Realism and Geopolitics

Simon Dalby

Geopolitics: then and now

The term geopolitics has many contested meanings. Its historical concerns with living space, the invocation of global equilibrium and the balance of power in Henry Kissinger’s political rhetoric, the assumptions of given contexts as the terrain of great-power rivalry, the geography of choke points and shatter-belts in geostrategy are all linked to the term in various ways. The reinvention of ‘Victorian’ approaches (Grygiel, 2006) and specifically the invocation of Halford Mackinder (1904; 1919) and his ideas of an Asian heartland as key to the patterns of world power, in such texts as the travel writer Robert Kaplan’s high-profile ‘Revenge of geography’ (2009), poses the questions of what the past teaches us and how the notion of geopolitics is now being re-imagined. ‘Victorian’ formulations suggest the contextual givens for humanity: the determinist invocation of limited environmental opportunities linked to an imperial optic where rivalries are inevitable and war the consequence of political ambition tied to inherently expansionist politics.

The key ‘realist’ assumption of the inevitability of clashing great powers inscribes rivalry among elites as the defining political condition of humanity (Mearsheimer 2001). War is seen as the ultimate arbiter. While the literature of realism usually claims a tradition stretching back to Thucydides and his analysis of the Peloponnesian War (see Frankel 1996a; 1996b), the discussion of realism was emphasized in post-war US political science following Hans Morgenthau’s germinal text Politics Among Nations (1948). Much of this is directly related to discussions of the presupposition of international anarchy as a situation in which military power acted as the ultimate provider of order given the absence of an over-arching authority (Booth 2010; Waltz 1979). It fed directly into questions of national security, the dominant formulation justifying military action through the Cold War period (Buzan 1983). As the rest of this chapter makes clear, much of this ‘realist’ discussion does not explicitly engage the geographic arrangements of international affairs; contrary to the use of geopolitics in the such publications as Saul Cohen’s geography of international affairs (2009). Frequently the context for power politics is simply taken for granted.
The invocation of a given although frequently unexamined context provides ‘realist’ authors with a backdrop, a supposedly objective contextualization of human affairs within which the drama of power politics plays out. In Shakespeare’s terms, all the world may be a stage, but assumptions about the arrangement of stage furniture and the location of the various props are not shared by many writers who invoke geographical verities as the basis for their supposedly realist analyses. As some of the examples invoked below suggest, the ability to establish the geographical context for discussion of matters of international politics conveys very considerable analytical and political advantages: it was key to strategic thinking for most of the twentieth century (Dalby 2009a).

In the aftermath of the Cold War there has not been widespread agreement on the contours of contemporary geopolitics. Indeed much of the policy discussion over the last two decades has been about claims concerning the geographical specification of contemporary transformations. The sheer speed of transformation is part of the difficulty. As this chapter emphasizes the historical analogies that they invoke may be of considerable use, but the crucial point is that now, to a much greater extent than in the past, humanity has taken its fate into its own hands. Technological innovations, the urbanization of humanity and the possibilities for literally building new environments dwarf the capabilities of the great powers of a century ago and now also offer very different possibilities for warfare. In the case of nuclear weapons the twentieth century presented the prospect of a prompt obliteration of civilization. Now the innovations in satellite technology, computer systems infrastructure and robotic warfare have once again changed the terms of military competition, just as the rapidly changing processes of the global economy cause endless shifts in patterns of production and power.

The specification of the appropriate context is crucial to the politics of all this, and a focus on geopolitics makes this especially clear. How politicians invoke the supposed verities of context to frame policy matters greatly. Insofar as geopolitics is understood to be about the discursive figures of the world used by political elites (N. Parker 2010), then the scholarly task of examining these imaginative geographies remains of pressing importance. The task for critical geopolitics scholars remains precisely to challenge these taken-for-granted contexts in political discourse. Contrasting traditional political realism with its focus on inevitable rivalries with new ecological understandings of how the planet works is but one way of undertaking this critical task, but one that does powerfully challenge the basic tenets of realism by tackling its implicit geographical premises or lack thereof.

To illustrate this argument this chapter first looks back to the invocation of earlier texts and the implied historical analogies that so frequently structure geopolitical discourse. It then revisits some of the now-forgotten discussions at the end of the Cold War concerning the appropriate contextualization of US foreign policy in a world without the Soviet Union. Discussions of contemporary globalization and the potential for future conflicts are then examined briefly for their invocations of context. Finally the chapter looks at the larger ecological context of humanity and suggests that the most important contextualization is now the changing environment. Not only do the new geological circumstances of the Anthropocene
era pose new challenges, they also undercut the determinist premises of classical geopolitics by forcing a recognition that the new world we live in is of our own making, not a given context within which traditional realist rivalries are played out.

Looking back: historical analogues

While the geographical literature has frequently looked back a century to Halford Mackinder (Kearns 2009), and indeed Robert Kaplan explicitly cited Mackinder as the key to understanding the future in Asia (2009), recent commentaries on China in particular have also invoked both Norman Angell, author most famously of *The Great Illusion* (1912), and many of A.T. Mahan’s historical volumes, including the *Influence of Sea Power upon History* (1890), to think through what lessons might be learned from the past and how current circumstances can be interpreted in light of previous events (Holmes and Yoshihara, 2006). These themes are explicitly discussed in the 4 December 2010 special issue of the *Economist* magazine suggesting that this matter is far from only an American preoccupation. Jakub Grygiel looks back to Mackinder too, in part, but he is much more concerned that the failure of the USA to shift its geostrategic focus to China may lead to its decline if it fails to understand the priorities in its new strategic context (2006). Where Angell warned of the irrationalities of great-power warfare in an already interconnected world, his warnings were ignored and the tragic consequences played out over the following three decades. Now the invocations of great-power rivalries in the face of common dangers once again focus attention on matters that might indeed become self-fulfilling prophesies.

In contrast Thomas Barnett, who might indeed be read as an extreme re-invention of liberal internationalism, sees China as America’s potential ally in the world of the future, rather than a potential rival (2009). His map of the world suggests the need to incorporate the peripheral parts of the world polity into the global economy. Fareed Zakaria’s much commented upon discussion of *The Post American World* (2009) implies that national rivalries will persist, but while the possibilities of cooperation are open America will continue to be the source of leadership and inspiration. Fear of China will not be a serious matter if Americans undertake a revival of their dreams of a better world, built on their traditional cultural strengths of technological innovation and economic change.

But which geographical arrangements are implicit in these texts matters greatly; how the world is specified is an inescapable part of these differing claims as to what is important (Dalby 2011a). All this is partly a matter of methodological nationalism, of a focus on the world through Westphalian lenses, despite the fact that the great powers are much better understood as empires than nation states. The policy discourse is dramatically enhanced by the persistence of nationalist tropes as the terms within which media reportage of the world is written. In the process the complex circumstances of contemporary environmental and economic interdependence are always in danger of being pushed aside in the narratives of
winners and losers, how our side is doing, and what a particular ‘we’ gains in the process. When security and danger is invoked, the specifications of the arena of contest are frequently overlaid with moral judgement and the insistence on certainties in the face of supposed external threats (Debrix 2008).

Political realists will no doubt argue that politics is about who is in charge first and foremost in a world of inevitable faction and power struggle. Being a superpower supposedly means, in terms attributed to Michael Ledeen, that ‘every ten years or so, the United States needs to pick up some small crappy little country and throw it against the wall, just to show the world we mean business’ (Goldburg 2002). It is apparently about deciding who gets to decide long before it focuses on what needs to be decided. George W. Bush famously called himself ‘the decider’ much to the delight of social theorists who looked to Carl Schmitt for theoretical inspiration. But of course who gets to decide what depends on how the context is specified and hence how things that might need to be decided are prioritized so that specific deciders are deemed appropriate by, well, those who decide who should decide! The specification of a given context as the arena for the human drama is a very powerful discursive move: it literally is geopolitics.

The Victorian view which specifies the world in terms of the inevitability of clashing spatial entities in an eternal struggle for dominance is the geopolitical contextualization for discussing ‘realist’ politics. Gerry Kearns invokes Peter Kropotkin’s discussion of mutual aid and cooperative ventures in both the animal and human world in contrast to the Mackinderian assumption of an inevitably social Darwinian world (2009). The logics of neoliberalism and of competition and the market enforced by state action to write rules favorable to an increasingly globalized capitalism emphasize this ethos of competition. Unrestricted competition was supposedly the Victorian way. Grabbing peripheral real estate certainly was, as were inter-imperial rivalries, although much of the potential difficulty this gave rise to for Europeans in Africa were sorted out in Berlin in the 1880s. For Africans the result was altogether different: slaughter and starvation was the lot of the people who lived under Belgian domination in particular (Hochschild 1998).

The imperial violence of Victorian conquest, of the appropriation of Africa in particular, but substantial parts of Asia too in the nineteenth century suggested the inevitability of rivalry and the geographic appropriation of territory as key to increased power. The extraordinary expansion of the USA, arguably the most successful of the European empires in the Victorian period, in terms of territory conquered and population growth and subsequently its rapid growth in international reach, only emphasizes this point (Smith 2003). The assumption of rivalry and priority given to political dominance and control is key. Imperial rulers in the period were concerned primarily with control, not with the fate of their subject peoples, many of whom were designated as less than civilized, and hence as not requiring modes of conduct that ostensibly applied to the rulers. In the imperial logic it followed that, if the miserable fate of imperial subjects could be blamed on their stingy or fickle nature, then so much the better (Davis 2001).

Victorian forces were mostly involved in small wars on the periphery of empire, wars of conquest and policing actions where the local populations resisted, as they
frequently did, and met their fate in the face of much superior firepower (Boot 2002). Nonetheless the arms races in Europe and the eventual catastrophic clashes of arms in what are not very helpfully called the two world wars, both exhausted the European empires and removed the legitimacy of their claims to rule in Africa and much of Asia. Viewed through Asian lenses the warfare of the twentieth century started earlier with the Chinese civil wars then the violence of the Japanese expansion and really only stopped temporarily in 1953 when hostilities came to a halt in Korea. The long struggles of decolonization, ‘the forgotten wars’ of the mid-twentieth century (Bayly and Harper 2008), are the military struggles that matter when viewed through many Asian lenses. The Vietnamese war, first with the French and subsequently with the Americans, stretched on till 1975.

The focus on the nuclear standoff between the Soviet Union and the USA that overshadowed the second half of the twentieth century, the transformation of destructive power coupled with missile technology that required a consideration of ‘whole earth security’ (Deudney 1983), is only part of the key geopolitical changes of the twentieth century. Understanding the global transformations that came about in these terms emphasizes the point that wars seen as peripheral through European lenses were key to Asian developments. The corollary is that imperial wars are not unusual, and that the pattern of American interventions in numerous places is not new either, discussions of a New World Order after the Gulf War in 1991 notwithstanding.

After the Cold War

At the end of the Cold War some academic commentators specifically suggested policy options based on the themes of classical geopolitics and made explicit reference to Spykman in particular to raise concerns about the possibility of new hegemons emerging in Eurasia. As O’Loughlin and Heske noted at the time, five major tenets of postwar American global strategic thinking were derived from Spykman’s writings in the early 1940s (O’Loughlin and Heske 1991; Spykman 1942; 1944). These are, first, the assumption that the USA should behave like all other great powers in assuming that events all over the globe have a direct influence on its interests. Second is the assumption that if these events are to be dealt with accordingly the USA must adopt an interventionist stance and be prepared to involve itself in international political life and be prepared to defend its interests. Third, because of the shrinking of the globe in political and military terms this involvement would necessarily involve actions all over the globe and in particular on the fringes of the ‘world island’. Fourth, in adherence to the anti-hegemonic role it had played in thwarting the Japanese and German ambitions the USA would have to continue to assure that no power dominated the ‘world island’. Finally Spykman’s work anticipated the doctrine, if not the term, of containment that was formulated by the Truman administration and formed the basis, despite dramatic political changes in the interim, for US foreign policy until the late 1980s.
But geopolitics is about more than just these themes, important though they are in US foreign policy. Geopolitics was also understood during the Cold War period as the bipolar rivalry for world power in which the danger of Soviet control of the world island remained a persistent theme. In a world understood as two players in a struggle for influence and territory all the political spaces available were scripted in terms of how they related to the overarching superpower struggle (Gray 1977; 1988; Jay 1979). Prestige, willpower and determination to prevail all counted in this understanding. Crucial tokens in this rivalry included the possession of weapons systems, the technological ability to monitor the other’s activities and the military capability to threaten enormous destruction through nuclear warfare. The pursuit of control over territory was also essential. Land provided for military bases and the control over the economic and other resources necessary for the continued militarization of international politics. But how was all this to play out after the Cold War rivalry no longer determined the overarching structure of geopolitics?

One debate from this period is especially germane in terms of the geographical imagination used to structure the discussion of the appropriate American strategy. Stephen Van Evera’s cogently argued case for drastically reduced US military capabilities started with a review of the geopolitical logic of containment, drawing heavily on Kennan’s arguments about the USA ensuring the independence of the major industrial regions of the globe (Kennan 1947; Van Evera 1990). Van Evera’s text is interesting precisely because he made the case for the obsolescence of Cold War geopolitical thinking as a useful basis for US security thinking. Specifically he argued that the introduction of nuclear weapons had made the military conquest of North America by any Eurasian hegemon virtually impossible due to the difficulty of an effective first strike. Second, the growth of ‘knowledge based forms of production’ reduces the ability of a hegemon to extract militarily useful resources from its conquests. Third, he argued, that the Soviet Union, as it then still was, was no longer a ‘plausible aspirant’ to Eurasian hegemony. Van Evera also argued that the Third World is effectively irrelevant to US security because its industrial potential is too small to present a military threat, and the US is not dependent on its resources. In light of 9/11 and subsequent American military activities in south-west Asia, this geopolitical framing is richly ironic but the crucial point here is that such geographical framings are key to ‘realist’ reasoning. In sum these arguments suggest that the bipolar geopolitical logic of the Cold War years offered no guidance for assessing US strategic priorities after the Cold War. One potential danger that might threaten US prosperity is a major European war and hence the logic for maintaining a US presence there.

Van Evera’s argument led to one response that argued that the traditional US focus on the North Atlantic as the most important arena of foreign policy is outdated (Hudson et al. 1991). They argued that in part this geopolitical preoccupation is a legacy of Mahan, Mackinder, Bowman, Spykman, deSeversky and others (see G. Parker 1985). In light of the then-current economic growth in both Japan and the German-led European Community they argued that the USA should concentrate its military, trade and foreign policy on areas of immediate concern for its own economic interests. Recognizing the perils of ‘imperial overstretch’ expounded
on at length in Paul Kennedy’s earlier *Rise and Fall of Great Powers* (1987), these authors suggested prioritizing American commitments in an explicitly geographic formulation. These areas, they argued, should be constructed as an American ‘zone of cooperation’ focused on the Pacific, including Australia, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines and Siberia. They continued that the decline of the north eastern USA and the rise of the south and the west should encourage a shift away from the traditional Atlantic focus. With this new strategic focus on the Pacific and Latin America, US military power could be reconstituted and its long-term strategic future assured. The geographical premises in these contrasting interpretations of power politics are key to what divides them, but rarely are such geographical premises the focus of sustained critique in ‘realist’ discussions of world politics.

In the 1990s such discussions of geostrategic priorities were trumped by the more general enthusiasm for globalization and the related argument that the world needed to be remade in America’s image. An altogether more ambitious agenda for the extension of US power emerged as discussions such as Krauthammer’s ‘The unipolar moment’ suggested the opportunity to shape much of the world to the liking of American elites (1992). The exuberant celebrations of globalization were encapsulated in the Clinton administration’s foreign policy agenda of democratic ‘enlargement’ in the 1990s. Liberal internationalism was supposedly triumphant and rivalry was subsumed into an expansionist logic that assumed that ‘democracy’ would vanquish all potential foes to a world order understood as peaceful once modernity had spread. In this regard the more explicitly military formulations of the Bush doctrine, the plan to use all means necessary including military force to end tyranny on earth, follows the same enlargement geopolitical logic (Barnett 2004). But the imbroglios in Iraq and Afghanistan proved that distant wars in Eurasia were not the panacea that their advocates thought. By early 2011 one ‘realist’ was arguing that such liberal imperialism had badly damaged American national interests precisely because it had caused a serious case of imperial overstretch (Mearsheimer 2011).

**Globalization**

The relentless saber rattling on the part of neoconservatives concerning Iranian threats since 9/11 perpetuated the pattern. Everyone involved has long understood that regime change in Tehran is the avowed aim of the policy (Ritter 2006). But assuming that either Arab rulers or many of the rest of the political elites elsewhere will applaud and welcome the removal of the regime and the Revolutionary Guards, is an assumption that might well prove a major miscalculation. So far after 30 years of refusing to recognize the regime and rejecting political overtures to deal with outstanding issues, Washington seemed happy to assert its dominance. Resistance in the long run apparently has to be demonstrated to be unsustainable if ‘Imperium’ is to be asserted (Lipschutz 2009).
But elsewhere, the assumption that Washington should rule and have its foreign policy in the region run by militarist factions in Israel is not necessarily accepted. In the event of an attack on Tehran, it is not clear why the rest of the world should allow the USA to effectively suspend international law once again and proceed with its plans. Debate about Iran crystallizes the issues facing the scholar of geopolitics not only in matters of arms control and nuclear technology (Dalby 2011b). The possibilities of the end of US imperial dominance coming quickly (Ferguson 2010), might indeed be a result of much of the rest of the world deciding that rather than cooperation with the USA in yet further attempts to use military force to rule the Middle East opposition to these efforts is necessary (Dalby 2009a).

What kind of world we will live in later in the twenty-first century in part depends on political assumptions as to whether the USA is to be a unipolar hegemon using force or a multilateral leader in tackling common problems. The latter formulation is anathema to many Washington-based observers of the global scene, but the shift in China from a developing country to a potential partner in global matters, exemplified by the shifting dynamics of the Copenhagen climate-change negotiations in 2009, marks a change in emphasis that is noteworthy, not least because it suggests that ‘First World’ solutions to global problems are not any longer the only obvious frameworks for policy. The necessity of coordinating at least some policy matters with the G20 leaders has become clear. Authority over many things is not so obviously resident in Washington even if the US navy still rules the waves in most of the world’s oceans.

What is much less remarked upon is that power in the last half century became a matter much more of technology than territory: capital now matters very much more than rural real estate (Nitzan and Bichler 2009). This is the case in terms of economic capabilities and military matters too where high-technology weapons systems require attributes very different from the conscript armies of the early twentieth century and the supplies of rural manpower, both in the metropolitan states and in their colonies, that allowed such military mobilizations (Singer 2009). Similarly global corporations are part and parcel of struggles over cyberspace, and, while states are trying to impose many national controls over how the infrastructure is built and who uses it, online matters frequently do not fit into state attempts at political administration (Deibert and Rohozinski 2010). The impetus to territorial expansion has, not surprisingly, diminished, as humanity has become an urban and industrial species; but the desire to control distant supplies of important substances, one of the logics of empire has, as the current violence in the Middle East attests, not disappeared, despite the supposed end of formal territorial–imperial modes of rule. Nonetheless at least the fiction that sovereignty resides in local rulers and that territorial rule applies, has become the norm (Elden 2009). With that has come a recognition that the rules that apply in various places are not necessarily congruent with the Westphalian model: regimes of sovereignty apply in geographically diverse ways that reflect the uneven development of the global economy and the differentiated human experience in the circuits of that economic system (Agnew 2009).
The emergence of complex governance structures, the United Nations only most obviously, is also related to this transformation. The nuclear revolution has made the necessity of ‘bounding power’ (Deudney 2007) unavoidable, even if political elites are reluctant to deal with the matter as seriously as many of us wish they would. But the logics of rivalry and struggles for power and influence in political matters persist, despite the grudging admission that overarching matters of civilizational survival trump rivalry as the priority in terms of what quickly if imprecisely became ‘global’ security. The expansion of US power in the Middle East of late looks remarkably like further imperial adventures in the periphery, although now of course petroleum is a key additional factor given its peculiar importance in the global economy (Harvey 2003).

Indeed, some of the immediate political crises of our times, and in particular the manufactured crisis over the supposed Iranian threat, replay some of the worst imperial adventures of the Victorian era. Like 1914 the possibilities of unforeseen escalation should the shooting, or perhaps more accurately the bombing, start, are what make commentators on that particular crisis so nervous about cavalier claims. More ominously the refusal of the US government in particular to recognize the regime three decades after the overthrow of the revolution perpetuates political games of dominance, epitomized in the Ledeen doctrine, where cooperation would be so much more efficacious. The construction of US interests in the region in terms of a global war on terror added to the difficulty.

But empires have, as in the case of the British one, ruled at least as much by financial power and periodic military interventions as they have by direct territorial control. Endless invocation of the dangers of al-Qaeda everywhere political violence erupts has lead to formulations of numerous opposition movements as part of a global war. In David Kilcullen’s terms, ‘accidental guerrillas’ (2009) have been made into part of an international terrorist movement and all sorts of policy mistakes made by misreading this political terrain. Once again the simplistic verities of militarization that legitimize violent policy are antithetical to the appropriate designation of distant dangers if anything other than mobilizing ‘us’ to fight ‘them’ is involved. The assumption that disorder comes from the peripheries, where rogue regimes reside and people breed irresponsibly feeds into the contemporary US geopolitical imaginary (Barnett 2004).

Lumping all opposition into such a single category makes for simple exposition and a reassertion of realist assumptions that power is about violent struggle between clashing geographical entities but hopelessly inadequate policy if the oversimplifications become the basis for action. It does, as Derek Gregory makes clear, reprise numerous imperial tropes in contemporary articulations of the architecture of enmity (2004). It may even yet lead to further extensions of classical geopolitics and discussions of an Anglosphere that perpetuates claims to English-speaking superiority in the Middle East (Megoran 2010). Robert Fisk, in his compendium of 30 years’ reflections on politics in the region, explicitly poses matters as conquest, suggesting that the old pattern of European, and by extension now American, imperial power operating to subdue economically important peripheries, continues with the Arab world merely being the latest region to come under external military
domination (2006). Realist claims are, it turns out, intertwined with highly contested geographical framings of the arena of international politics.

Anthropocene geopolitics

But while the moral case against imperial activities is clear (Gregory 2010), the changing ecological circumstances of humanity in the Anthropocene add compelling material reasons for challenging misleading colonial formulations of contemporary global security. The Anthropocene refers to the recognition by earth system scientists that humanity has transformed its circumstances to the extent that we now live in a new geological era, one that may have many profound effects on the human condition in coming decades (The Economist made this a cover story too, on 28 May 2011). One of the great dangers of the current moment, to borrow Steffen, Crutzen and McNeill’s formulation, at the end of what they term the Great Acceleration – a period that followed on from the first period of the Anthropocene, the nineteenth-century coal-powered industrial era – is precisely that traditional geopolitical mappings of events will be invoked in futile but very violent attempts to control the coming disruptions caused by ecological changes already set in motion by carboniferous capitalism (2007). The Victorian formulations of metropolitan virtue threatened by peripheral danger reverse the causal processes actually in motion if the scientific analyses of the Anthropocene are taken seriously (Dalby 2009b). Urban cores of the global economy disrupt peripheral places directly by extracting resources and remaking rural (and maritime) ecologies and indirectly disrupt ecologies by changing the atmosphere and causing climate change.

The necessity of tackling these new ecological circumstances of the human condition require abandoning of Victorian thinking about both empire and elite rivalry. In that sense, Deudney’s hope that what he terms ‘negarchial’ structures of mutual restraint will effectively constrain nuclear weapons in future (2007), now needs to be extended to matters of biospheric governance too. If we are to weather the storms that are coming and effectively become the stewards of the earth system in a third phase of the Anthropocene, as Steffen, Crutzen and McNeill suggest may yet happen (2007), then abandoning Victorian notions of hierarchical governance and assumptions of inevitable violent rivalries will clearly be necessary. Understanding ourselves as a part of a dynamic biosphere, rather than on a planet whose surface we can divide and rule with military force, is an essential ontological shift for any geopolitics that makes sense in the new context of the twenty-first century after the Great Acceleration (Dalby 2009a).

What is inadequately understood as globalization makes much more of a difference than is usually recognized and does so because to a very substantial extent the whole discussion of globalization still takes place either through an explicitly Westphalian set of lenses or through an imperial set where the struggle for dominance in world politics is assumed to be what ultimately matters in terms of the potential threats or opportunities that something called globalization offers.
Where environmental threats to this are acknowledged, they frequently are either collapsed into problems and limits on development or ignored because predictions are impossible in the long term.

That globalization is the process of ecological change is rarely countenanced, but even a quick look at the contemporary literature on earth system science suggests that globalization is actually a biophysical process quite as much as it is about trade, border crossings, internet connectivities, global culture or threats to the contemporary order (Dalby 2009b). Understanding globalization as ‘actually existing carboniferous capitalism’ means focusing on the changing material context for humanity. In material terms humanity is transforming the biosphere and introducing new ‘forcing mechanisms’ into the earth system. We have taken our fate into our own hands, and how we choose to make things in the next generation or two will present the ‘environmental’ context within which decision-makers in the latter part of this century will make their policies, specify priorities and try to rule. In the process environmental determinist arguments should finally be finished off.

As climate change accelerates in the coming decades, how elites respond to the inevitable disruptions will matter. Painting these coming dislocations as matters of national security for which fences and machine guns to keep refugees out are policy priorities remains a real danger, as Bangladeshis watching the construction of fences by Indian authorities along their borders are increasingly realizing (Jones 2009). The siege mentality and the invocation of ‘security first’ is counterproductive, not only because such policies deal solely with local expressions of some of the symptoms of climate change, but also because they are likely to generate precisely the political and violent action to which they are ostensibly a reaction. But this may be precisely what happens if ‘realism’ is invoked.

Assuming that desperate refugees are a security threat rather than fellow humans in need of assistance is a political choice likely to be made by Victorians: the nineteenth-century mentality of class and racial prejudices in imperial times suggests both that this is tragically likely and hugely destructive (Davis 2001). This all may happen if the political elites fall back on careless or, more likely, convenient thinking and draw misleading analogies from the past to determine their priorities in the coming decades. We may get Robert Kaplan’s ‘coming anarchy’ (1994) and, if we do get it, then it will in part be because political elites have bought into simplistic invocations of the ‘revenge of geography’ (Kaplan 2009) or, at least, some very Victorian assumptions about empires and the inevitability of their rivalries.

If they do this they will continue to ignore what geographers of many political stripes have been trying to tell them for the last generation at least. They will certainly preclude learning the lessons of globalization and fail to understand the new geological realities that face humanity. The largest potential geopolitical danger that looms now is a failure to understand that the geographies that the Victorians assumed were verities are being changed by human action. That is the key point that needs emphasis from all who work on geopolitical topics. We are making the future context for humanity, literally deciding on such things as whether the planet will have ice caps on the poles in coming centuries. If the changes we have already
wrought cause rapid ecological changes then it is clear that global institutions are not in place to facilitate adaptation. Crisis managers may well invoke Victorian verities and the violent logics of national security if this happens.

While Mahan’s concerns with sea lanes and choke points and the importance of a blue water navy in protecting commerce are certainly appropriate, given rising concerns about piracy, keeping the Straits of Hormuz open and maintaining globalized commodity chains intact, naval strategy is not helpful in dealing with rising sea levels and the possibilities of other climate-change disruptions. Ironically, if the political elites fail to deal with these disruptions then navies may be called in to try deal with the consequences, either evacuating people from disasters or making sure they do not become migrants, depending on which geopolitical frame their political masters use to view the situation.

But there is nothing inevitable about this. It is a matter of how politics plays out in the coming decades and how the geopolitical framings of the future are constituted to provide the discursive context for political action. If as Grygiel suggests, great powers fall when they allow themselves to be distracted from their core security priorities (2006), it seems that the current US elites may be in considerable danger of failing, precisely because neither the Victorian distractions in the Middle East, nor great-power fears of a rising China are their core security concern. If one takes the Anthropocene as the context for contemporary geopolitical thinking then focusing on the processes needed to perpetuate a fairly stable biosphere, de-carbonizing the global economy and constructing the appropriate cooperative governance arrangements that this will require are now much more important than military adventures in the Middle East. How to build sustainable urban communities that require much less energy than twentieth-century suburban automobile mode does is now a pressing priority (Davis 2010) even if such thinking has yet to penetrate either security studies or the think tanks that produce geopolitical punditry.

A shared biosphere, in which humanity is destabilizing the conditions that gave rise to civilization in the first place, requires a very different set of policies from those of a century ago. What environmental change is making clear is that the context is changing and doing so as a result of human actions, mostly on the part of the rich and powerful, not the poor and the marginal who frequently get blamed for all sorts of things that are not their doing. Making this point clear undercuts the determinist logic of Victorian geopolitics and should force us all to recognize the crucial importance of the invocation of context in geopolitical reasoning. The consequences of doing so are becoming ever more important as the earth system analyses continue to document the seriousness of the accelerating transformation of the biosphere that is the only context that ultimately matters to humanity.
References

Jones, R., 2009. ‘Geopolitical boundary narratives, the global war on terror and border fencing in India’. Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers NS 34: 290–304.


This page has been left blank intentionally