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Guest Editorial

Historically, geography has always been intertwined with the ambitions of empires because powerful nations have sought to expand their territories and influence. This drive for exploration, colonisation, and neo-colonisation shaped maps and understanding of the world, often reflecting the interest of those in power. As empires grew, the study of geography became a tool for asserting dominance, managing vast areas of land, and influencing both political and cultural exchanges (Barton & Irarrázaval, 2014). Santos (cited in De Toledo Junior, 2017) states that geography is a philosophy rather than a science, an ideology rather than a philosophy. He further explains that, in most cases, geography served as a propaganda instrument for these empires, and that new knowledge was created to facilitate the control and exploitation of diverse spaces and societies, along with some texts and maps to justify the emerging new hierarchies and rights (De Toledo Junior, 2017).

The military became imperial representatives in regions they controlled, and through scientific knowledge, as well as political power, they advanced the field of geography by means of cartographic representation. This is because the military was able to gather vital information about the territories they occupied. This not only shaped military strategies but also the extended understanding of these regions. The role of the military thus transcended enforcing control, and they became deeply integrated into the development of geographic knowledge and imperial ambitions.

Geography is described by Johnson *et al.* (2020) as an academic discipline that explores and encourages critical analysis of the organisation of the world. This includes the environment and patterns that exist, or which are imagined by humankind, and the interconnections that exist between the physical spaces as well as the nature of places and regions. According to Bustin (2011), contemporary geography focuses on the study of the arrangement and characteristics of the surface of the earth, the spatial distribution of various phenomena, the intertwined physical and human systems that influence the attributes of the earth, as well as the nature and essence of its constituent places and regions.

Both definitions of geography highlight the relationship between the physical and human systems that shape geographical features and the way they influence one another. Both definitions also emphasise the need for critical thinking and encourage a deep analysis into how the world is organised. There are, however, very prominent differences in these definitions of geography. While Johnson *et al.* (2020) describe geography as an exploration of the organisation of the world, including both the real environment and as it is imagined,

Bustin (2011) focuses on the arrangement of the characteristics of the surface of the earth, paying close attention to the attributes and features of landscapes.

Military geography is further defined by Palka *et al.* (2000, p. 113) as “the application of geographic information, tools, and techniques to military problems, focusing on a wide range of military scenarios from peacetime to wartime”. Palka *et al.* (2000) also explain that military geography primarily examines how military operations and armed conflicts are influenced by terrain and the environment, with deep historical roots tied to the imperial ambitions and military needs that shaped the development of late-nineteenth-century Geography. Smit, Magagula and Flügel (2016) considered several definitions of military geography. The two most prominent of these definitions were by Jackman in 1962, and Collins in 1998. Jackman describes military geography as a branch of geography that utilises geographical principles and knowledge to address and solve military issues. Collins expands on this idea, explaining that military geography focuses on the influence of physical and cultural environments of political military policy, plans, strategies, and operations at both local and global scales. These definitions highlight that military geography applies geographic tools and knowledge to solve military challenges, focusing on how terrain and the environment influence military operations and conflicts. Military geography has historical roots imbedded in imperial and military needs (Bryan, 2016). This in turn has shaped modern geography to expand its role, emphasising its influence on military policy, strategy, and operations during times of peace and of war at various levels. Globally, military geography has faced challenges in evolving as an academic discipline (Palka, 2002).

Smit *et al.* (2016) agree with the above statement, stating that military geography as an academic discipline experienced a significant decline in the 1960s. This period was marked by a lack of interest in military geography at universities in the United States. This lack of interest may be attributed to the resistance against American involvement in the Vietnam War (Palka, 2002). During this time, there was growing social and political concern regarding the military, which led many scholars to distance themselves from the field (Palka, 2002). The application of military geography in activities perceived to be associated with military operations was increasingly viewed with scepticism by academics (Palka, 2002).

Military geography is still struggling to regain its former prominence. Although it is now offered at several universities around the world outside of military academies, it has yet to recover fully from the downturn of the 1960s (Smit *et al.*, 2016). Another issue that continues to tarnish the appeal of military geography as an academic discipline is the view that geographical activities linked to military operations serve the interest of state propaganda or the projection of power that contributes to colonialist and neo-colonialist agendas (Gregory, Meusburger & Suarsana, 2015). Arguments such as these reinforce the perception of military geography as controversial in the political and ethical spheres, leading many scholars to question the legitimacy or relevance of the contemporary military geography discourse.

Recently, there has been a notable shift in the field of military geography, particularly

in terms of the inclusion of cultural and social geography perspectives in the discipline (Henrico, Smit & Henrico, 2021). This has allowed military geographers to move beyond the immediate and direct effects of military activities on landscapes and societies. This approach has expanded to include more nuanced and intricate interdisciplinary subject matter, such as social, cultural, geopolitical, economic, environmental, and historical dimensions of military action. The advancements of the fourth industrial revolution have also led to the development of new technologies, such as artificial intelligence, big data analytics, drones, automated systems and geospatial intelligence, which form part of military geographical information science (Moore *et al.*, 2019). These innovations have enabled real time data collection, analysis, communication, and mapping in ways previously unimaginable. This has caused military geography to shift from its traditional obligation to integrate cyber capabilities, global communication networks, and sensor technology that influence strategic decision-making (Grant, 2014).

In *Military geographies* (2004), Rachel Woodward reports on developments in military geography as an academic discipline. She outlines five central ideas that shape discussions on spatial dimensions and manifestations of military events. The paragraphs below provide a summary of the five ideas as outlined by Woodward (2004).

The first idea depicts military geography as more than a discipline about war, because it encompasses all the factors that enable military activities and the wide-ranging influences of armed violence across space. This approach raises questions about whether acts of armed violence should take analytical precedence, and whether peace, as the opposite of war, should be prioritised in military geography. The second idea views militarism and militarisation not only as descriptive terms but also as analytical tools for understanding military geography. This is because these concepts contribute to the broader debate in critical military studies. The concepts further highlight the spatial dimension of military phenomena and the effects of military power within a process-oriented framework that challenges traditional boundaries between militaries and civilians. Woodward's (2004) third idea states that the diverse epistemologies, methodologies, and tools used in military geography research should enrich the field and open new areas for innovation. According to Smit (2024), this methodological pluralism encompasses qualitative and quantitative methods as they reflect the variety of approaches used by researchers both as detached observers, and as current and former military operatives.

The fourth idea by Woodward (2004) is that individual positionality is valuable in analysing military geographical phenomena because recognising one's own perspective and that of others offers important insights. Military geographers therefore need to emphasise different positions in time, space, and context that shape how we view the world. The final idea is that military geography needs to be studied at various scales – global, national, regional, and local – because the effects and understanding of military phenomena vary depending on these scales of analysis.

Woodward's (2004) exploration of military geography emphasises its broad scope, which extends beyond warfare and encompasses factors that enable military activities and their spatial consequences. She also highlights that, by analysing militarism, embracing

methodological diversity, considering positionality and scale, military geography reflects a multifaceted approach to understanding military phenomena. Woodward's work challenges the traditional boundaries and fosters innovative perspectives on the field of military geography.

Military geography has long been part of the curriculum in the international education sector; however, in South Africa, it remains a relatively underexplored field. In universities that include some military geography component in their curriculum, the study of geographical factors is often combined with military strategy and operations within the context of the unique history, social, and environmental landscape of the country concerned. At the time of writing, the South African Military Academy (SAMA), which is part of the Faculty of Military Sciences at Stellenbosch University, is the only tertiary institution that offers military geography at both undergraduate and postgraduate level in South Africa (Henrico *et al.*, 2021).

When SAMA was founded in 1950, geography was one of the first subjects included in the curriculum. Initially, it was referred to simply as 'Geography'. The course was however renamed 'Military Geography' in 1958. For more than thirty years, the subject primarily focused on cartography, physical geography, political geography, economic geography, as well as urban and regional geography (Jacobs, Van Rensburg & Smit, 2002). This period coincided with the era of colonisation and apartheid in South Africa, during which SAMA operated under the Union Defence Force (UDF) and later the South African Defence Force (SADF), with the University of Pretoria and later Stellenbosch University serving as the academic overseers (Visser, 2004). With the transition to democracy in 1994, the curriculum at SAMA underwent significant changes to incorporate geographic information systems (GIS), remote sensing, and environmental geography. This transition was driven by the needs of the newly formed South African National Defence Force (SANDF), which shifted from a Cold War-era defensive structure to a focus on peacekeeping and post-conflict reconstruction across Africa (Van der Merwe, Visser & Donaldson, 2016).

According to Smit *et al.*, (2016) military geography at SAMA has evolved from a primarily utilitarian view to a more environmentally conscious view, with emphasis on the relationship between humans and the environmental effects caused by military operations, and vice versa. This shift was driven by national environmental legislation that was introduced in 1998, as well as modern technological advancements. In addition to this evolution of the subject, at a faculty board meeting on 30 October 2024, it was explained that the structure of the geography department at SAMA will also change. The military geography department is now part of the School for Geospatial Studies and Information Systems (GEOSIS). With the Faculty of Military Science, Stellenbosch University (FMS, SU), which is currently undergoing a reconstruction of its schools, it is likely that the military geography department will relocate to a different school. In South Africa – as in the world – military geography is set to continue to evolve as it adapts to the increasing complexities of global security dynamics as well as rapid technological advancements (Henrico *et al.*, 2021). As these technologies continue to develop, military geography researchers need to be able to use them to gain a comprehensive understanding of the geographic contexts and improve operational effectiveness.

In a 2016 article, Woodward explains that military geography has evolved in response to changes in military organisations, strategies, technology, and political relationships between the military and society. Woodward (2016) further states that, because of this change, military geography is dynamic but lacks many established traditions. She then presents four key dimensions in military geography research that can be regarded as traditions, namely spatiality, place, environment, and landscape. In the paragraphs below, the four key dimensions identified by Woodward (2016), which can be considered foundational traditions in military geography research.

Spatiality, as the first key dimension of military geography, addresses how **space** influences and is influenced by military operations. Traditionally, this focused on terrain, weather, and topology. Currently, the dimension of military geography includes aerial and marine dimensions, and refers to how military strategies are shaped across all environments. This includes geopolitical issues, such as territorial control and borders. Woodward (2016) argues that, with advancements in technology, warfare has evolved beyond merely physical warfare to beyond strategic control through mapping.

The second dimension is **place**, which emphasises how specific locations, such as military installations, play a role in broader social and economic networks. Military geography research in the place dimension focuses on connecting defence industries to national and global economic shifts. This is done to illustrate how military power extends beyond warfare to shape economic and industrial dynamics. Woodward (2016) says an example would be the way military bases influence local economies and social structures, as scholars would then study the civil–military relationships that emerge.

The third key dimension of military geography addresses the **environmental impact** of military activities, and the way environmentalism is framed for specific goals. Woodward (2016) emphasises that, during conflict, military operations cause severe ecological damage, with military geographers tending to study the long-term environmental effects of war. Beyond combat, military bases can however also have lasting environmental consequences, such as pollution, and/or – paradoxically – they may preserve certain ecosystems owing to restricted access.

The fourth and last key dimension of military geography identified by Woodward (2016) focuses on **military landscapes**. In this context, military geographers look at how both military and civilian actors interpret, represent, and engage with land. This is influenced by cultural geography, and addresses how landscapes are represented, especially at sites of memorialisation (battlefields, war memorials, and locations of wartime atrocities). Some researchers have also studied the sensory, emotional, and embodied experiences of military landscapes.

All six articles in this special issue align with these four key dimensions of military geography. The first article titled “Operation Observant Compass and the hunt for Joseph Kony: The use of special operations forces in humanitarian interventions”, highlights the spatial dimension of military geography by exploring the use of special forces in remote, and often hostile, terrains. This article also incorporates the place dimension because military intervention efforts affect local sociopolitical and economic structures.

The second article titled “Encroachment challenges for the military: The case of Army Support Base Potchefstroom”, reports on the environmental and spatial encroachment of military land by civilian activity, which is linked directly to the environmental impact and spatiality dimensions.

The third article, titled “Environmental security revisited”, is closely linked to the environmental dimension of military geography, because it emphasises how military activity affects environmental security. This is tied to the ecological consequences of military operations and installations, as well as the role of military strategies in both preserving and damaging ecosystems. The fourth article “Where did you hear that? Narrative competition and societal instability in Burkina Faso”, relates to the place and landscape dimension, and addresses the narrative surrounding military and political events shaping social structure and instability.

The fifth article “Illicit activities and border control in Ngoma, Namibia”, is associated with the spatiality and place dimension, and focuses on how border control and military activity could shape the geopolitical landscape.

The last article, titled “Illegal fishing and maritime security: Historical and contemporary challenges in Namibia”, is linked to both spatiality and environmental dimensions. Illegal fishing is a maritime security threat affecting territorial waters. The role of the military in securing maritime boundaries involves controlling space to prevent resource depletion and ensure national security.

These topics are crucial in military geography because they explore the spatial, place, environmental and landscape dimensions. The authors highlight how military operations could affect terrain, local economies, sociopolitical structures, and ecosystems by addressing environmental impacts, and examining the civil–military relationships and societal instability in conflict zones. The articles on border control and maritime security further reflect the complexities of geopolitical and environmental interactions.

A selection of book reviews by Anri Delpont, Mashudu Mathoho, Barbara Schabowska, Raymond Steenkamp Fonseca, and Louis M. du Toit conclude this issue of *Scientia Militaria*.

As a guest editor, I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to everyone who contributed to this special issue. I am especially grateful to the reviewing and the language editing teams, whose careful work ensured the quality of this publication. I also want to express my deepest appreciation to Ms Anri Delpont for inspiring me to take part in this project. Special thanks to Prof. Evert Kleynhans whose unwavering commitment and support were crucial for the success of this work. I also thank Dr Evert Jordaan for his invaluable guidance in helping me navigate through moments of confusion.

The Guest Editor
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