

Perspective on the History of Aviation and Geopolitics

LT GEN (RET.) CÉSAR NARANJO ANDA
ECUADORIAN AIR FORCE

There is nothing more fascinating than the evolution of aviation in the world. Growing from small experimental machines skillfully built with simple materials like wood and stiffened fabric, aviation today includes expansive spacecraft that are technological marvels featuring cutting-edge designs and materials.

So, too, in international relations aviation has had an impact. By altering the way nations interact and exert power on the world stage, aviation is now inextricably tied to geopolitics. Since “geopolitics is the science that studies the influence of geographical factors in the life and evolution of states, with the objective of drawing conclusions of political character,”¹ we need to consider the basic components of states—territory, population, and government—as the integration of these components becomes the only way for states to achieve sustainable development over time. Furthermore, since geopolitics studies the spatial causality of current and future political events, we cannot separate the fundamental role that aviation and its technological development play in these events.

Those countries that have dominated technology obtain strategic advantages. Case in point, when a country achieves air supremacy, it can control the land and obtain substantial strategic, tactical, and logistical advantages. During the First World War as well as in the Second World War, aircraft were used for reconnaissance, bombing, and troop transport.

The history of aviation is intrinsically linked with exploration and expansion. Aviation allowed for the mapping of unknown areas, identification of natural resources, and establishment of trade routes. The ability to reach faraway places allowed the mainly colonial powers to expand their influence. What’s more, commercial aviation facilitated international travel, commerce, and tourism. This generated a commercial and cultural interdependence among the countries. We can affirm that aviation has generated global connectivity, allowing the exchange of goods and economic growth. Thanks to aviation we are able to better understand and appreciate Earth, as it gives us the unique tools and perspectives that allow us the opportunity to monitor and preserve our planet. Aviation has

contributed to giving us a true space perspective, showing us the beauty and fragility of our planet and the need to protect it.

Having a strong air force also provides for both deterrence and projection of power. In fact, the strategic use of aircraft and air bases in different regions of the world has directly influenced international relations. Today, we talk about unmanned aerial vehicles, drones, jet aircraft with autonomous navigation systems, among others, exerting a considerable impact on national security and modern warfare. Information gathering and intelligence likewise have benefited from the capabilities available through the modern development of aviation.

The geopolitical interests of nations, such as territorial expansion, national security, resource competition, among others, have driven the research and development of recent technological advances in the aeronautics field. Aviation has exerted a particularly important impact on geopolitics, modifying international relations, security, and the stability of nations.

Focusing our attention on South America, geopolitics is overly complex due to the diversity of countries and the geographical characteristics of the region. South America is rich in natural resources, including petroleum, minerals, gas, water, and arable land. These resources influence the international economy, security, and relations. Geopolitics in this region is influenced by the attempts at regional integration, such as Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), and by territorial disputes such as the dispute between Argentina and the United Kingdom over the Falkland Islands or the controversy between Chile and Bolivia over an outlet to the sea.²

Furthermore, we should not discount the presence of outside regional actors and security problems due to ever-increasing drug trafficking. Extra-regional actors try to safeguard their economic, political, and, especially, strategic interests in the region. China, for example, has made investments in infrastructure and natural resources in very significant amounts. We should consider that geopolitics in South America is dynamic, and it is subject to long-term changes.

The history of aviation and geopolitics reveals their interconnectedness, generating changes and modifications in international relations. Progress is linked to these changes and the increasing dependent relationship on technology. □

Notes

1. José I. López, “La geopolítica Alemana” (German Geopolitics), *Revista Universidad Eafit*, (1994), 31-37.

2. Guillermo Long and Natasha Suñé, “Toward a New UNASUR: Pathways for the Reactivation of South American Integration,” Center for Economic and Policy Research, (18 October 2022),

<https://cepr.net/report/toward-a-new-unasur-pathways-for-the-reactivation-of-south-american-integration/>.

Lieutenant General (Ret.) César Naranjo Anda, Ecuadorian Air Force

Presidential pilot, Air Attaché to the Embassy of Ecuador in Washington DC, Delegate to the Inter-American Defense Board in Washington DC, Chief of the Transportation Air Command, General Director of Civil Aviation, and Chief of Staff of the Air Force. Recently served as Captain of Boeing 727-200 and Operations Vice-president of ICARO Air Line. Additionally, he has served as Chief of the Department of Flight Security of the First Air Zone, Chief of the Department of Studies of the War Academy, Sub Director of Instruction of the Air Force, Air Attaché of the President of Ecuador, Chief of the Military House of the Presidency of the Republic.