-discipline of critical geopolitics. The domain of popular geopolitics is the study of how geographic and political imaginaries are constructed, circulated, and consumed in everyday cultural life and reinforce spatial identities and geopolitical narratives.³

¹ A. Watson. Popular Geopolitics. *Elgar Concise Encyclopedia of Geopolitics* (2026), 145.

² S. T. Coleridge. *Biographia Literaria or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions* (1960), J. M. Dent. Trans. (Original work published 1817).

³ K. Dodds. *Geopolitics: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press 2007).

Historical Background

The origins of Popular Geopolitics can be traced back to Classical Geopolitics. The concept of geopolitics originated at the turn of the twentieth century, coined in 1899 by the Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellén.⁴ Deeply influenced by the intellectual climate of his time, Kjellén theorised the state as a geographical organism or a biological form of life that possessed willpower and was engaged in a continuous struggle for survival and expansion.⁵ His ideas were heavily indebted to the German geographer Friedrich Ratzel, who introduced the organic theory of the state and the concept of *Lebensraum* (living space) in his 1897 work *Politische Geographie*.⁶ Rooted in social Darwinism and environmental determinism, this model induced states, as organic entities, had to expand territorially to remain viable and inevitable decline.⁷

In the Anglo-American sphere, classical geopolitics took the shape of grand geostrategic theories. In 1890, the American admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan published *The Influence of Seapower Upon History*, establishing a doctrine that linked intercontinental dominance to naval power and the control of maritime commerce.⁸ On the contrary, the British geographer Halford Mackinder argued in his famous 1904 address, *The Geographical Pivot of History*, that technological advancements like railways were shifting the balance of power toward land-based empires.⁹ Mackinder conceptualised the Eurasian landmass as the Heartland, warning that whichever power controlled this pivot area could command the world.¹⁰ In Germany, General Karl Haushofer adapted these theories into *Geopolitik*, establishing a strategic foundation for Nazi expansionism during World War II. Classical geopolitics was defined by an imperialist, state-centric, and racially biased worldview that used a supposedly objective perspective of geography to pursue resource-driven statecraft.¹¹

⁴ R. Björk & T. Lundén (eds). *Territory, State and Nation: The Geopolitics of Rudolf Kjellén*. Vol. 41 (Berghahn Books, 2021).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ J. Dittmer & D. Bos. *Popular Culture, Geopolitics, and Identity* (USA: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019).

⁷ S. Dalby, P. Routledge & G. Ó. Tuathail. *The Geopolitics Reader* (Routledge, 2003).

⁸ Dittmer and Bos. *Popular Culture, Geopolitics, and Identity*.

⁹ Dalby, Routledge & Tuathail. *The Geopolitics Reader*.

¹⁰ Dittmer & Bos. *Popular Culture, Geopolitics*.

¹¹ Watson. Popular Geopolitics. *Elgar Concise Encyclopedia*, 145.

The next phase of Geopolitics is during the Cold War. Following the defeat of Nazi Germany, the term geopolitics fell into disrepute and became an academic taboo due to its associations with Hitler's *Lebensraum* and violent imperialism.¹² However, geopolitical reasoning was swiftly resurrected to map the post-war ideological struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union.¹³ In the phase of geopolitics, the geography of countries was connected with rigid ideologies. During the Cold War, diplomats like George Kennan, designed the US containment policy. The Soviet Union was portrayed as a contagious ideological threat. This era divided the globe into a free First World, totalitarian Second World, and developing Third World as a strategic chessboard.¹⁴ The domino theory during the Vietnam conflict, completely ignored the geographical realities.¹⁵

After the Cold War, geopolitics shifted toward Critical Geopolitics. During the late 1980s and 1990s, an intellectual rupture in political geography led scholars like Gearóid Ó Tuathail, Simon Dalby, and John Agnew to challenge the presumed objectivity of classical thought. Influenced by post-structuralists like Foucault and Derrida, and Edward Said's *Orientalism*, this movement rejected geography as a natural fact.¹⁶ Instead, critical geopolitics exposed geopolitical knowledge as a culturally and politically constructed discourse.¹⁷ Critical Geopolitics seeks to expose how "intellectuals of statecraft" spatialise world politics into maps of power and identity to justify foreign policy. It categorizes geopolitical discourse into three types: *formal* (academics), *practical* (policymakers), and *popular* (everyday media).¹⁸

Popular geopolitics emerged as an interdisciplinary field examining how geopolitical reasoning operates in daily life and mass media rather than just formal government sectors.¹⁹ In the 1990s, seminal studies including Joanne Sharp's work on *Reader's Digest*, Klaus Dodds's analysis of *James Bond*, and Steve Bell's cartoons established popular culture as a critical site

¹² Björk & Lundén (eds). *Territory, State and Nation*.

¹³ Dalby, Routledge & Tuathail. *The Geopolitics Reader*.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Dittmer, & Bos. *Popular Culture, Geopolitics*.

¹⁶ Watson. *Popular Geopolitics*.

¹⁷ Dalby, Routledge, *The Geopolitics Reader*.

¹⁸ Watson. *Popular Geopolitics*.

¹⁹ Ibid.

of political knowledge.²⁰

The new emerging field postulates that popular culture and international politics are co-constitutive. Entertainment does not merely reflect international relations, but actively shapes citizens' "geographical imaginations" by determining what is politically possible and who constitutes the "enemy Other". This subject relies on a foundational trinity concept of narrative, myth, and stereotype to explain how complex world affairs are boiled down into consumable binaries of "us" versus "them" across films, comic books, video games, novels, and news journalism.²¹

In recent years, the field has evolved into "Popular Geopolitics 2.0".²² Responding to critiques that early scholarship was excessively fixated on textual deconstruction and an ocularcentric (purely visual) focus on media representations, the discipline has expanded its methodological apparatus. Contemporary popular geopolitics now incorporates audience reception studies, ethnography, and non-representational theories to explore the material, affective, and emotional dimensions of global politics.²³ This includes studying how geopolitical power is physically embodied and perceived, such as the adrenaline of playing a military video game or the communal affect generated by digitally networked social media movements.²⁴

Current popular geopolitics research often highlights the visual allure of films and games, yet frequently neglects the medium that pioneered the genre, the novel. Literature remains the oldest, most foundational, and most influential vehicle for mass geopolitical communication. World literature is not a static collection of texts, but a dynamic field whose theory and practice have been consistently reshaped by international events, power struggles, and shifting borders.²⁵

²⁰ R. A. Saunders & V. Strukov (eds). *Popular Geopolitics: Plotting an Evolving Interdiscipline* (Routledge, 2018).

²¹ R. A. Saunders. *Popular Geopolitics and Nation Branding in the Post-Soviet Realm* (Routledge, 2016).

²² Watson. *Popular Geopolitics*.

²³ J. Dittmer & N. Gray. "Popular Geopolitics 2.0: Towards New Methodologies of the Everyday." *Geography Compass* 4, no.11 (2010): 1664-1677.

²⁴ Watson. *Popular Geopolitics*.

²⁵ T. D'haen. "Geopolitics and World Literature." In *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Geopolitics* (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2024), 1275 – 1288.

During the 18th and 19th-century the novels were not just a source of entertainment but it was used as a mouthpiece of imperial ambitions. It was the same era of European expansion when the novel became a key tool for political indoctrination. Due to the partiality and political biases the newspapers were unable to achieve projection of neutrality. This gap was filled by literature. Authors employed different genres like adventure stories, travelogues, to propagate imperialist ideals. These narratives subtly shaped the understanding of the public. They frame the world through diverse tropes of the civilized world, lawless regions and mysterious Eastern threats.²⁶

Literature is a representation of life though it also reflects the geopolitical anxieties and ambitions of its time. Particularly novels, which actively helps in producing public approvals but also maintaining these objectives.²⁷

Literature is a creative work of an author yet reflects the direct political agenda as well as.²⁸ They embody geopolitical tropes to convey the ideological essence.²⁹

Geopolitical Tropes

Rooted in classical rhetoric, "trope" refers to a figure of speech that employs non-literal language to create deeper meaning. The word trope has a rich etymological history, originating from the ancient Hellenic language. At its most basic, the word *trópos* signifies a turn, way, manner, or style. The foundational meaning points towards a sense of redirection, a specific approach, or a characteristic fashion of expression. This Greek root *trópos* is itself derived from the verb *trépein*, which carries the core meaning of "to turn".³⁰

This etymology is essential for assessing modern political tropes. The idea of "turning" signifies a transition from literal to figurative meaning. In

²⁶ Edward W. Said. *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Random House, 2014).

²⁷ T. D'haen. Geopolitics and World Literature.

²⁸ A. Babukar, A. Bartolomeo. "Literature Social Role and Artist's Accountability," *Global Journal of Art and Social Science Education* 4, no,1 (2016): 141–151.

²⁹ S. Dalby & G.Ó. Tuathail. "The Critical Geopolitics Constellation: Problematizing Fusions of Geographical Knowledge and Power," *Political Geography*, 15 (1996): 451-456.

³⁰ Definition of Trope, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/trope>.

rhetoric, a trope utilizes this non-literal "turn" through metaphor, irony, or metonymy.³¹

However, the specific academic concept of geopolitical tropes emerged in 1996 introduced by academics Simon Dalby and Gearóid Ó Tuathail.³² Applied to geopolitics, tropes function at the intersection of geography and political power to understand policy narratives in popular culture. In 1996, Simon Dalby and Gearóid Ó Tuathail dismantled classical geopolitics' objective facade, arguing that geography is a politically inscribed text. They demonstrated that geographical depictions in real time are done by literary tropes. These tropes can help realistically the use of state force and also restrict the public perception.³³ In the geopolitical context it is called a "geopolitical script", termed by Gearóid Ó Tuathail.³⁴ The culturally embedded concepts and illustration of the world makes specific interpretations seem acceptable while others unbelievable. With the everyday repetition of these tropes the society's ideologies are reproduced. Aid in crafting the political narratives.³⁵

The power through which geopolitical tropes are driven is their easy accessibility unlike complex theoretical arguments. Along with the continuous repetition from various media platforms. And narrations that resonate with public emotions. The *modus operandi* of tropes can be described in Roland Barthes words. He outlined the concept of "mythologization".³⁶ The repetition has the ability to transform a certain historical and politically motivated idea into a naturalized and as a universal reality.

The notion of Geopolitical tropes began from both historical and ideological contexts. The initial trope can be considered as the Civilized

³¹ S. Green, C. M. Alpaslan & I. Mitroff. Organizational inquiry as a rhetorical process: The role of tropes in organizational theory and methods," *Electronic Journal of Business Research Methods*, 8, no. 1 (2010): 46-62.

³² Dalby & Tuathail. *The Critical Geopolitics Constellation*, 456.

³³ G. Ó. Tuathail & J. Agnew. "Geopolitics and Discourse: Practical Geopolitical Reasoning in American Foreign Policy." *Political Geography* 11, no.2 (1992): 190-204.

³⁴ G. Ó. Tuathail. *Critical Geopolitics: The Politics of Writing Social Space* (London: Routledge, 1996).

³⁵ Dalby & Tuathail. "The Critical Geopolitics Constellation."

³⁶ D. J. Huppertz. "Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*," *Design and Culture* 3, no. 1 (2011): 85 - 100. doi:10.2752/175470810X12863771378833.

versus Barbarism. It dates back to the Greeks. They used to define the *Oikoumene* as the civilized world.³⁷ Those outside the boundary were rejected as "Barbarians". It was used as an insult targeting their "unintelligible" languages. This trope validated the idea of superiority of one world over the other as a prevalent binary still relevant today.

The "Great Game" trope is the first "geopolitical script"³⁸ that was tailored for mass consumption. It emerged alongside the telegraph and spy novels. This trope transformed foreign policy into a "Sporting Metaphor" for regional hegemony. The genealogy of geopolitical tropes originates in classical geopolitics. Mackinder's 'Heartland' and Spykman's 'Rimland' tropes, divide world space into strategic zones for domination.

Cold War geopolitics utilized tropes like the Iron Curtain, Domino Theory, Bipolar World, Proxy Chessboard, Containment, and Third World. Churchill's "Iron Curtain" partitioned the globe ideologically.³⁹ The Domino Theory suggested that one nation falling to communism would trigger a regional collapse.⁴⁰ The Bipolar World reduced global politics to a binary choice between capitalism and communism, while the Proxy Chessboard framed sovereign nations in Latin America, Africa, and Asia as mere squares for superpower conflict.⁴¹ George F. Kennan's Containment viewed communism as an infectious pressure to be restricted, and the Third World was seen as an undeveloped edge for superpowers to design.⁴²

Post-Soviet expectations for the decline of geopolitical tropes were unmet. Instead, more intricate layers emerged, such as Rogue and Failed States, the Clash of Civilizations, the War on Terror, and the Axis of Evil.

³⁷ D. Thap. Mapping the Oikoumene – Explorers & Exploration of the Hellenistic World. *The Hellenistic Age Podcast*, episode 52 (2020, September 28). <https://hellenisticagepodcast.wordpress.com/2020/09/28/052-mapping-the-oikoumene-explorers-exploration-of-the-hellenistic-world/>.

³⁸ Tuathail. *Critical Geopolitics*.

³⁹ Iron Curtain Speech by Churchill in *Encyclopædia Britannica* (2019). <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Iron-Curtain-Speech>.

⁴⁰ President Eisenhower presents Cold War "domino theory," (April 7, 1954). <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/april-7/eisenhower-gives-famous-domino-theory-speech>.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Office of the Historian. *Kennan and Containment, 1947*. <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/kennan>.

The 1990s introduced the “rogue state”⁴³ trope, tagged nations to justify US military intervention and regime change similar to the “failed state”.⁴⁴ Huntington's “The Clash of Civilizations”⁴⁵ postulated the future of the conflicts would be cultural and religious. “War on Terror”⁴⁶ trope framed borderless terrorism to post 9/11 military expansion. The “Axis of Evil”⁴⁷ used Cold War rhetoric presenting unallied states jeopardizing world peace.

Geopolitical tropes are prevalent in contemporary discourse, shaping how policymakers, journalists, filmmakers, and citizens perceive global events and their own positions in the world. Because they often function invisibly accepted as natural facts rather than recognized as human constructions their underlying ideological influence frequently remains unexamined.

The link between geopolitical tropes and popular geopolitics is organic and mutually reinforcing. Popular geopolitics defined by Ó Tuathail and Dalby's Tripartite Framework alongside formal and practical geopolitics is the daily circulation of geographical ideas via media and literature.⁴⁸ It serves as the cultural domain through which the public processes world affairs, primarily via these tropes. Conversely, geopolitical tropes gain power and longevity through their dissemination across popular geopolitical channels.⁴⁹

To understand global politics, it requires examining the association between geopolitical tropes and popular geopolitics. The trope serves as the conceptual foundation. While popular geopolitics acts as the primary vehicle for public acceptance of that idea.

⁴³ <https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/isa/hop01/>.

⁴⁴ Robert I. Rotberg, “Failed States, Collapsed States, Weak States: Causes and Indicators,” in Robert I. Rotberg (ed.), *When States Fail: Causes and Consequences* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 1.

⁴⁵ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

⁴⁶ Harmonie Toros, Lee Jarvis, and Richard Jackson, “What the War on Terror Leaves Behind: An introduction,” *European Journal of International Security* 10, no. 1 (2025): 4. <https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2024.39>.

⁴⁷ Alex Wagner. “Bush Labels North Korea, Iran, Iraq an Axis of Evil,” Arms Control Association. <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2002-03/press-releases/bush-labels-north-korea-iran-iraq-axis-evil>.

⁴⁸ Watson. Popular geopolitics.

⁴⁹ K. Dodds. *Geopolitics: A very short introduction*.

In the digital age, traditional information gatekeeping techniques are fractured. The boundary between elite geopolitical discourse and popular understanding of geopolitics are increasingly porous. The roles are now reversed. Policymakers are now drawing inspiration from popular narratives. On the other hand, the filmmakers and social media users encode and circulate these tropes at high speeds.⁵⁰ This intertwines formal theories, policy, and popular culture to merge as a single, interconnected system.⁵¹

Popular geopolitics encompasses diverse sources. It covers traditional and new mushrooming mass media like reports, documentaries, podcasts, YouTube. The entertainment industry of films, TV, video games, graphic novels are also part of it. Global literature such as thrillers, sci-fi, dystopian fiction are one of the most influential bases of popular geopolitics. With new trends emerging, visual culture like memes and political cartoons along with everyday discourse such as jokes and false news are part of it.

Popular geopolitics looks at how geopolitical knowledge is manufactured in living rooms and cinemas. Popular geopolitics is a primary site of knowledge production in public. It is not mere derivative domain of geopolitics.

Theoretical Framework

The assessment of the geopolitical tropes, how they are perceived within popular culture is meticulous. It requires a multidimensional approach to understand geopolitical intelligence. A dual framework of Critical Geopolitics and Narrative Theory offers lenses for recognizing these tropes. Together they help in understanding the tools that create meaning in contemporary politics.

This correlation illuminates complex phenomena. Critical Geopolitics provides a macro-level analysis of power and spatial discourse construction. While Narrative Theory offers micro-level tools to dissect *how* stories persuade audiences to accept those discourses.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ J. Dittmer. "On Captain America and 'Doing' Popular Culture in the Social Sciences." in Federica Caso and Caitlin Hamilton (Eds). *Popular Culture and World Politics: Theories, Methods, Pedagogies* (E-International Relations, 2015), 45-50.

Critical Geopolitics inquires the big, global perspective questions. It tells us that the world map is not a natural, objective thing. It is a script written by powerful people to justify their actions. It tells about the power structures and identifying the political fabrication within the discourse. It is powerless to explain why people believe the fiction. It fails to explain the mechanics of how spectators get influenced by a spy novel or movie.⁵²

The Narrative Theory invites specific queries. It is unconcerned with the actualities of foreign policy; exclusively focus on the essential mechanics of emplotment. This framework looks at technicalities of storytelling like point of view, pacing, plot devices, and character archetypes.⁵³

Sole reliance on Narrative Theory yields a mere standard book report. One may meticulously detail the workings of suspense in a thriller, still overlook the severe real-world political repercussions instigated by that suspense.

Hence, the dual framework Critical Geopolitics demonstrates that these texts are not entirely safe entertainment but rather constitute the Narrative Infrastructure supporting actual conflicts.

The Great Game and *Kim*

As it is established that the Great Game is one of the classical examples of how the geopolitical ambition can be elucidated to masses by using the most ordinary medium. The phrase *The Great Game* was first used in the background of British concerns in India by Colonel Arthur Wellesley in 1804, who applied it to potential military action against the Maratha Confederacy, a usage entirely unrelated to Russia or Central Asia.⁵⁴

However, in the context of Central Asian geopolitics, Captain Arthur Conolly of the East India Company is widely credited with coining the phrase in 1840 in correspondence with Major Henry Rawlinson, likely adapting it from an earlier letter by British envoy William Macnaghten.⁵⁵

⁵² K. Dodds, M. Kuus, & J. Sharp. *The Ashgate research companion to critical geopolitics* (Ashgate, 2013).

⁵³ Jonathan Culler. *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*, 2nd edn, Very Short Introductions (Oxford, Oxford Academic, 2011).

⁵⁴ S. Becker. "The 'Great Game': The History of an Evocative Phrase." *Asian Affairs*, 43, no.1 (2012): 61-80.

⁵⁵ P. Hopkirk. *The Great Game: On Secret Service in High Asia* (Oxford University Press, 2001).

Over the past two centuries, the meaning of the phrase has evolved dramatically through several distinct facets. The first phase was as a cooperative, civilising mission, for Captain Arthur Conolly in the 1840s. The "great game" or "noble game" was fundamentally an altruistic and benevolent commitment.⁵⁶ He anticipated a civilising mission in which Britannia would persuade Central Asian rulers to free slaves and establish secure borders to stop nomadic raiders. Significantly, Conolly saw Russia not as an enemy, but as a potential ally and partner in this effort to spread European civilisation across the region. Historian John William Kaye brought Conolly's phrase into the public domain in 1851. Though Kaye also used the term to describe Richard Wellesley's earlier, purely internal pursuit of British supremacy in India.⁵⁷

The second phase is of Anglo-Russian confrontation. This phrase was stripped of its cooperative meaning in 1879 by the writer Demetrius Charles Boulger. Boulger applied the term to describe a direct defensive struggle against Russian encroachment, advocating for military measures such as placing a British garrison in Herat to forestall a Russian advance toward India. Under Boulger, the metaphor shifted from a civilising mission to a confrontational chessboard where Britain and Russia were actively playing against one another.⁵⁸

The third phase this term is adopted in the espionage arena and for the secret agents. The British author Rudyard Kipling gave the phrase the meaning it is most well-known for today. Through his novel *Kim*, Kipling permanently analogized "The Great Game" with a shadowy world of undercover espionage, information gathering, and counter intelligence.⁵⁹ In his fictionalised tale, the game was a thrilling struggle fought by disguised operatives of the Indian secret service and their Russian adversaries.⁶⁰

Recently, the term has transitioned into modern geopolitics as "The New Great Game." While strategists initially avoided Kipling's romanticized spy imagery for Indian defense, the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan

⁵⁶ A. Vescovi. "Beyond East and West. The meaning and significance of Kim's Great Game." *Altre Modernità*, 11 (2014):10-20.

⁵⁷ Becker. The 'Great Game'.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Vescovi. "Beyond East and West."

⁶⁰ Becker. "The 'Great Game', 80.

triggered a major resurgence of the concept in literature. It now characterizes 21st-century superpower rivalries involving the U.S., Russia, and regional actors competing for dominance across the Middle East, Central Asia, and South Asia.⁶¹

Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* anchors the spy thriller genre. As an interdisciplinary work of late Victorian literature, it serves as a story of the imperial quest. Blending elements of the picaresque, bildungsroman, and adventure story, *Kim* establishes a foundational baseline for geopolitical narratives.⁶² It also presents a dual framing that intricately weaves a spiritual pilgrimage together with the geopolitical machination of British espionage in India.

The story begins with Kimball O'Hara (Kim), an Irish soldier's orphaned son, whose culturally fluid⁶³ vagabond life in Lahore allowed him to navigate the city like a native. After encountering a Buddhist Tibetan lama searching for the miraculous River of the Arrow, a sacred stream believed to cleanse sin and liberate the soul. Kim joins him as a *chela* (disciple).

Meanwhile, Kim was drawn into the covert world of the British Secret Service. An Afghan horse dealer and British spy named Mahbub Ali recruited the boy to carry a coded message encrypted as the pedigree of a white stallion, to British officials in Umballa. This message finally triggered a British military campaign, marking Kim's unofficial entry into the Great Game.

While traveling south along the Grand Trunk Road, Kim and the lama encountered the Mavericks, the Irish regiment once served by Kim's father. Identified by their Red Bull flag, which fulfilled an ancestral prophecy, the regiment's chaplains confirmed Kim's European heritage through his father's papers.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² D. Birch & K. Hooper (eds). *The Concise Oxford Companion to English Literature* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁶³ IPSweb. (2022). "Borderland communities are culturally fluid, but politically tend to get rigid" – Dr Ghulam Hussain Sufi – Institute of Policy Studies. <https://www.ips.org.pk/borderland-communities-are-culturally-fluid-but-politically-tend-to-get-rigid-dr-ghulam-hussain-sufi/>.

To ensure Kim gained the "wisdom of the Sahibs",⁶⁴ the lama paused his quest to fund Kim's education at St. Xavier's in Lucknow. Parallel to his formal schooling, Kim was groomed for the Secret Service by Colonel Creighton, Mahbub Ali, Hurree Chunder Mookerjee, and Lurgan Sahib. His vacations were dedicated to mastering espionage skills like disguise, surveying, and the "Play of the Jewels"⁶⁵ for memorization, effectively channeled his innate street-smarts into imperial service.

After finishing school, Kim rejoined the lama, traveling deep into the Himalayas. Their spiritual journey collides with the Great Game when Hurree Babu enlists Kim to help track a Russian and a Frenchman secretly mapping mountain passes. This foreign collaboration with local rulers sought to undermine British interests in the region.

When the agents and the holy man meet, the Russian's physical assault on the lama sparks a mutiny among the hill-porters. In this chaos, Kim protects his master and also seizes the secret documents from them. Hence he was able to complete the given task of neutralizing the Russian threat. This episode causes the lama in a spiritual crisis. He considers his state of anger as a hindrance in his enlightenment. Returning to the plain, a wealthy Sahiba provides them with shelter. Kim delivers the espionage documents to Hurree Babu. He fulfilled his duty to the British State.

The novel concludes with the joyful lama whose search is over. He also wants Kim's liberation too. In the end, both master and disciple are looking for salvation.

Kim transcends its status from a simple classic adventure tale of a British orphan in colonial India. It is a sophisticated geopolitical narrative which is full of imperial tropes. The spatial imaginaries in the novel continue to influence modern discourse.

Kipling's *Kim* centers on the 'Great Game', the Anglo-Russian strategic rivalry for control over Central Asia and India. Driven by geopolitical schemes, the plot encodes tropes regarding civilizational and racial hierarchies, the civilizing mission, and the 'threatening Other'. As a widely adapted work, *Kim* popularized these narratives, demonstrating how

⁶⁴ Rudyard Kipling, *Kim* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987).

⁶⁵ Ibid.

geopolitical thought emerged from imperial projects. The text illustrates that such narrativization did more than reflect reality; it actively shaped public behavior, justified imperial policy, and influenced actual British foreign strategy in the region.

Reflections

Kim stands as a canonical geopolitical text, deeply embedded in the historical context of late Victorian Britain. This era is defined by strategic competition between the empires. Along with the geopolitical anxieties, and nationalistic imaginaries. The "Great Game" was for dominance over the Central Asian region including Afghanistan, and India. This conflict was non-military in nature. At its core, it was a struggle for territory and its resources alongside the trade routes, and spheres of influence.

India was viewed as an imperial 'jewel' by the Britain empire which was essential for its wealth and global power. As a result, Russian expansion near its periphery appeared as an existential threat. This makes the 'Great Game' a dominant concern for British leaders and its public.

British geopolitical anxiety was both a strategic and cartographic need of the time. Britain sought to map and understand the region. The knowledge of geography, resources, and population composition of Central Asia and Afghanistan were essential components of the planning. The exploration of this periphery became fundamental to the Great Game for both empires.

Though Mackinder's Heartland theory was published in 1904, Great Game competitiveness was based on the same postulate. Its core logic pivoted around those who control the Eurasian interior would have global supremacy. The strategic interests of Britain through Mackinder's theory would become necessary to halt Russian expansion in the region.

Before and in the midst of any geopolitical tension, popular culture is the vital source to circulate geopolitical knowledge required to understand it. A popular adventure tale of agents outsmarting other operatives became highly persuasive in public circles. Far from mere entertainment, these works functioned as key sites for knowledge production. Similarly, *Kim* too shaped how the people understood the Great Game and the Russian threat. Kipling crafted a unique geopolitical piece of literature, who has a

profound awareness of the setting of the novel and global political arena. His narratives reflect the British geopolitical imagination of the territory.

Critical geopolitics deconstructs how *Kim* naturalizes specific representations of power, identity, and space. The story focuses on mapping India and Central Asia to establish British strategic dominance and categorize regional peoples and territories.

The novel opens at the Lahore Museum is an explicit description of the indigenous landscape. A space "given up to Indian arts and manufactures"⁶⁶ where locals must ask the British Curator "to explain" their own history. This portrays India as a space to be arranged, reflecting Edward Said's concept of Western knowledge production. The opening scene significance, underscoring India as a space of strategic importance that the British must map and control. The museum, collecting and cataloging Indian artifacts for British consumption, represents the British desire to master India through classification. The illustration of the locals as superstitious and irrational also justify their subordination to British authority. The construction of civilizational hierarchies serves imperial rule as necessary for order of the region.

This fiction portrays India as inherently fragmented. Using this trope to validate British rule as a vital force for order in a chaotic region. Centered on the Great Game, Kim's journey normalizes the Anglo-Russian rivalry for territorial control in Central Asia. The location of the novel sums up international politics as a zero-sum competition for dominance. It effectively shapes the geopolitical standpoint of the audience.

Kipling's portrayal of is Russian as a tyrannical "Other"⁶⁷ is a critique on Tsarist expansion. He cast British expansionism as a necessary act to preserve the region, making Russia a threat. It creates a sharp contrast between the two. One a civilized, rational, and benevolent other the opposite. This illustration of binary serves a justification of British imperialism and military intervention. It is used as a defensive measure against Russian aggression in Central Asia and Afghanistan. Russian agents are depicted as foreign exploiters, while the characters of Kim and Colonel

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Boubaker Mohrem. "Examining the Concept of the 'Other' According to Edward W. Said." *International Journal online of Humanities* 6, no. 2 (April 2020): 18-30

Creighton are portrayed as concerned and compassionate non natives. This binary geopolitical stance peaks during the episode in the incident in the Himalayas. Kipling elucidates the geopolitical threat through sudden violence. As "the Russian struck the old man full on the face"⁶⁸. And Kim's securing the confidential maps act as neutralizing the foreign threat.

Kim functions as the archetypal geopolitical agent. He utilises his dual identity and local expertise to serve British interests. His mastery of diverse customs and languages shapes him as a colonial fantasy image. His figure suggests that imperial rule is an organic outgrowth of service for the benefits for natives rather than conquest. Kipling depicts British administration as natural as the hero of the novel. A hybrid protagonist who is loved by locals and he is also anxious about them.

Besides the geopolitics depiction, *Kim* skillfully employs the Narrative Theory. It frames the events in the story as a moral and principled tale. Kim's adventure chronicle shows the "Great Game" as a heroic quest rather than imperial strife. The bildungsroman part of the novel tracks Kim's development and growth from a street smart kid to a high operative agent serving the crown. Colonel Creighton represents the calculating British administration. He views the religious pilgrimage of lama and Kim not as a spiritual journey, but as a strategic move. His deciding to "Let the boy run with the lama for six months"⁶⁹ so Kim "will get experience"⁷⁰ of the Great Game. This manner mirrors British imperial development. Training the individual for the service to the Empire which is both essential and fulfilling. The novel's moral architecture presents Kim as the loyal hero, and Colonel Creighton as the strategic mentor of generous authority. While Russian agents are the sinister villains. The subordinates Indian characters are incapable and strive for foreign protection. The whole story is a moral binary justifying British rule as protector of the realm.

This novel serves as a primary vehicle for popular geopolitics. It publicises and simplifies the imperialist point of view to a global audience. It displays the British dominance in the region as inevitable and morally justified. Critical geopolitics draws attention to how geographical representations in the text are the model of the policies. Portraying Central Asia as a strategic

⁶⁸ Rudyard Kipling, *Kim*.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

prize and Russia as a threat legitimize the British imperial interests. At the same time, narrative theory reveals how anecdote structures also help in awareness of the crown's policies. Like the bildungsroman and adventure tale mobilize support for colonial investment. Together, these angles expose *Kim* as sophisticated propaganda that constructs a naturalized geopolitical imaginary of British rule.

This novel is a quintessential case study of spy thriller and a geopolitical text. It was published in 1901, yet its immense popularity and subsequent media adaptations ensured that these encoded imperial tropes remained embedded in public consciousness.

Kim, as a case study in geopolitical tropes and popular geopolitics, functioned as a vehicle through which geopolitical knowledge circulated to broad audiences and shaped how readers grasped geopolitical issues, heavily shaping public understanding of India, the Great Game, and British imperialism.⁷¹

Kim's geopolitical ideas influenced British foreign policy, as policymakers were readers of Kipling.⁷² The novel reinforced policymakers' views of the Great Game as a necessary Anglo-Russian competition and strengthened their commitment to maintaining British rule in India. Furthermore, the novel's popularity offered policymakers a cultural framework or geopolitical imaginaries to justify military expenditures and interventions to the public, lending legitimacy to imperial policies.

Kipling's *Kim* continues to shape geopolitical imaginaries through ongoing media adaptations. The novel's tropes such as the "threatening Other" (Russia then; China and Russia now), the strategic importance of Central Asia (now the Indo-Pacific and Middle East), and Western civilizational hierarchy persist in modern discourse. By analyzing *Kim*, we can see how these lasting narratives are constructed and implanted in general perception.

⁷¹ "The imperial past of Indian geopolitics," *Engelsberg Ideas* (2025, October 20). <https://engelsbergideas.com/essays/the-imperial-past-of-indian-geopolitics/>.

⁷² Emily Laskin. Geography, Genre, and Narrative in Kipling's *Kim*. In *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 54, no. 1 (2021, May): 43-64. DOI: 10.1215/00295132-8868779.

Conclusion

The map of global power structure is drawn not only with treaties and military deployments. It is sketched with the ink of narration and popular fiction. This article demonstrates, the literary text is merely a passive report of geopolitical events. It operates as an active geopolitical broadcast.

The relationship between geopolitical tropes and popular geopolitics is one of the most consequential features of contemporary world politics. Geopolitical tropes supply the narrative templates and conceptual vocabulary. And popular geopolitics articulates them. They circulate across multiple discourse and landscapes. From the elite policy circles to the entertainment media and social networks. These platforms create self-reinforcing cycles which provide particular interpretations of the world fated and natural.

Kim exhibits literature to be a central repository for geopolitical knowledge for the public. Through Critical Geopolitics with a Narrative Theory lense, it is evident the tropes are not neutral descriptors of reality. Rather, they are constructed frameworks. They tend to naturalize specific power arrangements while legitimize militaristic policies. And frame international relations as zero-sum contests. It can be noted that the geopolitical narratives carry tangible political consequences. These images circulated through literature have historically influenced public opinion and foreign policies. They serve as a vehicle for substantial geopolitical intelligence production and circulation. Today, contemporary spy novels, and television series similarly encode these tropes, circulating geopolitical knowledge to popular audiences.

The new unprecedented technological acceleration and hyper-globalized interconnectivity era, geopolitics is also emerging. The role of geopolitical tropes has never been more critical, nor more dangerous as in this period. This article has explored the mechanisms of tropes as a powerful tool. They tend to organise geographic space with the structuring of the policy narratives, and also mobilizing public sentiment. Looking toward tomorrow with the proliferation of Artificial Intelligence, deepfake technologies, and algorithmic media distribution promises to amplify the reach and impact of geopolitical tropes to unprecedented levels. Algorithms and shrinking attention spans of the audience prefer oversimplified, emotionally resonant narratives, creating a perfect storm for weaponizing geopolitical

tropes. Disinformation exploits this by flooding digital spaces with charged tropes to stir up anxiety and polarization. Social media accelerates the circulation of these tropes, leading to immediate consequences, rapid escalation of tensions, and international destabilization at an unprecedented scale.

Time has proved that these geopolitical tropes are a 'double edged sword'. The geopolitical landscape we inhabit is currently undergoing a profound transformation. Marking the end of an era that has shaped the world since the post-World War II period, a system established by American hegemony.⁷³

Geopolitics has always been the driving force behind globalization, but today it is the primary engine of deglobalisation. Rivalries between the United States and China, the resurgence of Russia, and the fragmentation of the European project are not solely economic disagreements. These conflicts are, at their core, fundamentally geopolitical struggles projecting the future trajectory of global governance. Frameworks such as the "Rise of the Rest,"⁷⁴ the "Thucydides Trap,"⁷⁵ and the concept of "Great Power Competition"⁷⁶ have since ascended to become the dominant paradigms. Consequently, the current epoch driven by intensifying geopolitical rivalries yet filtered through the lens of these prevailing tropes presents humanity with a profound, double-edged sword.

⁷³ M. R. Mansoor. "Cultural debate in the 21st century on declining multiculturalism in Europe. *Journal of European Studies* 40 no. 2 (2024): 41-41.

⁷⁴ *The decline of the West and the rise of "the Rest" will lead to a new world order*. Chatham House – International Affairs Think Tank (2024, December 9). <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/the-world-today/2025-09/decline-west-and-rise-rest-will-lead-new-world-order>.

⁷⁵ J. Rovner. "The Real Thucydides Trap." *Foreign Affairs* (2026, April 14). <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/real-thucydides-trap>.

⁷⁶ T. Müller. "Narratives, knowledge objects, and the making of great power competition." *Global Studies Quarterly*, 4no3 (2024).