



## **Lessons in American Geopolitik: Kaplan and the Return of Spatial Absolutism**

Title	Lessons in American Geopolitik: Kaplan and the Return of Spatial Absolutism
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East, 36.

31. Mearsheimer and Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*, 143.

32. Mearsheimer and Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*, 145.

33. Goldberg, *Jewish Power*, 112.

34. Benjamin Ginsberg, *The Fatal Embrace: Jews and the State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993):1.

35. Goldberg, *Jewish Power*, 280.

36. Ginsberg, *The Fatal Embrace*, 1.

37. Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab, *Jews and the New American Scene* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995): 26–27.

38. Ginsberg, *The Fatal Embrace*, 1, 103.

39. One book lists seventeen Jewish holidays in its table of contents; some of them commemorate pivotal events in Jewish history; some date back to the Torah, others were instituted later. Robert Goodman, *Teaching Jewish Holidays: History, Values and Activities* (Denver, CO: A. R. E. Publishers, 1997).

40. Some American Jews prefer to see the roots of their liberalism in Jewish tradition. However, according to Goldberg (*Jewish Power*, 27), “Many non-Jewish activists who came in contact with the organized Jewish community see Jewish liberalism in much more straightforward terms: as a simple matter of self-interest.”

41. Goldberg, *Jewish Power*, 23.

42. Walter Laqueur, *A History of Zionism* (New York: MJF Books, 1972): 549–50.

43. Bass, *Support My Friend*, 6.

45. The Jewish lobby continued to exert pressure on President Eisenhower to provide military assistance to Israel. In the fall of 1955, it organized public rallies, attended by such luminaries as Harry Truman and Eleanor Roosevelt, “to demonstrate the strength of American sympathy for Israel.” It also sponsored a congressional petition, signed by 40 Republican congressmen in support of U.S. military assistance. The lobby met with greater success in mobilizing the Senate and House against American support for the Aswan Dam project. Burns, *Economic Aid and Foreign Policy*, 21, 49.

46. The turning point in President Eisenhower’s approach to Egypt can be dated to early 1956, when it was becoming clear that he could not persuade Gamal Nasser to accept Israel or give up his growing friendship with the Soviet Union. The new approach, spelled out in the *Omega Memorandum*, spelled out the need to undermine Egypt and the nationalists in Syria, to shelve assistance for the Aswan Dam, and continue to block military supplies to Egypt. Burns, *Economic Aid and Foreign Policy*, 77–70.

47. Abraham Ben-Zvi, *Lyndon B. Johnson and the Politics*

*of Arms Sales to Israel* (London: Routledge, 2004): 70.

48. Goldberg, *Jewish Power*, 149.

49. Goldberg, *Jewish Power*, 146–47.

50. Goldberg, *Jewish Power*, 147, 149.

51. Goldberg, *Jewish Power*, 171, 174.

52. Timothy Weber, former president of the Memphis Theological Seminary, writes, “Before the Six Day War, dispensationalists were content to sit in the bleachers of history, explaining the End-Time game on the field below. . . . But after [the] expansion of Israel into the West Bank and Gaza, they began to get down on the field and be sure the teams lined up right, becoming involved in political, financial, and religious ways they never had before.” (Mearsheimer and Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*; 2007, 133).

53. Daniel Pipes, “Israel’s Ultimate Strategic Asset,” *Jerusalem Post* (July 16, 2003), <http://jewishpoliticalchronicle.org/oct03/Israel%20s%20ultimate.pdf>.

54. Ginsberg (*The Fatal Embrace*, 231) writes that the neoconservatives moved to the right primarily because of “their attachment to Israel and their growing frustration during the 1960s with a Democratic party that was becoming increasingly opposed to American military preparedness and increasingly enamored of Third World causes.”

55. The neoconservative Jews kept predicting, during the 1970s, “that the Jews were done with liberalism and would now switch their allegiance to the Republican column.” (Goldberg, *Jewish Power*; 1996, 161).

56. Chomsky, *Fateful Triangle*, 455–63.

57. Mearsheimer and Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*, 128–32.

58. “Further, the process of transformation [to new technologies that will preserve American military preeminence in the coming decades], even if it brings revolutionary change, is likely to be a long one, absent some catastrophic and catalyzing event—like a New Pearl Harbor.” Project for the New American Century, *Rebuilding America’s Defenses: Strategy, Forces, Resources for a New Century* (Washington, DC: September 2000): 51, <http://www.newamericancentury.org/RebuildingAmericasDefenses.pdf>. (: 2000)

59. Stephen Schwartz, *Is It Good for the Jews? The Crisis of America’s Israel Lobby* (New York: Doubleday, 2006): 121.

60. Goldberg, *Jewish Power*, 15.

61. In the Zionist worldview, writes Goldberg (*Jewish Power*, 18), it was the Jewish state that “would give a voice to the voiceless people and return Jews to the stage of history after centuries of helplessness. American Jewish power has turned the Zionist idea on its head.”

## GEOGRAPHY WRITES BACK RESPONSE TO KAPLAN’S THE REVENGE OF GEOGRAPHY

Founded in 1970 by Samuel Huntington and Warren Demian Manshel, and now published by the Slate Group, a division of Washington Post. Newsweek, *Foreign Policy* is a magazine of global politics, economics, and ideas. The May/June issue published an article by Robert Kaplan entitled “The Revenge of Geography”. Kaplan is an American journalist, currently national correspondent for the *Atlantic Monthly*, whose writings appear in leading US newspapers and magazines. He is a senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security dedicated to “developing strong, pragmatic and principled national security and defense policies that promote and protect American interests and values”. In July, 2009 Kaplan was appointed to the US Department of Defense, Defense Policy Board.

*Foreign Policy*, May/June 2009. [http://www.foreign-policy.com/story/cms.php?story\\_id=4862&page=0](http://www.foreign-policy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=4862&page=0)

### The Revenge of Geography

In his *Foreign Policy* article, Kaplan argues that understanding the insights of geography means seeking out authors who thought that the map determined nearly everything, leaving little room for human agency. He gives as examples, the French historian Fernand Braudel, Alfred Thayer Mahan, the Dutch-American strategist Nicholas Spykman and, most significantly, “the father of modern geopolitics” Sir Halford J. Mackinder (1861-1947), founder of the Oxford School of Geography and former Director of the London School of Economics, where he was also Professor of Geography. Mackinder,

Kaplan says, is famous for his article, “The Geographical Pivot of History” with the theme: “Man and not nature initiates, but nature in large measure controls.” Mackinder thought that Russia, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia are the “pivot” around which the fate of the world empire revolves, with four “marginal” regions of the Eurasian landmass surrounding it: two “monsoon lands”, one in the east facing the Pacific Ocean, the home of Buddhism; the other in the south facing the Indian Ocean, home of Hinduism. The third marginal region is Europe, watered by the Atlantic to the west and home of Christianity. And the most fragile is the Middle East, home of Islam, “deprived of moisture by the proximity of Africa” and for the most part “thinly peopled”. This Eurasian relief map, and the events playing out on it at the dawn of the 20th century, were Mackinder’s subject. Historians of the remote future, Mackinder said, will describe the last 400 years as the Columbian epoch, but say that it ended soon after 1900. At the turn of the 20th century, “we shall again have to deal with a closed political system,” and this time one of “world-wide scope.” “Every explosion of social forces, instead of being dissipated in a surrounding circuit of unknown space and barbaric chaos, will [henceforth] be sharply re-echoed from the far side of the globe, and weak elements in the political and economic organism of the world will be shattered in consequence”, said Mackinder. [In *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, 1919 Mackinder redefined central Asia and Central Europe into a “heartland” concept. The book proclaimed that: Who rules East Europe commands the heartland. Who



rules the heartland commands the world-island. Who rules the world-island commands the world.]

For Kaplan the wisdom of this geographical determinism endures because it recognizes that the most profound struggles of humanity are not about ideas, but about control over territory, specifically the heartland and rimlands of Eurasia.

However, to see where the battle of ideas leads, Kaplan thinks, means revising Mackinder for our time. Mackinder could not foresee how a century's worth of change would redefine -- and enhance -- the importance of geography. Kaplan finds the new map of Eurasia, tighter, more integrated, more crowded, and even less stable than Mackinder thought. Rather than heartlands and marginal zones, we will have a series of inner and outer cores, fused together through mass politics and shared paranoia -- deepening connections are transforming the Middle East, Central Asia, and the Indian and Pacific oceans into a vast continuum. Much of Eurasia will eventually be as claustrophobic as Israel and the Palestinian territories, with geography controlling everything, and no room to maneuver. The ability of states to control events will be diluted and, in some cases,

destroyed. Artificial borders will crumble, become more fissiparous, leaving only rivers, deserts, mountains, and other enduring facts of geography. Indeed, the physical features of the landscape may be the only reliable guides left to understanding the shape of future conflict.

Like rifts in the Earth's crust that produce physical instability, there are areas in Eurasia more prone to conflict than others, "shatter zones" threatening to implode, explode, or maintain fragile equilibrium. Eurasia is most prone to fall apart in the greater Middle East's several shatter zones.

The Indian subcontinent is one such shatter zone -- the current political organization of the subcontinent should not be taken for granted. The worst nightmare is Pakistan, whose dysfunction results from an utter lack of defining geographic logic, and then Afghanistan, the ultimate world of Mackinder, a region of mountains and men, where the facts of geography are asserted daily, to the chagrin of U.S.-led forces. Another shatter zone is the Arabian Peninsula, a geographically nebulous network of oases separated by massive waterless tracts, but now linked by highways and domestic air links, crucial to Saudi Arabia's cohesion. The shatter zone of

Arabia is most acute in Yemen, full of aggressive, well armed people -- the future of teeming, tribal Yemen will contribute to determining the future of Saudi Arabia. Geography, not ideas, has everything to do with it. And geography, not ideas, has everything to do with it. The Fertile Crescent, wedged between the Mediterranean Sea and the Iranian plateau, is another shatter zone, with countries -- Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq -- that are vague geographic expressions, with little meaning before the 20th century. Removing the official lines on the map reveals a crude finger-painting of Sunni and Shiite clusters that contradict national borders -- the most geographically illogical state being Iraq, although geography and history tell us that Syria might be at the real heart of future turbulence in the Arab world. Kaplan thinks that the Arab world is unable to secure its own environment, and the plateau peoples of Turkey will dominate the Arabs in the 21st century, because the Turks have water and the Arabs do not. A final shatter zone is the Persian core, stretching from the Caspian Sea to the Persian Gulf. Virtually all the greater Middle East's oil and natural gas reserves lie in this region. Iran was the ancient world's first superpower because, with a certain geographic logic, it is the greater Middle East's universal joint, tightly fused to all the outer cores. Iran will cause instability not by imploding, but by a strong, internally coherent Iranian nation exploding outward from its natural geographic platform to shatter the surrounding region.

In this century's fight for Eurasia, Mackinder's axiom holds true: Man will initiate, but nature will control. Liberal universalism and individualism are not going away. But the success of these ideas is in large measure bound and determined by geography. While this was always the case, it is harder to deny now. The global economy will contract for the first time in six decades, with not only wealth, but political and social order eroding in many places, leaving only nature's frontiers and men's passions as the main arbiters of the age-old question: Who can coerce whom? The antiquarian world of dusty maps now returns with a vengeance. We must learn to think like Victorians to guide and inform our newly rediscovered realism. Geographical determinists must be seated at the same honored table as liberal humanists. Yet embracing the dictates and limitations of geography will be especially hard for Americans, who like to think that no constraint, natural or otherwise,

applies to them. Denying the facts of geography only invites disasters that, in turn, make us victims of geography. Better, instead, to look at the map for ingenious ways to stretch the limits it imposes. This will make support for liberal principles in the world more effective. Amid the revenge of geography, that is the essence of realism and the crux of wise policymaking -- working near the edge of what is possible, without slipping into the precipice.

**Revenge of the Geographers Foreign Policy Web Site June 2009**

[www.foreignpolicy.com/storycms.php?story\\_id=4979&page=0](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/storycms.php?story_id=4979&page=0)

The editors of *Foreign Policy* thought that fights over geography have gone on ever since early man first dropped from the trees and started marking the territory he landed on. So it was of little surprise that Robert D. Kaplan's "The Revenge of Geography" sparked controversy and smart responses. The journal published six responses to Kaplan, mainly from academic geographers, at ForeignPolicy.com, with Gerard Toal, John Morrissey, Gerry Kearns and Simon Dalby contributing. Also writing were Christian Caryl, a contributing editor for Newsweek, and David Polansky, a graduate student in international relations at the University of Chicago. Robert Kaplan then briefly responded. A section labeled "Is Geography Destiny?", carried letters from Brian Blouet, Professor of Geography and International Education, College of William and Mary, Geoffrey Kemp, Director of Regional Strategic Programs, The Nixon Center and Robert E. Harkavy, Professor Emeritus of Political Science, Pennsylvania State University and Abdullah M. Alsaïdi, Ambassador to the United Nations for the Republic of Yemen, with again a brief reply from Robert Kaplan.

**References**

Mackinder, J. *The Geographical Pivot of History*, The Geographical Journal, 13,4., April 1904: 421-44.  
 Mackinder, J. *Democratic Ideals and Reality* New York: Holt 1919

In what follows we present fuller versions of the political geographers' responses to Kaplan. We will provide an opportunity for Kaplan to respond.

## LESSONS IN AMERICAN GEOPOLITIK: KAPLAN AND THE RETURN OF SPATIAL ABSOLUTISM

Response by:

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*You can make your own history,  
but you have to live with your geography...*

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### Introduction

In the aftermath of World War I, Karl Haushofer emerged as one of the most important and influential visionaries of German regeneration and renewed geopolitical ambition. Retiring from the German Army and taking up an honorary professorship in Geography at the University of Munich, Haushofer's prolific scripting of German geopolitik championed a grand strategy for a global-orientated German foreign policy whose endgame was the securitization of lebensraum for a land-based empire in the Eurasian heartland. That heartland was theorised and envisioned via geographical determinism and the anticipated geopolitical world seen as spatially absolute.<sup>1</sup>

Some 90 years later, the sinews of spatial absolutism and geographical determinism so central to Haushofer's geopolitik have been resurrected and rehabilitated for the purposes of another global-orientated foreign policy: American geopolitik. Academically, its foremost

proponents comprise a broad array of cited experts and influential commentators in Strategic Studies, and over the last thirty years in particular their collective writings on US foreign policy have consistently called for an American 'leasehold' land-based empire to secure key 'pan-regions' in the world's most pivotal spaces. One of Strategic Studies' most influential writers today is Robert Kaplan, and his recent 'The Revenge of Geography' thesis is in many ways simply echoing more popularly the geopolitical envisioning of an extensive and well-connected assemblage of Pentagon-linked defense universities, war colleges and think-tanks specialising in US foreign policy.

### Geopolitical Calculation And The Logic Of Geographical Determinism

Strategic Studies have long been guided by an essentialist and largely uncritical notion of geographical determinism, with abstracted geopolitical calculations typically utilizing simplified yet rhetorically powerful registers of spatial absolutism to frame international relations. With a spatially absolute world as the discursive touchstone, the logic of geographical determinism as a form of analysis and explanation proves useful in a variety of ways, but perhaps most importantly in neatly delineating the necessity of militarily securing the world's most volatile yet vital strategic spaces for the good of the global political economy. For that enduring endgame, 'land power' and the primacy of 'land nodes' (bases, security sites, pre-positioned equipment, port facilities and so on) become the essential modalities to facilitate geopolitical and geo-economic calculation. The geographical determinism position then becomes a neat mechanism by which to talk about 'effecting' 'liberal principles' in the 'shatter zones'; to secure, in other words, the moral compass for closing the neoliberal gaps of American geopolitik.

The geographical determinism position in Strategic Studies has been championed by many. In the 1980s, Jeffrey Record at the Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis in Washington was particularly influential in the Reagan administration in identifying the Persian Gulf as the new pan-regional focus of US foreign policy due to its vital material assets. Record argued for the effective planning of a military securitization strategy to harness this heartland's key geographical resources and,

like Kaplan, dressed an American geopolitical agenda in the universality of neoliberalism and securing the global political economy. And Record's endgame is Kaplan's endgame too: "it should go without saying [that] the ability to use force successfully in defense of declared national interests, is desirable in a world where force remains the final arbiter of international disputes".<sup>2</sup> It was not until the 1990s before the US secured the various 'land nodes' of military power necessary for the policing of the Persian Gulf and deterrence of regional rivals, yet the scripting of the importance of land power had been an ever-present feature of Strategic Studies as the US overseas basing structure in the Middle East began to take shape.<sup>3</sup> At this point, the geographical determinist logic had resulted in the emergence of what Bradley Klein calls a prevailing "strategic culture" in US foreign policy circles in Washington in effecting American geopolitics in the Eurasian heartland.<sup>4</sup> And Kaplan's own strategic sensibility is avowedly based on respect for the enduring "wisdom of geographical determinism", which he believes recognizes that "the most profound struggles of humanity are not about ideas but about control over territory, specifically the heartland and rimlands of Eurasia".<sup>5</sup>

The last decade has of course seen Washington's strategic culture further emboldened under the Bush administration, but what has not changed is the prevalence of reductive, geographically determinist geopolitics being endlessly scripted in Strategic Studies. Kaplan's 'geographical revenge' thesis is echoed, for example, by Bradley Thayer in his attempt to make "the case for the American Empire" (Thayer's 2004 book, *Darwin and International Relations: On the Evolutionary Origins of War and Ethnic Conflict*, leaves us in no doubt about his particular understanding of geopolitics).<sup>6</sup> Robert Kagan's recent effort, *The Return of History and the End of Dreams*, resonates a Kaplan-esque mapping of the world into "liberal" zones and "autocratic" zones, and frames a fundamental struggle and clash of civilizations between "radical Islamists" and "modern secular cultures".<sup>7</sup> And others too have vociferously argued that the effecting of American geopolitics and securing of key geo-economic spaces must ultimately be based on land power, which is, "in the final analysis, what will secure the world's most precious and coveted real estate".<sup>8</sup> And such scriptings of the import of land power are mirrored in the corridors of power in Washington. The US Overseas Basing

Commission, for instance, recently hinged their report to Congress on the pivotal importance of the global network of U.S. bases – "the skeleton upon which the flesh and muscle of operational capability [is] molded" – on the key notion of geographical containment and deterrence, the ultimate role of the US military so laudably extolled by Kaplan.<sup>9</sup>

In 'The Revenge of Geography', Kaplan clearly wishes his disquisition to be received as affectively as possible,<sup>10</sup> yet there is of course nothing new to his formulation. The archetypal story of Strategic Studies has long been characterised by an abstracted geographical determinism that neatly binds the identifying of volatility and threat with the envisioning of intervention and securitization. For Kaplan, that determinist binary has enabled the various geopolitical scriptings running so reductively through his piece: the imperial and Orientalist mapping of the world into areas of civilization/security and areas requiring civilizing/securing;<sup>11</sup> the Malthusian reproduction of discourses of population excess, material scarcity and resource wars;<sup>12</sup> the positing of causal environmental instability and risk alongside governmental dysfunctionality and disorder;<sup>13</sup> the scripting of future danger and the perennial need for military interventions, patrolling and deterrence;<sup>14</sup> and the identifying of emerging states harbouring regional ambition for "power projection" such as Iran; whose geographically determined danger and lawlessness cannot be helped.<sup>15</sup> And for Iran and every other geoeconomic and geopolitical challenge in Eurasia, Kaplan's endgame position is one of geographical containment and deterrence (via a physical military ground presence; echoing the Overseas Basing Commission report to Congress).<sup>16</sup> This, for Kaplan, is how to effect neoliberal empire and value "order above freedom".<sup>17</sup>

### Conclusion

Does Kaplan matter? Or more broadly Strategic Studies? Sadly, the answer is yes to both. I have outlined elsewhere the insidious impact of Strategic Studies in directly and indirectly influencing US foreign policy.<sup>18</sup> The president of the prominent Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA) in Washington, Andrew Krepinovich, for example, recently boasted of the "demand for CSBA's independent research and analysis of US military policy" and lauded his staff for their

political outreach tactics and for being quoted on all “topical defense-related issues ranging from the FY 2009 defense budget request, to the war in Iraq, to Army, Air Force and Navy plans”.<sup>19</sup> And any discussion of Kaplan cannot deny the effect of his work on US foreign policy in the Balkans in the 1990s.

From the abstracted formulations of US grand strategy to its system administrators, the ‘imperial grunts’, Robert Kaplan appears endlessly seduced by military-strategic scriptings of heartlands, cores and boundaries, ongoing and emerging threats, and new needs for intervention, deterrence, action. The discursive production of a precarious yet pivotal military-economic space in Eurasia requiring permanent securitization is a reductive equation dangerously reified in ‘The Revenge of Geography’. And perhaps the greatest danger in Kaplan’s piece is how with feigning intellectual credentials he popularly reinforces a binary that so neatly scripts the necessity of an enduring US military ground presence in the world’s key geographical nodes to close the neoliberal gaps of American Empire.

Kaplan’s article ultimately amounts to an astoundingly uncritical enlistment of some of the most essentialist yet prominent geographers in the history of recent western geopolitical ambition. Kaplan cites many of them in his pithy jaunt through that history, and indeed exalts Halford Mackinder as the “archetype of the geographical discipline” (and presumably still). But it is perhaps the other so-called ‘father of geopolitics’ whose environmental determinist conception of the geopolitical world is echoed most by Kaplan, though not acknowledged (Mackinder, Malthus and Mahan are no doubt more palatable to Kaplan than a man associated with Rudolf Hess and the Nazis). In the early 1920s, Karl Haushofer’s German geopolitik combined “geographical materialism” with “teleological possibilism”, which ultimately allowed for a “non-fixed malleable sense of geography” in international affairs.<sup>20</sup> Nearly a century later, Robert Kaplan’s American geopolitik enunciates anew the ultimate “dictates of geography” in international relations but yet leaves space to “look hard at the map for ingenious ways to stretch the limits it imposes”.<sup>21</sup> For Kaplan and abstracted grand strategists everywhere, the real dream is ‘to make your own geography’, especially if you do not have to live with your history.

## Notes

1. On Haushofer, see the work of Wolfgang Natter: Natter, W. (2003) ‘Geopolitics in Germany, 1919-1945: Karl Haushofer and Zeitschrift für Geopolitik’, in: J. Agnew, K. Mitchell and G. Toal (eds) *A Companion to Political Geography*. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 187-202; Natter, W. (2005) ‘On the geo-economic pivot of history: Neil Smith’s American Empire’, *Political Geography*, 24(3), pp. 245-250; see esp. pp 247-248.

2. Record, J. (1981) *The Rapid Deployment Force and U.S. Military Intervention in the Persian Gulf*. Washington, DC: Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, p. 39; see also Epstein, J.M. (1987) *Strategy and Force Planning: The Case of the Persian Gulf*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution. Kaplan echoes Record by unproblematically outlining the key realist question he sees in international relations (what he calls the “age-old question”): “[w]ho can coerce whom?” (Kaplan, R.D. (2009) ‘The revenge of geography’, *Foreign Policy*, May/June, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story\\_id=4862](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=4862) (last accessed 6 May 2009)).

3. See, for example: Lesser, I.O. (1991) *Oil, the Persian Gulf, and Grand Strategy: Contemporary Issues in Historical Perspective*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation; Pelletiere, S.C. and Johnson II, D.V. (1992) *Oil and the New World System: CENTCOM rethinks its Mission*. Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College; Blank, S. (1995) *Energy, Economics and Security in Central Asia: Russia and its Rivals*. Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College; and Ullman, H.K., Wade, J.P., Edney, L.A., Franks, F.M., Horner, C.A., Howe, J.T. and Brendley, K. (1996) *Shock and Awe: Achieving Rapid Dominance*. Washington, DC: Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University.

4. See Klein’s excellent *Strategic Studies and World Order: The Global Politics of Deterrence* (Cambridge University Press, 1994).

5. Kaplan, “The revenge of geography”.

6. Layne, C. and Thayer, B.A. (2007) *American Empire: A Debate*. New York: Routledge; Thayer, B.A. (2004) *Darwin and International Relations: On the Evolutionary Origins of War and Ethnic Conflict*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky.

7. Kagan, R. (2008) *The Return of History and the End of Dreams*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, p. 4. Kagan’s book has been lauded in political circles in Washington, where it appears special commendation is reserved for the most essentialist foreign policy pronouncements. On Amazon, the book is enthusiastically endorsed by Senators John McCain and Joseph Lieberman and former US Ambassador to the UN, Richard Holbrooke; see <http://www.amazon.com/Return-History-End-Dreams/dp/030726923X#> (last accessed 8 May 2009).

8. Hajjar, S.G. (2002) *U.S. Military Presence in the Gulf: Challenges and Prospects*. Carlisle, PA: Strategic

Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, pp. 58-59. See also: Krepinovich, A. and Work, R.O. (2007) *A New Global Defense Posture for the Second Transoceanic Era*. Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments; and O’Hanlon, M. (2008) *Unfinished Business: U.S. Overseas Military Presence in the 21st Century*. Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security.

9. Overseas Basing Commission (2005) *Commission on Review of the Overseas Military Facility Structure of the United States Report to the President and Congress*. Arlington, VA: Commission on Review of Overseas Military Facility Structure of the United States, p. iii.

10. His proclivity for affect is a consistent feature of his vivid and ferocious geographical imaginaries: the “unruly crags and canyons”; the “shatter zones”; the volatile spaces threatening to “implode, explode, or maintain a fragile equilibrium” (Kaplan, “The revenge of geography”).

11. Kaplan scripts a Eurasia of “vast urban areas, overlapping missile ranges, and sensational media”, a pan-region of “constantly enraged crowds, fed by rumors transported at the speed of light from one Third World megalopolis to another” (Kaplan, “The revenge of geography”).

12. Kaplan’s invokes Paul Bracken’s “crisis of room”, the “prison from which there [is] no escape” (Kaplan, “The revenge of geography”).

13. Almost all of Eurasia is denigrated beyond the Pale by Kaplan; Yemen’s essential insecurity is down to it being “highly populous” and “crowded”; “teeming”, in fact, with “tribal” Yemenis “crammed” into a “corner” (Kaplan, “The

revenge of geography”).

14. Kaplan’s nod to the always rhetorically useful aleatory future mirrors the Overseas Basing Commission’s impassioned declaration that the US overseas basing structure “must enable us to meet the threats that will emerge over the next quarter century and beyond” (Overseas Basing Commission, 2005: 7).

15. Despite Kaplan’s positing of Iran’s “more venerable record as a nation-state and urbane civilization” in comparison to the rest of the entire “Arab world”, he nonetheless presents the lurking threat of its “many bays, inlets, coves, and islands” that allow for “excellent places for hiding tanker-ramming speedboats” (Kaplan, “The revenge of geography”).

16. For Kaplan, the effective grand strategy for Iran involves recognizing its “geography” (the unreconstructed geopolitical scripting of its ‘geography’, of course) and embarking on a military mission of “containment” to secure “this shatter zone”.

17. Kaplan, “The revenge of geography”.

18. Morrissey, J. (2010) ‘Architects of Empire: The Military-Strategic Studies Complex and the Scripting of US National Security’, *Antipode*, 42 (in press).

19. Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (2009) *Message from the President*, [http://www.csbaonline.org/2006-1/5>AboutUs/Presidents\\_Message.php](http://www.csbaonline.org/2006-1/5>AboutUs/Presidents_Message.php) (last accessed 16 May 2009).

20. Natter, ‘On the geo-economic pivot of history’, p. 249.

21. Kaplan, “The revenge of geography”.



## FATEFUL MAPPINGS: GEOGRAPHY, ENVIRONMENT AND INSECURITY

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Robert Kaplan has made a career of combining travel writing with supposedly learned reflections drawn from an exceedingly diverse set of sources. It appears that he haunts bookstores on his travels to add intellectual spice to his reflections on what he sees from the road. In this he is hardly alone, but his prominence as a pundit and journalist who has found his way into the halls of power, and more specifically into both the farthest extremities and the training schools of the U.S. military, make him an especially interesting writer. Now he has once more invoked cartographic rhetoric to specify the “real world” and done so in ways that invoke imperial tropes generally and the name of Halford Mackinder in particular.

As with many of his earlier efforts Kaplan is difficult to critique because just when one expects an idea to be drawn to a conclusion, inserted in some larger conceptual narrative, the case used to make some clear statement one gets instead another theorist, another observation from some other place. De-contextualised theory and impressionistic accounts juxtaposed more or less at random don't a logical case make, now any more than they did fifteen years ago when Kaplan announced “The Coming Anarchy” in the pages of the *Atlantic Monthly* in February 1994 (See Dalby 2002). Simple

alternatives to his preferred interpretations simply don't appear in his texts.

While there are numerous quibbles one might make with this article the most important point about the supposed geography that Kaplan makes has one crucial commonality with Mackinder that is worth emphasising as his first key assumption. This is the supposedly “realist” assumption of the inevitability of clashing powers, and more precisely the supposed inevitability of the clash of spatial entities. This basic mapping denies the possibility that globalization and the peculiar military circumstances of the present have changed the dynamics in such a way that great power rivalry is no longer played according to classic “realist” rules.

As the events of late 2008 and 2009 have clearly suggested, the political response to the economic crisis of the present is not a replay of the 1930s, and its clear to most political leaders that globalization has made cooperation essential. While there are periodic alarms from various American military think tanks concerning the rise of China and the possibilities of it emerging as a “near peer” competitor, which inevitably requires substantial military outlays on the part of the US state, overall the Chinese military modernisations of the last decade do not suggest anything other than routine upgrades and the growth of capabilities commensurate with the rapid increase in Chinese wealth as its economy expands. Neither in the case of India is there much more than a gradual expansion of its capabilities. The second key assumption in Kaplan's writing is that the only view of the world that matters is the one from Washington. If America is the most powerful state then its view matters; ultimately its remit is a global one that apparently makes it the only view that matters. The peripheries of the global economy are there to be administered by those of us in the metropolises who know best. And those who know best apparently know that contemporary political and economic transformations are trivial in comparisons to the eternal verities of “the map”. Those peripheries are increasingly seen as wild and un-governed, perhaps ungovernable, spaces requiring imperial policing (Galgano 2006). At best they are places liable to the persuasive demagoguery of “fundamentalists”.

All this is apparently about Kaplan's third assertion that environment causes if not determines human fate. Man apparently initiates but environment, or is that

geography, controls? While thus it might have seemed to Halford Mackinder, blessed with the superiority of an imperial education, it's hardly how geographical scholarship now understands matters. But there are no contemporary geographers on Kaplan's reading list. Presumably they are not of any relevance (In this he follows some recent academic discussion of geographical influences on grand strategy in for instance Grygiel 2006). Or could that simply be that a serious engagement with what they have to say would preclude the assertions Kaplan so casually makes? Consigning geographers to the era prior to political science allows him to simultaneously claim the superiority of geographical verities while neglecting all the likely lines of counter argument that might be drawn on if contemporary scholarship was read rather than being summarily dismissed.

Arguably the most important condemnation of determinism published this decade is simply missing altogether. In exploring the origins of one of the worst imperial abrogations of responsibility Mike Davis (2001) suggests plainly that invoking the stinginess and fickleness of nature in the case of famine in the late nineteenth century allowed imperial administrators to avoid dealing with the practical matters of political economy and political administration which could have substantially countered the starvation of millions under their care. Blaming nature, allowing it to take the rap for their neglect of their responsibility was just part of the larger relationships between the geopolitical imagination and the practices of politics. But it was precisely the connections between the global economy and the prices of food that needed attention.

Updating this argument it's clear that the global economy is now key to many other changes that have effects beyond what Kaplan suggests. Globalization has transformed many things, but its not just globalization that matters in terms of contemporary discussions of economy and political change. Kaplan notes the rapid urbanization of many parts of the world including the Arab parts and sees in these sprawling megacities a potential for political dangers. He also suggests that these urban centres might be the scenes of Malthusian fights over scarce resources, never stopping to consider the matter of public water supply or the possibilities of infrastructure innovations being key to urbanization for many millions.

These cities are artificial constructions, not ones related so directly to the agricultural and nomadic modes of existence that so concerned Malthus. The new contexts of urban futures and all the transformations of the global economy are simply subsumed under geographical verities that are never investigated in any detail. So too are many of the borders that Kaplan worries about, although only in the case of the Indian sub-continent does he pay any serious attention to the artificiality of states there, hinting rather than making clear that the Durand Line, the border that bisects “Pashtunistan” was an imperial imposition. The geography that matters here is a matter of state borders and administrations formed in the aftermath of the arrangements made by the departing Raj, as much as anything that nature might in some sense control.

While Kaplan's concerns about the future of Bangladesh, and its political fate should large scale inundation occur in coming decades are widely shared, especially by those in the earth science community who worry about sea level rise, nowhere does Kaplan seem to consider the human causes of this sea level rise. There is no clear indication that the widespread use of carbon fuels is an important part of this story. Neither is there any sense that the circumstances of humanity now are different in a number of important ways from Mahan or Mackinder, not to mention Malthus' concerns of yesteryear.

Perhaps if Robert Kaplan started with some other reading material of more recent vintage his presuppositions of geographical determinism might not be so enthusiastically trotted out to rearticulate the tropes of tabloid realism (Debrix 2008), the constant reinforcement of fear, the moral angst and the sense of helplessness in the face of danger which seems so overwhelming because, in Kaplan's articulation it's out there, beyond human control, determining our fate. He might even have condescended to read some of the contemporary attempts to think carefully about environmental history and how it relates to the emergence of the global economy in the first place (Hornborg, McNeill and Martinez-Alier, 2007). Or perhaps a geographer or two concerned with the megacities in the global South? Perhaps he could have consulted Mike Davis' (2005) *Planet of Slums* where he would learn lots about the politics of the megacities he so fears.

But if Kaplan had started with say the latest United Nations Global Environmental Outlook (2007) he would have learned that human activity is changing environments at a rapid rate in most parts of the planet. The global economy that he seems to simply take for granted has wrought huge changes in much of the natural world. Whether its habitat loss with all the difficulties relating to biodiversity, the pollution and diversion of most of the major rivers of the planet, the removal of substantial parts of the Ocean biomass by rapacious industrial fishing done by fleets far from their native ports, or the urbanization of many parts of the world made possible by globe spanning industrial commodity chains, humanity has become a veritable force of nature. Man initiates all right, but now keeps right on going even when the follies of disruption come back to haunt human efforts. The response now frequently is further engineering, further environmental modification, and results very different from the pessimistic revenge scenarios that haunt Kaplan's tabloid imagination.

If Kaplan had started with the reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2007) or perhaps more tellingly with the German Advisory Council on Climate Change (2008) he might have had to face the most important reason of all for why his reversion to old fashioned determinism is not only inappropriate but a dangerous distraction from the sources of danger and insecurity in coming decades. If he had read this material he would understand that, contrary to the views of nature as outside human control which so usefully supported imperial administrators neglecting their responsibilities a century and more ago, we are now increasingly taking our fate into our own hands. He might just understand that the earth is a system in which life changes its own habitat, and that the latest dominant life form on the planet, industrial humanity powered by carboniferous capitalism which reaches round the globe, is changing environmental conditions in many places quite dramatically.

The problem with such investigations of environmental matters is that it doesn't support Kaplan's reinvention of imperial geographical verities. It inconveniently (to borrow Al Gore's apt formulation) points to the new circumstances of humanity that makes global political economy the driving force of the changing ecologies of the planet. It wouldn't allow him to evade

the crucial matters of how political economy determines who lives and who dies and how political decisions made in many places influence the lives of people the other side of the world, and have done so since, as Mike Davis so pithily puts it the integration of the world grain trade meant that "Suddenly the price of wheat in Liverpool and the rainfall in Madras were variables in the same vast equation of human survival" (Davis 2001: 12). Above all it wouldn't allow Kaplan to get away with the simple explanations of the violence in many parts of the world, especially in Spykman's rimlands, which seem to be the root of his insistence on providing advice to the current generation of strategists and foreign policy makers who read *Foreign Policy*.

What is clear if one reads the discussions of earth system science, and the attempts to combine human geographies with natural processes is that humanity is changing its habitat directly in becoming not only a growing species, but one that is now more than 50 percent an urban one, while simultaneously changing the larger parameters of the biosphere, only most obviously by setting climate changes in motion. We are, as the residents of both Mumbai and New Orleans discovered in July and August 2005 respectively, becoming vulnerable to climate change and infrastructure inadequacies. Although we have yet to think very seriously about the infrastructure of urban centres as artificial ecologies or the matter of enhanced storms and rainfall events as only partly "natural", doing so has become necessary to confront the dangers that render so many humans insecure in the coming decades (Dalby 2009a). Understanding this as the context of insecurity is both informed by contemporary scholarly research and requires that maps such as Kaplan's be drastically updated.

While it's too soon to announce the end of major warfare between the great powers, the patterns of military activity and the necessity for cooperation have in the last decade come increasingly to the fore. The failure to recognise this was the great failing of the neo-conservatives; their outdated maps suggested a world indefinitely doomed to great power rivalries and the necessity for America to use force to shape the world to its advantage. Its abject failure to use force effectively in Iraq was partly due to the completely inappropriate training and equipment of the Army sent to topple Saddam Hussein (Dalby

2009b), and once again of course a complete failure on the part of the military to seriously consider the local political economy as key to post invasion stability. But the possibilities of international cooperation after 9/11 and the specification of the attack on 9/11 as war rather than a criminal matter, likewise was a matter of completely inappropriate cartographic imaginations linked to the script of revenge.

Kaplan's cartography, for all its claims to distance itself from neo-conservative failings in favour of a new geographically instructed realism, replicates precisely these errors. This is not surprising given the imperial view he deliberately invokes as the correct lens through which to view the world. While perhaps it is progress that he only goes back one century to Mackinder in this article, whereas Malthus, two centuries back got pride of place in "the Coming Anarchy", it is richly ironic that in the earlier piece in 1994 he lamented the failure of maps to explain the new realities after the cold war. Now his particular preferred maps are to be invoked as the guide to the military establishments of the next few decades. But these are hopelessly inaccurate guides to the future.

By misconstruing the past, failing to engage contemporary environmental and geographical understandings and falling back on the worst kind of naïve empiricism, Kaplan provides a guide more likely to replicate the follies and the tragic errors of imperialism than to help understand the rapidly changing circumstances that need to be confronted in any serious attempt to deal with human insecurity. Except of course that is not Kaplan's concern. Like Mackinder before him he is not concerned with the plight of the native, the distant, the Other. He's concerned about maintaining a form of political rule that ensures the dominance of the imperium rather than the human possibilities for those it either rules or excludes (Lipschutz 2009).

Geographers have an obligation to contest this imperial nostalgia, not only because it misconstrues the present, and does so dangerously, but also because it's high time we insisted that the discipline has something substantial to say about the future of our collective fate. This is fate that we have, albeit mostly inadvertently taken into our own hands, partly as a result of our (sometimes wilful) ignorance of our place in the biosphere. But to make that substantial contribution to the discussion of our collective future we need both up

to date maps and clear understandings of our new place in the changing biosphere. Then we can also put matters of political economy directly into the discussion both to understand the causes of violence in particular places and to make it clear that decisions about production, are indeed decisions about the production of nature as Neil Smith (2009) reminds us again recently. Then we can talk effectively about a genuinely human geography rather perpetuate imperial fantasies about environments supposedly determining our fate.

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## MACKINDER REDUX

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Composed at the end of the First World War, Halford Mackinder's *Democratic Ideals and Reality: A Study in the Politics of Reconstruction* poured the cold-water of geographical determinism over the liberal idealism of Woodrow Wilson's proposed new world order. Mackinder suggested that while a disarmed world of global law and national self-determination remained a noble ideal, geographical realities made it dangerous folly to expect it any time soon. Instead, Mackinder warned that a world brimful of super-powers and their colonies would see various attempts at global hegemony, and that, should any one power bring under its sway the resource basket of oil, wheat, and coal to be found in West Russia, the Ukraine, and the Caspian Basin, it stood fair to dominate a bipolar world. Against this possibility, treaties and law were paper tigers, only a countervailing and superior military force could offer any real protection.

This same dialectic of ideals and reality animates Robert Kaplan's argument about the Revenge of Geography. Kaplan proposes that liberal humanists and neo-Conservatives are too ambitious, seeking to remake the world in line with their democratic aspirations, but in doing so, they over-reach themselves and become mired in disasters like Vietnam or Iraq once the stubborn geographical realities of ethnic and regional

distinctiveness assert themselves, leaving the United States in Iraq, for example, as 'a land-based, in-your-face meddler [...] caught up in sectarian conflict' (Kaplan 2009a). Atavistic conflicts flourish as the weak institutions of states are shattered by globalization while the struggle for existence is sharpened by population growth amid dwindling resources. Writing of the Balkans, Kaplan finds recurrent conflict around primordial ethnic identities, as in Macedonia where, in the years preceding the First World War, 'ethnic hatreds released by the decline of the Ottoman Empire had first exploded, forming the radials of twentieth-century European and Middle Eastern conflict, Macedonia was like the chaos at the beginning of time' (Kaplan 1994: 51), and, again with the end of communism in Yugoslavia, Kaplan heard 'phantom voices that I knew were about to explode once again' (Kaplan 1994: 5). As did Mackinder, Kaplan believes that he lives in dangerous times, 'when politics are increasingly shaped by the physical environment. A brief moment marked by the Industrial Revolution, which gave humankind a chance to defend itself somewhat from nature, may be closing' (Kaplan 1996: 4). As did Mackinder, Kaplan sees contemporary crises as replaying the intense territorial conflicts of an earlier closed-space world (Kearns 1984).

For Kaplan, geography divides the world into three sets of peoples: land powers, sea powers, and the regional ethnicities ('granular ethnic and tribal elements' (Kaplan 2009b) scattered around them. Following Mackinder, Kaplan suggests that land-power is essential aggressive and dangerous, after all did not communism flourish around the edges of the great Russian land power and was not fascism a continental European phenomenon, whereas, 'liberalism nurtured its deepest roots in the United States and Great Britain, essentially island nations and sea powers both,' for 'the sea, beyond the cosmopolitan influences it bestows by virtue of access to distant harbors, provides the inviolate border security that democracy needs to take root' (Kaplan 2009c). This places a particular burden upon the United States as, for example, 'the only great power with no territorial designs on Asia [, allowing it ...] to rise above realpolitik and act solely for the good of the region' (Kaplan 2009d). Fragile states within the reach of aggressive and repressive land powers can be saved for liberal democracy although, 'not [by] forc[ing] elections on societies ill prepared for them [,] but [by] project[ing] economic and military power

regionally' (Kaplan 2000: 328). In other words, fragile states must be brought under benign US control or left to the mercy of fascist empires. Like Mackinder, Kaplan believes that, in the face of these challenges, idealism is not only ineffective, it is also dangerous: '[i]dealism shorn of any element of realism is immoral' (Kaplan 2003: xv).

### The Materiality Of Ideology

The return to Mackinder invokes a geographical approach to international relations that promises to naturalize a certain set of policy postures, placing them beyond challenge, the necessary response to a stable set of environmental causes (Kearns 2006). This is not now, and was not in Mackinder's day, the only geographical approach to foreign affairs and I want to outline four bases for an alternative, more progressive, Geopolitics (Kearns 2008). The first is that force is not the only and irreducible basis of international relations. The primacy of force lies behind Mackinder's opposition of geographical realism to liberal idealism. The conflation of real with force is evident in 'realist' international relations theory with its dismissal of multilateral institutions as chimerical (Mearsheimer 1994). It is evident also in Kissinger's (1994) preference for realpolitik over ideologically driven foreign policy. Yet ideas too have material expressions and effects. The Cold War was many things but it is impossible to understand it without taking seriously the ideological differences between the USA and the USSR over the meaning and legacy of European modernity (Buck-Morss 2000; Westad 2005). International agreements to prosecute crimes against humanity produce new risks for tyrants and may reduce the sense of impunity with which vicious leaders grant themselves immunity from prosecution (Robertson 2006). The United Nations embodied a global covenant that accelerated decolonization by delegitimizing colonial rule (Jackson 2000).

These arguments were made by many among Mackinder's contemporaries (Kearns 2009). Norman Angell (1909) argued that the most powerful nations were no more prosperous than many that had virtually no effective defense. Indeed, economic interdependence meant that states had a material interest in averting war if they could build institutions and trust that would defer or mitigate conflict. James Bryce (1921)

proposed that a combination of a sufficient number of nations might develop the moral force to develop fora of conciliation and arbitration that would prevent at least many otherwise likely wars. John Hobson argued for a League of Nations with the right and ability to 'apply an economic boycott, or in the last resort an international force' (Hobson 1915: 6). Peter Kropótkin and Élisée Reclus argued that cooperation was the social force out of which humankind developed its highest capacities at all scales, from kin to the global ecumene (Kearns 2009).

These alternatives to conflict developed international expression. They did not eliminate military action but then neither did military action eliminate the aspiration for cooperation and renewed attempts to devise better institutions and practices. International relations are a mix of force and association, of conflict and collaboration, and foreign policy should attend to ways of building and preserving peace. Insisting that only one side of this equation is real confounds attempts to reinforce the other.

### Geopolitical Economy

Kaplan and Mackinder explain the geography of conflict in terms of fundamental spatial realities that are relatively unchanging. Kaplan finds that in the regions where empires clash, political institutions are shattered loosing ethnic and sectarian hatreds. These are the very regions that Nicholas Spykman (1942) identified as the rimlands of Mackinder's Heartland. However, the continuity of conflict in these places is due more to the instability produced by earlier conflicts than by stable geographical realities. For example, the British fought wars in Iraq during 1914-18, 1920-21, 1922-4, 1943, and 1945, and in Afghanistan during 1839-42, 1878-80, and 1919, and of course are in both places yet. Current patterns of disadvantage flow from this past rather arising afresh in the present by impress of the environment. The relatively stable elements result from our having a hydrocarbon economy and under these conditions the Great Powers have a continuing interest in the Caspian Basin and Iraq. In other words, the continuity of instability is produced by recurrent external interest rather than by geographically determined local conditions.

The economic interests involved in imperialism were identified by Mackinder's contemporaries, such as

John Hobson (1901), and it is still true that jingoistic adventures are talked up by resource-hungry corporations. Another of Mackinder's contemporaries, Élisée Reclus (1905, 1908) and Peter Kropótkin () argued that the free trade pressures from rich countries, led to the commodification of land in poor countries and the promotion there of an export-based, cash-crop rural economy to the serious detriment of indigenous food security. In this way, economic and thus political instability were intensified in ways that David Harvey (2003) today describes as accumulation by dispossession. These realities of geo-political economy do not feature in the environmental determinism of Kaplan and Mackinder. Yet these realities matter because under the guise of freedom or justice a whole series of economic relations were put in place by the USA and the USSR during the Cold War. Even now, freedom is invoked to justify the creation of free markets and the elimination of the very sorts of economic protection that almost every industrialized country has relied upon when establishing companies that can compete with international enterprises (Bradshaw and Huang 1991; Lee 2008).

#### Primordial Ethnicities

A third difficulty with the geographical arguments of Mackinder and Kaplan is that they ground stable identities in regional ecologies. Kaplan proposes that when the artificial institutions of state and empire shatter, primordial ethnicities re-assert themselves. This is what Lene Hansen (2006: 13) calls a 'Balkan discourse,' the suggestion that in certain places antagonistic identities persist and people with these identities will ever be at each other's throats, whenever not restrained by the artificial institutions of state or empire. There are two problems with varieties of the 'Balkan discourse.' In the first place, ethno-national identities far from being a constant yearning have to be taught, diffused, and insisted upon. The Serbian ethnicity that Kaplan attends to in *Balkan Ghosts* was staged and promoted over many years by Slobodan Milošević in order to create a Greater Serbian identity around which he could seize control of the destiny of the former Yugoslavia (Magas 1993). He wanted control of the state because the transition from socialism created marvelous opportunities for those in power to profit from the sale of state assets (Holmstrom and Smith 2000). The second problem with 'Balkan discourses' is that by placing the blame for

ethnic antagonism in history, they divert attention from the scale and consequences of sectarian crimes in the present. Furthermore, they fail to attend to the role of justice in mitigating sectarian tensions and providing a basis for building due recognition and a parity of esteem between formerly hostile groups (Thompson 2002).

Again, similar arguments were made by several of Mackinder's contemporaries. Peter Kropótkin's (1969[1896]) discussion of the evolution of the state made clear the class-based dynamics of state formation and the invention by absolutist monarchs and, later, nationalist bourgeoisies of both ethnicity and tradition. Against the view that humanity is essentially competitive and violent, many anarchists chose to stress instead the essential goodness of humanity and the naturalistic basis for an ethics of cooperation and mutual aid (Kropótkin 1947[1922]). This tradition is important because there is an accumulated expertise in conflict resolution (Cortright 2006; Kurlansky 2006) that is dismissed in Balkan discourse, producing a dispiriting and despairing view of Geopolitics.

#### National exceptionalism

The final issue I wish to raise concerns the idea of national exceptionalism. Kaplan and Mackinder both insist that, although over much of the world the projection of force beyond national borders is aggressive and invasive, there is an exception. Both identify sea-power as essentially pacific and both view their own state as properly a sea-power. The aggression of US foreign policy cannot so easily be treated as a sideshow. In the last twenty years the United States has used military force against twenty-four countries (Grossman 2009). The current conflict in Iraq has produced some 100,000 civilian casualties (Iraq Body Count 2009). In addition, the United States has engaged in covert activities in many more places, training and funding a variety of death squads (Grandin 2006) and now maintaining an archipelago of sites of torture (Heiner 2007). Furthermore, it arms so many other countries that a large share of both civil and international conflict may properly be considered proxy wars (Loveman 2002).

Again, the national exceptionalism claimed by so-called sea-powers was challenged by Mackinder's contemporaries. I have already noted Angell's criticisms of Alfred Mahan (Navari 1989) but perhaps the most

trenchant critique of the hypocrisy of British claims to elevated motives in its use of force came from John Hobson. Hobson's study of the *Psychology of Jingoism* dissected much of the rhetoric sanitizing imperialism and in his famous study on *Imperialism*, he was refreshingly direct:

*Paramount power, effective autonomy, emissary of civilisation, rectification of frontier, and a whole sliding scale of terms from 'hinterland' and 'sphere of influence' to 'effective occupation' and 'annexation' will serve as ready illustrations of a phraseology derived for purposes of concealment and encroachment. The Imperialist who sees modern history through these masks never grasps the 'brute' facts, but always sees them at several removes, refracted, interpreted, and glozed by convenient renderings (Hobson 1988[1902]: 21).*

Mackinder claims that geographical realities underpin international relations. In this manner, the issue of state agency and responsibility is hidden by environmental necessity. States, we are assured, have little choice but to play forcefully the hand that nature has dealt them. This has three main consequences: it obscures the economic basis of much foreign policy, it denies the possibility of peaceful co-existence, and it excuses the violence of colonialism and imperialism. Some of Mackinder's contemporaries understood this and if we are to revive geographical perspectives on international relations, then, we should return also to these anarchist and socialist alternatives.

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## B MOVIE GEOPOLITICS

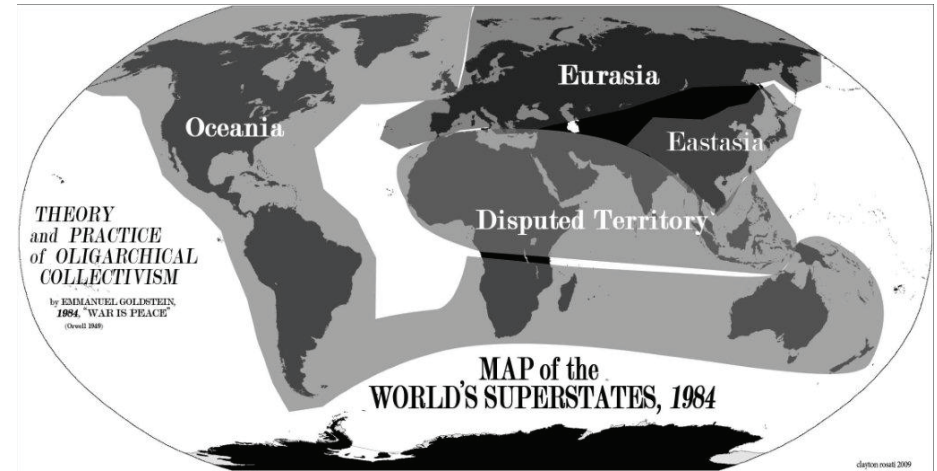
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While the contemporary publication industry is in crisis, certain genres of writing from the previous century endure. One is the geopolitical essay, a form of discourse that came into its own in the twentieth century as journals and magazines on foreign policy were launched and sought an audience amongst an educated and internationally minded public. High-brow forms of the geopolitical essay appeared in specialist journals tied to influential associations and think tanks like the Royal Geographical Society (*The Geographical Journal*) and the Council on Foreign Relations (*Foreign Affairs*). Middle-brow forms appeared in weekly news magazines like *Time* (founded in 1923) and *Newsweek* (launched in 1933) as well as in magazines like *The Saturday Evening Post* and *Readers Digest* magazine. *Foreign Policy* magazine began life as an academic journal in 1970 but re-invented itself in the 1990s into a glossy bimonthly magazine available in airports and newsstands for cosmopolitans on the move.

The geopolitical essay genre has three distinctive features. First, it purports to present a 'strategic view' of international affairs. The prevailing conceit here is that the author is presenting a detached, objective, and long-term perspective on the course of human affairs.



Strategic vision is taken to be penetrative vision: it sees through the humdrum of daily events to the important structuring dualities of our time. Second, the geopolitical essay purports to offer a 'global view' on the challenges facing humanity and the state from which the author writes. The 'global' evoked is both geographical – the international system treated as a singular worldwide unit – and conceptual – it is comprehensive and totalizing. Implicitly if not explicitly, global vision is held to be superior to all situated and embedded forms of seeing. It sees how everything fits together. Third, empowered by its multiply superior forms of seeing, the geopolitical essay engages in divination, prophecy and warning. It identifies and describes key spaces and signs from across the world, organizes these together using its preferred dualisms into an overarching narrative and issues imperatives based on the arrangement of these signs and their current qualities. The geopolitical essay, in sum, is a genre of serious writing reliant on some key fictional conceits.

This prologue helps situate Robert Kaplan's essay in the 'Think Big' issue of *Foreign Policy* magazine. Kaplan's piece is a commodity, a paid piece of writing by a well know travel writer designed to stimulate, provoke and entertain the magazine's readers. To this end, Kaplan needs to keep things relatively simple and engaging. His essay is a hybrid of the high-brow and

middle-brow style of the geopolitical essay (while trading occasionally in some pulp fiction). It mixes elements of in-the-know fashion commentary – 'realism' is 'in' this season; Mahan is "all the rage among Chinese and Indian strategists" – with classic elements of the geopolitical essay, promising insight into what endures and underlies the froth of events. The hook of the essay is the promise of rediscovering, Indiana Jones style, lost Victorian era insight. Geography, Kaplan proclaims, is the force behind many of the events and conflicts facing the world. This contention gets a B movie title: 'The Revenge of Geography.'

In developing this argument, the well-travelled Kaplan doesn't rest his expertise solely on his experiences traversing remote mountains and deserts (though 'I've been there' is central to his writing). Following the formula of his travel writing, Kaplan consults classic writing and finds 'guides' full of wisdom and foresight supposedly forgotten by our age. Rebecca West was his guide to the awakening Balkans in the early 1990s and now in 2009 he's rediscovered another forgotten British master guide, the conservative imperialist geographer Halford Mackinder. Just as his attachment to West lead him to a pit of primordialist clichés about the Balkans, Kaplan's uncritical embrace of Mackinder leads him to global visions suffused with imperial anxiety.

Halford Mackinder is widely seen, as Kaplan notes, as the ‘father of geopolitics.’ The version he codified is built around the conceit that the world has conveniently arranged itself into the binary categories prevailing in late Victorian England. Thus there are things which can be termed ‘nature’ or ‘geography’ and these can be held to be the substratum upon which everything human is built: ‘culture,’ ‘ideas,’ and, most important of all to Mackinder, a successful empire. Mackinder, with an ear to marketing his ideas, summed this up in his own compelling slogan: “Man and not nature initiates, but nature in large measure controls.” Kaplan revives this and like Mackinder seeks to use ‘geography’ and ‘the map’ as a synonym for ‘nature’. But his usage is not consistent and there is considerable slippage and ambivalence in these terms. Packaging his argument as the rediscovery of the foresight of Victorian age guides who “knew the landscape best” (another slippage in Kaplan’s categories) geographical determinism returns in the ‘revenge of geography.’

The difficulties with this line of thought are many. Conceptually, the organizing dualisms begin to fall apart when we recall that ‘geo-graph-y’ literally means ‘earth writing.’ To study geography is to study books, historical and culturally bound versions of how the world appears to certain cultures and authors, rather than an eternal and transcendent real. This matters because the distinction between ‘geography’ (the supposedly given and unchangeable) and ‘ideas’ (the human) is fundamental to the geopolitical essay yet never clear. Physical geography cannot be considered without, at the same time, examining how economies are organized, states are governed, technological systems deployed and power distributed across the earth. All geography is ultimately human geography because ‘geo-graph-y’ is a human activity not an external given. Following on from this, any claim that there are ‘enduring facts of geography’ has to concede that this notion is ultimately a writerly trope.

What is clear is that the fiction of a separation between “Man” and “Nature” (of ‘geography’ and ‘ideas’) helps normalize all sorts of political prejudices and agendas as the natural (‘realist’) condition of things. Mackinder, after all, used the distinction to naturalize his racist worldview and imperial modernization agenda as “realist.” For Mackinder, racial inequality

was a natural fact and history inevitably a history of competition between races (this is mentioned in the “Pivot” essay Kaplan admires when Mackinder declares Professor Edward Augustus Freeman’s notion of history as “Mediterranean and European race history” as “in a sense, of course, true,” i.e. an established genetic given prior to the effects of environmental influences on history). Yet, Mackinder was no racial or environmental fatalist and nurtured dreams of a modernized British Empire enduring through the twentieth century and beyond. Mackinder promoted Geography as a university discipline and tried to make it an intellectual vehicle for his imperialist beliefs. Geography, he wrote in 1907, was vital to the education of British school children or, as he put it, “the children of an Imperial Race.”

In the guise of revising Mackinder ‘theories of geopolitics’ (sic) for the contemporary age (though he discusses only the 1904 essay and misreads it badly when he claims it “prepared us for the rise of the Soviet Union and its vast zone of influence”), Kaplan gathers up select trends and presents them as ominous threats to what is implicitly held to be the benign world order secured by American military power. In the first, Mackinder’s concern with proliferating railways is replaced by proliferating missile technology and the “rising power it confers on states.” “Not only is no one safe, but a 1914-style chain reaction leading to wider war is easily conceivable.” In the second, population growth threatens to fill out the empty spaces on the map and create a “conflict over scarce resources” as states compete for territory, food and water. In the third, urbanization, sensational media and compressed geography “provide optimum breeding grounds for dangerous ideologies and channels for them to spread.” “This new map of Eurasia – tighter, more integrated, and more crowded – will be even less stable than Mackinder thought.” Kaplan then offers up his most hyperbolic vision: “In fact, much of Eurasia will eventually be as claustrophobic as Israel and the Palestinian territories, with geography controlling everything and no room for maneuver.” Instead of world regions, we have ‘shatter zones.’ States appear as artificial and ramshackle constructs, some like Pakistan a ‘nightmare’ teetering on the edge of calamity.

This is vivid B movie stuff: unstable leaders with dangerous weapons, an existential struggle for resources, and stifling numbers of people overrunning the fragile

order of states. While Kaplan makes the condition of various places compelling, the vision he presents is more pulp than realist geopolitics, too superficial, too hyperbolic and too vividly cataclysmic to be taken as soberly realist. Confronting the dark condition of much of humanity is one thing. Modernizing classic imperialist anxieties is entirely different and, to put it mildly, hardly an intelligent basis for realist thinking about the U.S. role in the 21st century. Robert Kaplan is an entertaining travel writer; his talent for writing pulp geopolitics should be also be appreciated.



*Tangled Wilderness, for resistG20.org*