

Harvey Sicherman

## The Revival of Geopolitics

The fashionable long view of American foreign policy tells a narrative of increasing power and wisdom. The United States avoided “entanglements” when we could not afford them in the nineteenth century; we entered the First World War in time to be decisive yet without losing the flower of our youth; we flirted with isolationism but when attacked revealed our might by defeating both Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan in the Second World War; we successfully waged the protracted Cold War conflict without a nuclear disaster until in the fullness of containment, the Soviet Union passed away. Throughout, there were many generous acts such as the Marshall Plan—and more than a few follies, which need not be enumerated. Suffice to say, there is more than enough in the record to encourage those who believe that America enjoys a special Providence.

Many analysts have also seen within this record a kind of dialectic, whether isolationism versus internationalism, or more recently, the supposed conflict between unilateralism and multilateralism. These accounts of American foreign policy are mostly academic exaggerations of what one suspects is the real American view: if we can

secure our aspirations abroad acting alone, then so be it; if we can act more effectively with allies, then do it that way.

The real argument over America’s approach to the rest of the world may therefore be one of means rather than ends. Professor Walter McDougall’s *Promised Land, Crusader State* caught the temper of this. One school holds that because of America’s democratic nature, we just aren’t up to conducting “power politics” abroad the way others do. Our true interest, it is said, lies not in playing the traditional game of state relations, but rather in overturning the game and creating a better one. Hence, Wilson’s crusade to transcend balance of power diplomacy and Roosevelt’s effort to harness the four great powers to a United Nations organization. Winning the war in 1919 and again in 1945 can be seen as opportunities to win the peace by the permanent recasting of the system.

Another school disagrees, however, viewing the failures of 1919 and then after 1945 as proof that a crusade to transform the international system will always crash upon

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the rocks of contending self-interests—human nature, writ large in the nation-state. There can be, and will be, new participants, new combinations, new winners and losers in the international system. States and empires will rise, fall, or even disappear. Yet a permanent end to international rivalries through some new “system” is a chimera. The facts of geopolitics in particular—the resources and locations of various peoples and states—do not permit the easy assumption of a permanent peace. The facts of geopolitics do not allow for any international organization that by its nature could assure peace. In short, while geopolitics can be manipulated to achieve security for the democracies, geopolitics can never be abolished or transcended.

Victory in the Cold War reignited this controversy between the geopoliticians and the anti-geopoliticians. How would the United States win the peace? For a decade, the American voter trusted the more radical approach of the anti-geopoliticians, which also appeared the easier and less expensive way. Overly impressed with the suddenness and ease of the Soviet collapse, most Americans were convinced that it was “over, over there.” And if it was truly over, then the really urgent public business was over here, i.e., domestic politics. Foreign policy could be left safely to various international devices, such as the U.N. Security Council, or to some benevolent and automatic economic process that fortuitously spread American values far and wide, at no cost to ourselves.

The Clinton Administration followed the lead of these anti-geopoliticians. While the president concentrated on domestic affairs, the post-Cold-Warriors and neo-Wilsonians who were appointed to win the peace explained the world with the painless concept of “globalization.” This was a conscious attempt to transcend geopolitics, and it involved more than the spread of

democracy and free markets through the extension of American commercial practices. Before the decade of the 1990s was out, the Clinton commitment to “globalization” gave birth to an important, if only half articulated, political-military doctrine. In a world of unassailable American might, the use of force abroad could only be justified by humanitarian considerations, free of sordid calculations of national interests, and the U.S. contributions would come from air power rather than from casualty-producing deployments of infantry. Thus, the United States could bring along into the new world order those lost in yesterday’s world—and with the least effort.

Globalization had begun to falter even before September 11, when the destruction of the World Trade Center ended the era. Today, geopolitics has returned with a vengeance. America’s collision with international realities offers us a clear message. The world, while changed, still works by a more traditional set of rules and impulses. Henceforth, Washington can be effective only if its foreign policy comes “down to earth.” Here, I want to examine what went wrong in the 1990s and consider some of the challenges we face in setting things right.

Globalization as a foreign policy originated in the belief held by many leaders in the West that the end of the Cold War meant more than just the end of ideological rivalry; it would also close the book on geopolitics. The old geopolitics meant to its opponents a calculation of national interest that gave short shrift to morality and economic matters except insofar as they served narrow national ambitions.

The new dispensation offered instead these alternatives: (1) world-wide economic progress would overcome national barriers and knit the world closer together; (2) military force, if it had to be used at all, would be launched by international coalitions.

tions under the banner of humanitarian intervention free of selfish national interests; and (3) America's unique military asset, precise air power, would reach remote places without the risks of expeditionary forces or massive casualties. Altogether, the United States could conduct an "ethical" foreign policy that fully reflected the American desire to do good as we did well. On balance, these ideas had many merits and only one defect: they did not work.

Globalization as an economic phenomenon began well and lasted the better part of the decade. Astonishing flows of capital moved abroad, nourishing newly emerging markets, especially in Asia. Countries such as China, India, and the whole swath of ASEAN suddenly became the "tigers" of a region long thought invulnerable to economic progress because of lack of resources, excessive population, or just bad government. Gross domestic product (GDP) growth of eight or twelve or even twenty percent per year doubled per capita incomes in a decade. It was, or at least appeared to be, the irrevocable triumph of liberal capitalism, spreading democracy in its wake. For those afflicted with a Hegelian disposition, it was, as Francis Fukuyama wrote, the "End of History." And there would be no antithesis to this thesis.

Then a funny thing happened on the way to the global forum. There was a big crisis. Debt, corruption, and other accumulated ills suddenly spooked capital in Asia, of all places—the Asia of the coming Pacific Century, the scene of globalization's greatest successes. As Thailand, Indonesia, and South Korea were convulsed by financial fears, the global healers from the IMF arrived, prescribing tight money and other manly virtues. They made matters worse. After the same contagion seized Russia in 1998, and then threatened the United States, the Federal Reserve Board did the opposite of the IMF prescription, counter-

ing deflation successfully and sparing the world what might have become another Great Depression.

Amidst all the tumult, an untidy little fact emerged. The private capital that knew no borders suddenly rediscovered them. Capital fled back to within the borders of Western Europe and the United States, places where laws and governments gave investors reasonable protection and what has been called "transparency." In other words, in these places, you could see what was being done with your money and you had legal recourse in the event of dishonesty. To use a metaphor, the capitalists grazed in far-flung pastures during the 1990s, but when they got skittish, they remembered the location of the barn.

War was another subject where geopolitics was supposedly passé. The Clinton Administration believed that just as economic globalization would transcend borders, so security could be lifted out of the rut of geopolitics with the use of the U.N. The Security Council, freed of a Soviet veto, would take up conflicts around the world and settle them in the general interest.

This powerful idea needed as its corollary an international military force. No less a figure than Winston Churchill, in the oft-quoted but rarely read Iron Curtain speech, endorsed such a force. He noted, however, that in the absence of such a force, the only recourse would be regional coalitions. The creation of a U.N. military run by the Security Council had been a victim of the Cold War. Predictably, the idea enjoyed a sharp revival when the Soviet Union disappeared. And at first there was heady progress.

In 1992-93, the U.N. was deploying under its ostensible command nearly 100,000 troops from Cambodia to the Balkans to Somalia. Boutros-Ghali, the Secretary General, had advanced with American support a plan for a permanent force. In a fulsome

report to the Security Council, he saw the U.N. as the leading international peace-maker, not only a *peacekeeper*.

It still beggars belief that these grandiose projects came to grief over a blundering ambush in Mogadishu, the derelict capital of Somalia, a country which had become a “geographic expression” rather than a state. Suddenly, the President of the United States had to defend the deaths of American soldiers in a U.N. enterprise with no easily expressed relationship to the U.S. national interest. Face to face with the geopolitical monster in the unlikely form of the desperate General Aideed, President Clinton flinched, abandoning both the nation-building in Somalia and the idea of a permanent U.N. force. Only a few years later, after several disasters in the Balkans and a successful anti-U.N. campaign in the U.S. led by that unlikely pair, Madeleine Albright and Jesse Helms, the Security Council was clearly sidelined.

That left the U.S. to deal with distressing bouts of violence in Haiti, Bosnia, and Kosovo, often at the head of reluctant coalitions. U.S. actions, however, were not easily justified in the old terms of national interest to which the American people were still largely attached. So a new idea surfaced, given a name by British Prime Minister Tony Blair: humanitarian war.

Could there be a more anti-geopolitical expression than this one? The United States and its allies would act to rescue at-risk populations unsullied by any motive of self-interest, and they would not be limited by geography in doing so. Humanitarian war was also shaped by the revolution in communications. The trigger of humanitarian war proved to be the CNN effect: horrors brought into the living room convinced the American public that action was necessary, thereby rallying popular support the president could ride to war.

The downside, of course, was that disas-

ter had to occur before effective action could be taken. And once countries had been through such catastrophes, the rebuilding of failed states and fractured nations was all the more difficult. Humanitarian interventions, because they came too late, were succeeded by expensive but unrealistic expectations of reconstruction.

There was another awful truth. There have been at least eight episodes since 1992 when more than 100,000 were killed or more than a million set to flight and there was no intervention at all. What did Rwanda, Sudan, Burundi, Congo, Angola, Afghanistan, and Chechnya have in common? Some were not on the CNN beat. More often, these incidents occurred in places so remote and posing such dangers that not even Washington’s humanitarian warriors were prepared to risk intervention. Humanitarian war was highly selective, and political geography, not fashionable labels, determined that selection.

This brings us to the third great shibboleth of the post-Cold-War era, the revival of air power as a strategic weapon. Americans have long been obsessed with the search for a way to fight wars while avoiding the trouble and casualties of the infantry. The 1991 Gulf War with its highly dramatic scenes of continuous bombardment broadcast in every American home promised a new era of warfare.

It was too easy to overlook that in Desert Storm and succeeding campaigns in the Balkans, ground action—or the threat of it—was vital to carrying the day. NATO’s raids on the Bosnian Serbs in August 1995 were effective primarily because the Croatian ground offensive was making progress. Before that, pinpricking was no more useful against a determined Serb foe than it would be against Saddam Hussein in 1994, 1996, or 1998. And in 1999, the air campaign over Kosovo made its greatest

impression when NATO's tank engines, amplified by the Russian stethoscope to penetrate even Milosevic's ears, finally turned over. In short, a ground campaign, or at least the threat of one, was still fundamental to military success.

By the end of its tenure, the Clinton Administration had begun to shed some of its geopolitical inhibitions. Side by side with the globalism legacy was some old-fashioned business. NATO expansion into Central Europe, accomplished during Clinton's second term, was strongly opposed by many who saw it as an intrusion into Russia's "historic" (since 1945) sphere of interest, but warmly welcomed by Western and Central Europeans alike. The United States had reaffirmed and extended its status as a European power, placing itself between the Germans and the Russians, as it had earlier between the Germans and the French in the original NATO, and hoping for equally beneficial results. Similarly in Asia, the U.S. strengthened its military relationship with Japan, thereby preserving its post World War II role as guarantor of the peace of East Asia.

While Clinton would never tire of preaching globalization, he knew when he had gotten beyond his mandate. Presidential attempts to tangle the United States in faux multilateralism—such as the Kyoto Protocol or the permanent International Court—were opposed by a large majority in Congress. Clinton's solution was to sign the agreements but not to submit them to the Senate for ratification, a novel approach to treaty-making.

The Clintonians also left a large disaster in that most geopolitical of regions, the Middle East. Personal intervention by the

president had not averted a collapse of the peace process into an Israeli-Palestinian war. In the Gulf, the anti-Saddam coalition from the Gulf War (1991) was barely alive. These were notable failures that converted the unassailable American position earlier in the decade into one of increasing vulnerability.

The other bequest of the Clinton Administration was the prickly but still working relationship with China. Somehow, that relationship had survived the human rights enthusiasts, the "globalists," and miscalculations over Taiwan that nearly led to military confrontation in 1996. But Clinton had conveyed Beijing into the World Trade Organization without answering the key question about China: if it was not a "strategic partner," then what was it?

Indeed, by the end of Clinton's term both the Chinese and the Russians had embraced each other—at least rhetorically—in opposition to American "hegemony," fueled especially by the humanitarian war against Serbia during which the Chinese embassy was bombed. This consequence was quite a surprise to a Washington that did not care to think in geopolitical terms and was given to boasting about both its leadership and moral intent.

In contrast, George W. Bush's Administration represented a full return to geopolitics. By instinct and experience, the new Republican team preferred to work within a traditional nation-state system at the center of which was now an American power that should look after its own interests first. Bush called this in the campaign "a distinctly American internationalism." But the slogan's articulation was lost in bureaucratic grinding, the president's preoc-



*The end, and beginning, of an era.*

cupation with a fast domestic start to assert his contested political authority, and Clinton's multilateral tangles. The Bush Administration appeared at odds with everyone over the end of Kyoto, with the Europeans and Russians over missile defenses, with the Chinese over the spy plane incident, with the Gulf Arabs over Iraq, with the Arabs and Israelis over the collapsed peace process, and with Japan and Korea alike over relations with North Korea. Some of these disputes had been fixed or at least eased by late summer 2001. Still, neither Bush nor Secretary of State Colin Powell had laid out their overall foreign policy objectives when on September 11th, the United States was attacked.

That clarifying act of violence dramatically ended the post-Cold-War experiments founded on a benevolent view of international politics. One day sufficed to change Bush from an embattled domestic president to a war leader. National security and foreign policy were now at the top of the national agenda.

The objectives, tactics, and timetable of the American war on terrorism continued the break from globalism. While international terrorism, often called a "transnational threat," was the main target, Bush's inclusion of states assisting them gave it precise geographic focus. The first phase of the war against the Taliban in Afghanistan amplified this approach.

Bush also broke with the legal-criminal strategy of his predecessors that attempted to fit terrorists into either a domestic civil-criminal system or an international version thereof, complete with peace-time demands for proof, witnesses, and evidence. In doing so, the U.S. would not attempt to transform international politics but rather to defeat, stigmatize, and deter certain states, who, unable to achieve their objectives by war or diplomacy, resorted to violence against civilians, either through their

own agents or the fanatics of an Osama bin Laden. In doing so, the Administration will still encounter the underlying phenomena that the policy of globalization failed to address.

Globalization endowed the world with a web of Western style financial connections and an aspiration for the free flow of money, goods, ideas, and people. But financial crises in the late 1990s have not yet run their course, and the current economic slowdown may claim more than Argentina before it is over. While the IMF, the World Bank, the U.S. Treasury, and the European Central Bank grapple with the problems of order and transparency, globalization's other undersides have also been exposed by September 11.

Simply put, the war on terrorism will impede flows of money, goods, ideas, and people. Financial institutions are under greater scrutiny, to be followed by more regulation. Imports and exports face inspections. Airline travel will be slowed. Everyone faces higher insurance costs. The advent of cyber-war means restrictions even for the internet, that paragon of globalized free access.

The most troubling issues, however, will concern individual liberties and cultural clashes. When "the front" is everywhere, foreign and domestic policy merge. Under attack, the Western democracies, especially the United States, have experienced a new patriotism and with it, a fresh defense of Western civilization. The legal balance heavily in favor of individual rights will now face countervailing pressure for social responsibility. Those unwilling or unable to assimilate the ways of the Western democracies will find themselves unwelcome, whether parading under the banner of religion or multiculturalism. In these issues, the United States is not alone, but the way we manage them will set a certain standard.

American military forces are waging war today in defense of U.S. national security, not to secure the freedom of Afghans. Humanitarian warfare is a doctrine come and gone since September 11. But one issue raised by the experience of the 1990s still confronts us today. What to do about failed states in the aftermath of victory?

War, while inhumane by definition, may still have humane consequences. The enslaved are freed, the oppressed relieved. This alone is rarely enough to reconstruct a decent social order or an effective state. Yet the record of “nation-building” is a study in frustration. Does anyone seriously believe, for example, that NATO’s expeditions in the Balkans will implant multicultural democracies?

The choice is between social and political engineering. Social reformers work from the bottom up, and their favorite devices are schools, institutions, and the like—a new civil society. Political reformers work from the top down, for without sound government civil society cannot flourish. Outside of a long military occupation, can we really hope to change Afghan ways? Or is our best bet to get a decent government, i.e., one responsive of our interests, give it some security and money, and let the Afghans do it their way?

At this point, the Bush administration, true to its modest expectations, prefers the latter, although it seems ready to let the Europeans or the U.N. tinker with the former. In either case, the U.S. will be picking up, with its coalition partners, the failed and failing states of Afghanistan and Pakistan for some time to come. We are thus becoming a new linchpin for the security of South Asia, surely an unwelcome but at this point unavoidable consequence of the war on terrorism. Washington will need great skill to pass off the nation-sustaining burden on its allies while retaining political

leadership. It is betting that new regional power balances rather than new nations will be the way to secure the future.

The combined arms operation that laid the Taliban low relied upon careful coordination between infantry and precision air power. American special forces were key. After an unsuccessful effort to “hire” Pashtun tribes in the south, the U.S. recruited the Northern Alliance to supply the ground elements.

Once again, the U.S. waged a victorious war with advanced weaponry and communications, using air and infantry in a way that minimized American casualties while maximizing enemy losses. There were extraordinary scenes, such as the use of global positioning devices to drop hay for the first cavalry charge of the twenty-first century. But most remarkable was the American ability to avoid the commitment of major ground units or to suffer many fatalities. Thus, the thesis that Americans would not support a campaign for long in the face of heavy losses remains to be proven. U.S. commanders are still rumored to be putting force protection at the top of the list, perhaps at the cost of military flexibility.

It is not clear whether in such cases as Iraq or Iran or even Somalia the infantry will be available for rent. The Afghan formula may therefore be short-lived. But the U.S. demonstrated in the Gulf War its ability to use very large American forces while still suffering few losses. In any event, polls have confirmed common sense: after losing three thousand Americans on September 11, U.S. leaders can expect broad support for military measures even at higher levels of losses. The test is rather whether the campaign makes sense, the objectives are clear, the progress measurable, and the results appear worth the cost. These are elementary measures of prudence. That we are even debating them indicates how foggy

things have become in Washington. In short, Afghanistan has ratified the thesis that air power can be devastating, but only in the context of a combined operation that brings infantry to bear as well.

This brief tour of U.S. foreign policy since the end of the Cold War reveals some familiar fault lines in the perennial debate over how to conduct America's relations with the rest of the world. Expectations that globalization would transform international politics have been cruelly disappointed. Even before September 11, the weaknesses of this approach—the heir to Wilsonian aspirations—had been manifest. Behind the astonishing economic changes there lay corruption and weakness. Humanitarian warfare lacked public support and an enduring rationale; it also came too late to save hundreds of thousands of victims. Air power alone did not offer an effective substitute for infantry and the potential for heavy losses in causes not easily related to the national interest. When infantry did appear, it was often joined, as in the Balkans or Haiti, with dubious or failed nation-building experiments.

The return of the geopolitical approach, already evident in the early Bush Administration, was accelerated into dominance of U.S. foreign policy by September 11. America and its allies are now grappling with the downsides of globalization, including difficult civil liberties and cultural issues in a war where the front is everywhere. The campaign and its targets, especially the state sponsors of terrorism, have an identifiable geography. Except for the United States, with its global military reach, the regional power balances are all important to the selection of coalition partners. The U.S. objective is to stigmatize the targeting of civilians as a useful instrument of statecraft, not to change the international system. Washington is waging war in the

name of national security, rather than the rescue of populations put at risk by failed states or vicious politicians. Thus far, the U.S. has suffered minimal combat losses because its combined arms operations found infantry for rent in Afghanistan.

There are plenty of risks in this course. Already the Bush Administration has had to face the difficulty of dealing with failed or failing states and the uncertainties of managing lethal regional conflicts such as South Asia. The war against terrorism is a classic protracted conflict that will probably defy a single decisive campaign, as illustrated by the tricky endgame in Afghanistan where the U.S. forces are still fighting small-scale but deadly encounters. Inevitably, the moralist strain in U.S. politics will recover its voice whether in defense of immigrants or in criticism of military tactics.

Many things could yet go wrong. Yet it is safe to make these observations. For now, Washington has given up the idea of inventing or presiding over a new international political system. The tools deployed, especially the military tools, may be innovative, but the geopolitical essentials remain the same. Power will be measured in regional coalitions orchestrated by the U.S. and not the United Nations. Prosperity will be measured by an economic geography, not coterminous with the old national borders but by systems that share characteristics hospitable to capital. Finally, to borrow from paleontology, there will still be small- and even medium-sized meat eaters to disturb the peace. We are not finished yet with the Osamas or Saddams of this world, and the era of the plant eaters, although long forecast and eagerly awaited, has not yet arrived. That being the case, the world will have to bear with American predominance for a while longer as the best guarantee of democratic aspirations in an unreformed, untransformed international system of politics and power.