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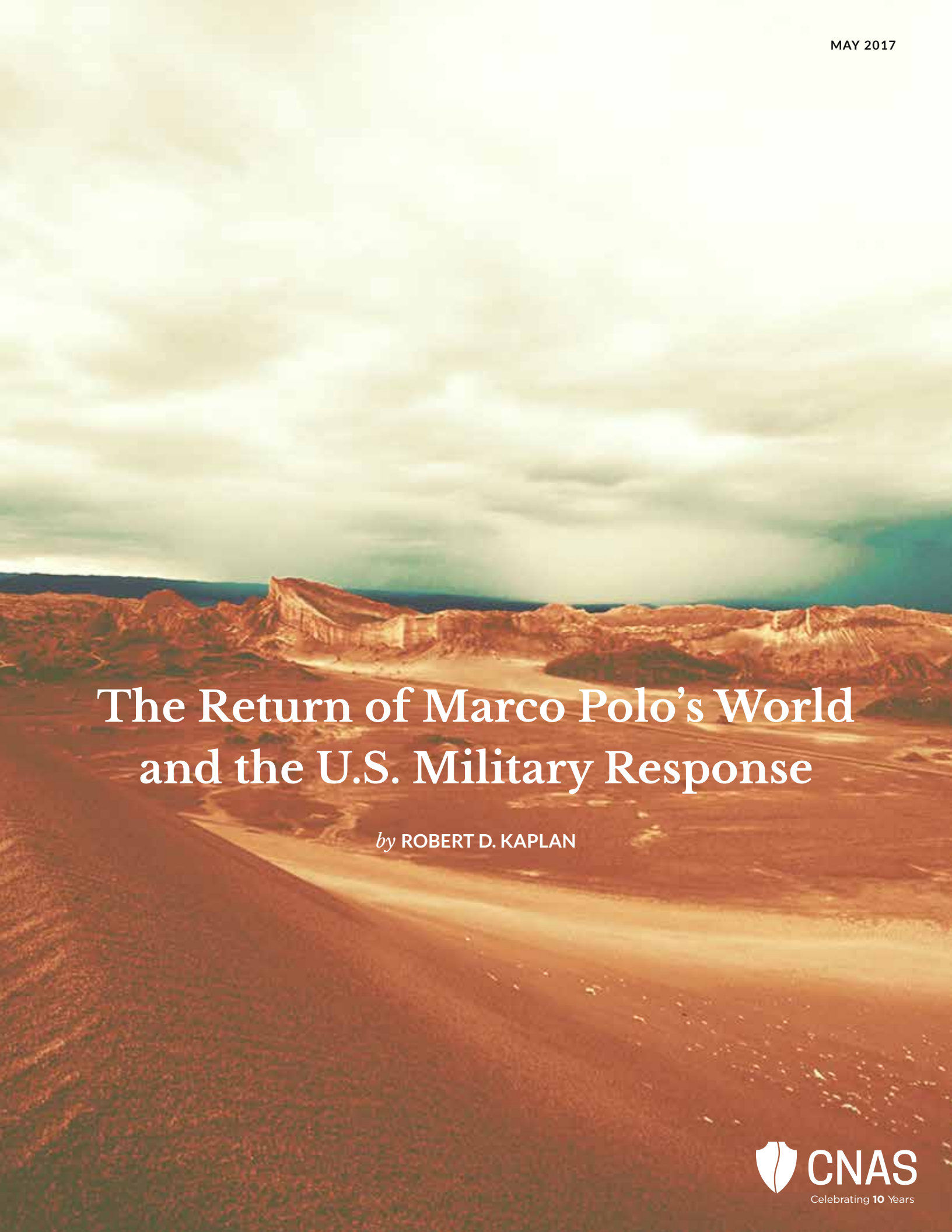

The Return of Marco Polo's World and the U.S. Military Response

by **ROBERT D. KAPLAN**

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About the Author

ROBERT D. KAPLAN is a senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security, originally joining the Center in March 2008. He is the bestselling author of fifteen books on foreign affairs and travel translated into many languages, including *Asia's Cauldron*, *The Revenge of Geography, Monsoon, Balkan Ghosts,* and *Eastward to Tartary*. He is a senior advisor at Eurasia Group. For three decades, he reported on foreign affairs for *The Atlantic*. He was chief geopolitical analyst at *Stratfor*, a visiting professor at the United States Naval Academy, and a member of the Pentagon's Defense Policy Board, appointed by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates. *Foreign Policy* magazine twice named him one of the world's "Top 100 Global Thinkers."

New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman has called Mr. Kaplan among the four "most widely read" authors defining the post-Cold War (along with Stanford Professor Francis Fukuyama, Yale Professor Paul Kennedy, and the late Harvard Professor Samuel Huntington). Mr. Kaplan's article, "The Coming Anarchy," published in the February, 1994 *Atlantic Monthly*, about how population rise, ethnic and sectarian strife, disease, urbanization, and resource depletion is undermining the political fabric of the planet, was hotly debated in foreign-language translations around the world. So was his December, 1997 *Atlantic* cover story, "Was Democracy Just A Moment?" That piece argued that the democracy now spreading around the world would not necessarily lead to more stability. According to U.S. News & World Report, "President Clinton was so impressed with Kaplan, he ordered an interagency study of these issues, and it agreed with Kaplan's conclusions."

In the 1980s, Mr. Kaplan was the first American writer to warn in print about a future war in the Balkans. Balkan Ghosts was chosen by *The New York Times* Book Review as one of the "best books" of 1993. The Arabists, The Ends *of the Earth, An Empire Wilderness, Eastward to Tartary, and Warrior Politics were all chosen by The New York Times* as "notable" books of the year. An *Empire Wilderness* was chosen by *The Washington Post* and *The Los Angeles Times* as one of the best books of 1998. *The Wall Street Journal* named *The Arabists* one of the five best books ever written about America's historical involvement in the Middle East. *Financial Times* named *Asia's Cauldron* one of the ten best political books of 2014.

Besides *The Atlantic*, Mr. Kaplan's essays have appeared on the editorial pages of *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, the *Financial Times*, *The Wall Street Journa*l, and *The Los Angeles Times*, as well as in all the major foreign affairs journals, including cover stories in *Foreign Affairs*. He has been a consultant to the U. S. Army's Special Forces Regiment, the U. S. Air Force, and the U. S. Marines. He has lectured at military war colleges, the FBI, the National Security Agency, the Pentagon's Joint Staff, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the CIA, major universities, and global business forums. He has briefed presidents, secretaries of state, and defense secretaries, Mr. Kaplan has delivered the Secretary of State's Open Forum Lecture at the U. S. State Department. He has reported from over 100 countries. Two earlier books of his, *Soldiers of God: With Islamic Warriors in Afghanistan and Pakistan*, and *Surrender or Starve: Travels in Ethiopia, Sudan, Somalia and Eritrea*, have been re-issued, so that all his books are in print.

In 2004, Mr. Kaplan was given the Distinguished Alumni Award by the University of Connecticut. In 2009, he was given the Benjamin Franklin Public Service Award by the Foreign Policy Research Institute in Philadelphia.

Mr. Kaplan was born June 23, 1952 in New York City. He graduated in 1973 from the University of Connecticut, where he was the features editor of the *Connecticut Daily Campus*. In 1973 and 1974 he traveled throughout Communist Eastern Europe and in parts of the Near East. From 1974 to 1975 he was a reporter for the *Rutland Daily Herald* in Vermont. In 1975, he left the United States to travel throughout the Arab and Mediterranean worlds, beginning a period of 16 years living overseas. He served a year in the Israel Defense Forces and lived for nine years in Greece and Portugal. He has been married to Maria Cabral since 1983. They live in the Berkshires in western Massachusetts. They have one son, Michael, who is married with a daughter and works for an investment bank in Boston.

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AS EUROPE DISAPPEARS, EURASIA COHERES.
The supercontinent is becoming one fluid, comprehensible unit of trade and conflict, as the Westphalian system of states weakens and older, imperial legacies – Russian, Chinese, Iranian, Turkish – become paramount. Every crisis from Central Europe to the ethnic-Han Chinese heartland is now interlinked. There is one singular battlespace.

What follows is an historical and geographical guide to it.

"I have rarely appreciated an essay as much. It is seminal."
—Henry Kissinger

The Dispersion Of The West[1]

Never before in history did Western civilization reach such a point of geopolitical concision and raw power as during the Cold War and its immediate aftermath. For well over half a century, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) condensed a millennia-long tradition of political and moral values – the *West,* in shorthand – into a robust military alliance. NATO was a cultural phenomenon before it was anything. Its spiritual roots reach back to the philosophical and administrative legacies of Greece and Rome, to the emergence of Christendom in the early Middle Ages, and to the Enlightenment in the 17th and 18th centuries – from which the ideas of the American Revolution emerged. Of course, key nations of the West fought as an alliance in the First and Second World Wars, and those emergency contingencies constituted forerunners to NATO's more secure and elaborate structures. Such structures, in turn, were buttressed by a continent-wide economic system, culminating in the European Union (EU). The EU gave both political support and quotidian substance to the values inherent in NATO – those values being, generally, the rule of law over arbitrary fiat, legal states over ethnic nations, and the protection of the individual no matter his race or religion. Democracy, after all, is less about elections than about impartial institutions. The end of the Long European War, 1914–1989, saw those values reign triumphant, as communism was finally defeated and NATO and the EU extended their systems throughout Central and Eastern Europe, from the Baltic Sea in the north to the Black Sea in the south. And it categorically was a *long European war*, as wartime deprivations, political and economic, existed in Soviet satellite states until 1989, when the West triumphed over Europe's second totalitarian system, just as it did over the first in 1945.

Civilizations often prosper in opposition to others. Just as Christendom achieved form and substance in opposition to Islam after the latter's 7th–8th century conquest of North Africa and the Levant, the West forged a definitive geopolitical paradigm in opposition to Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia. And because the aftershocks of the Long European War extended to the very end of the 20th century, with the dissolution of Yugoslavia and chaos inside Russia, NATO and the EU remained as relevant as ever, with NATO demonstrating its expeditionary capability in the case of Yugoslavia, and the EU building inroads into the former Warsaw Pact to take advantage of Russia's infirmity. This era was called the Post Cold War – that is, it was defined in terms of what came before it and what still continued to influence it.

The Long European War, which lasted three-quarters of a century, influences events still, and constitutes my entry point for describing a new world far beyond Europe that the U. S. military now must grapple with. And because Europe's current predicament constitutes an introduction to that new world, I begin with it.

It was the monumental devastation of two world wars that led European elites, beginning in the late 1940s, to reject the past altogether, with all of its inherent cultural and ethnic divisions. Only the abstract ideals of the Enlightenment were preserved, which in turn led to political engineering and economic experimentation, so that the specific moral response to the human suffering of 1914–18 and 1939–45 was the establishment of generous social-welfare states, which meant highly regulated economies. As for the national-political conflicts that gave birth to the two world wars, they would not be repeated because, in addition to other aspects of supranational cooperation, European elites imposed a single monetary unit on much of the continent. Except in the most disciplined northern European societies, however, those social-welfare states have proven unaffordable, just as the single currency has caused the weaker economies of southern Europe to pile up massive debt. Alas, the post–World War II attempt at moral redemption has led over time to an intractable form of economic and political hell.

The irony deepens. Europe's dull and happy decades in the second half of the 20th century were partially borne of its demographic separation from the Muslim Middle East. This, too, was a product of the Cold War phase of the Long European War, when totalitarian prison-states in such places as Libya, Syria, and Iraq were propped up for decades by Soviet advice and support, and afterwards took on a life of their own. For a long time Europe was lucky in this regard: It could reject power politics and preach human rights precisely because tens of millions of Muslims nearby were being denied human rights, and with them the freedom of movement. But those Muslim prison-states have all but collapsed (either on their own or by outside interference), unleashing a tide of refugees into debt-ridden and economically stagnant European societies. Europe now fractures from within as reactionary populism becomes a relevant dynamic, and new borders go up throughout the continent to prevent the movement of Muslim refugees from one country to another. Meanwhile, Europe dissolves from without, as it is reunited with the destiny of Afro-Eurasia as a whole.

All this follows naturally from geography and history. For centuries in early- and middle-antiquity, Europe meant the entire Mediterranean Basin, or *Mare Nostrum* ("Our Sea") as the Romans famously called it, which included North Africa until the Arab invasion of Late Antiquity. This underlying reality never actually went away: In the mid-20th century, the French geographer Fernand Braudel intimated that Europe's real southern border was not Italy or Greece, but the Sahara Desert, where caravans of migrants now assemble for the journey north.[2]

Europe, at least in the way that we have known it, has begun to vanish. And with it, the West itself – at least as a sharply defined geopolitical force – also loses substantial definition. Of course, the West as a civilizational concept has been in crisis for quite some time. The very obvious fact that courses in Western civilization are increasingly rare and controversial on most college campuses in the United States indicates the effect of multiculturalism in a world of intensified cosmopolitan interactions. Noting how Rome only partially inherited the ideals

of Greece, and how the Middle Ages virtually lost the ideals of Rome, the 19th-century liberal Russian intellectual Alexander Herzen observed that "Modern Western thought will pass into history and be incorporated in it, will have its influence and its place, just as our body will pass into the composition of grass, of sheep, of cutlets, and of men. We do not like that kind of immortality, but what is to be done about it?"[3]

Western civilization is not being destroyed; rather, it is being diluted and dispersed. After all, how exactly does one define globalization?

Indeed, Western civilization is not being destroyed; rather, it is being diluted and dispersed. After all, how exactly does one define globalization? Beyond the breakdown of economic borders, it is the worldwide adoption of the American form of capitalism and management practices that, merging with the advance of human rights (another Western concept) has allowed for the most eclectic forms of cultural combinations, wearing down, in turn, the historical division between East and West. Having won the Long European War, the West, rather than go on to conquer the rest of the world, is now beginning to lose itself in what Reinhold Niebuhr called "a vast web of history."[4] The decomposition that Herzen spoke of has begun.

A New Strategic Geography

As Europe disappears, Eurasia coheres. I do not mean to say that Eurasia is becoming unified, or even stable in the manner that Europe was during the Cold War and the Post Cold War – only that the interactions of globalization, technology, and geopolitics, with each reinforcing the other, are leading the Eurasian supercontinent to become, analytically speaking, one fluid and comprehensible unit. *Eurasia* simply has meaning in the way that it didn't used to. Moreover, because of the reunification of the Mediterranean Basin, evinced by refugees from North Africa and the Levant flooding Europe, and because of dramatically increased interactions across the Indian Ocean from Indochina to East Africa, we may now speak of *Afro-Eurasia* in one breath. The term "World-Island," early 20th-century British geographer Halford Mackinder's phrase for Eurasia joined with Africa, is no longer premature.[5]

The slowly vanishing West abets this development by depositing its seeds of unity into an emerging global culture that spans continents. Further encouraging this process is the erosion of distance by way of technology: new roads, bridges, ports, airplanes, massive container ships, and fiber-optic cables. It is important, though, to realize that all this constitutes only one layer of what is happening, for there are more troubling changes, too. Precisely because religion and culture are being weakened by globalization, they have to be reinvented in more severe, monochromatic, and ideological form by way of the communications revolution. Witness Boko Haram and the Islamic State, which do not represent Islam per se, but Islam igniting with the tyrannical conformity and mass hysteria inspired by the internet and social media. As I have written previously, it isn't the so-called *clash of civilizations* that is taking place, but the clash of artificially reconstructed civilizations. And this only hardens geopolitical divides, which, as the collapse of Middle East prison states indicates, are in evidence not only between states but within states themselves.

The combination of violent upheavals and the communications revolution in all its aspects – from cyber interactions to new transportation infrastructure – has wrought a more claustrophobic and ferociously contested world: a world in which territory still matters, and where every crisis interacts with every other as never before. This is all intensified by the expansion of megacities and absolute rises in population. No matter how overcrowded, no matter how much the underground water table and nutrients in the soil have been depleted, people will fight for every patch of ground. On this violent and interactive earth, the neat divisions of Cold War area studies and also of continents and subcontinents are starting to be erased as the Long European War passes from living memory. Europe, North Africa, the Near East, Central Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, East Asia, and the Indian subcontinent are destined to have less and less meaning as geopolitical concepts. Instead, because of the erosion of both hard boundaries and cultural differences, the map will manifest a continuity of subtle gradations, which begin in Central Europe and the Adriatic, and end beyond the Gobi Desert where the agricultural cradle of Chinese civilization begins. Geography counts, but legal borders will matter less so.[6]

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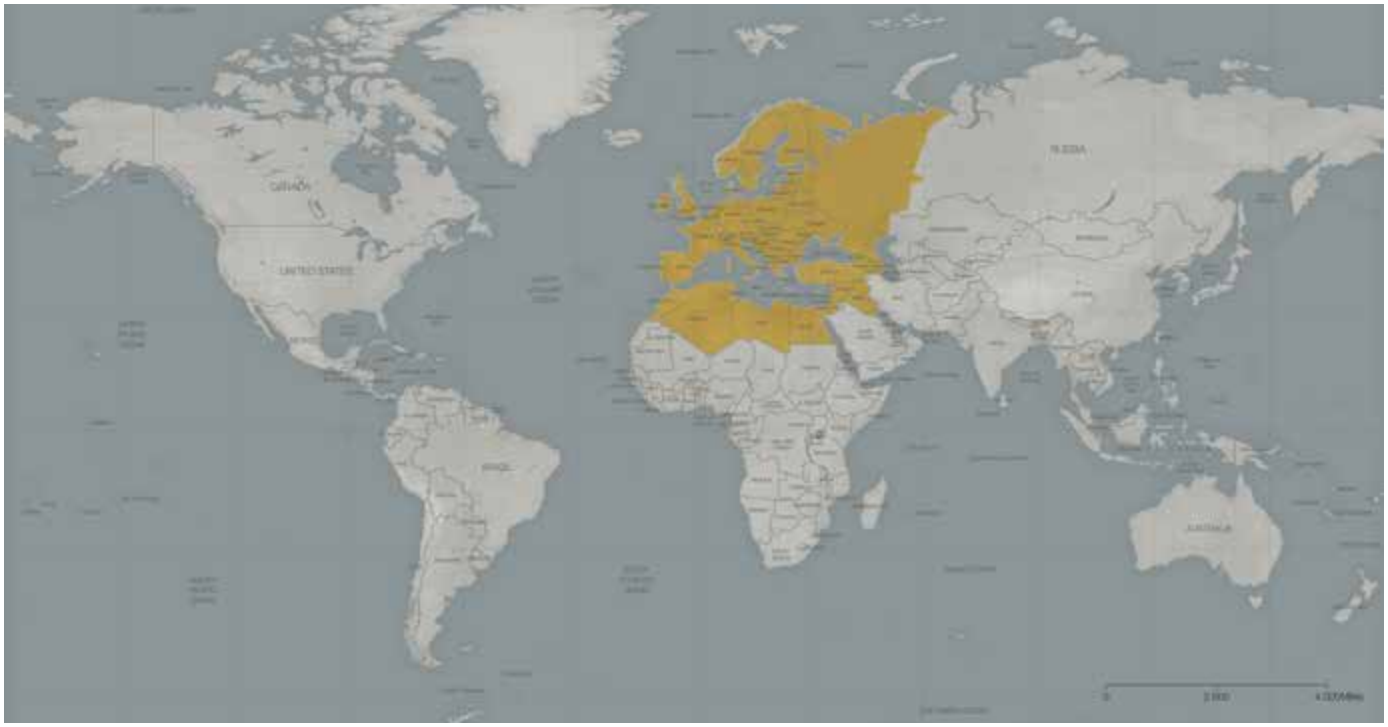
This world will be increasingly bound by formal obligations that exist both above and below the level of government, a situation that recalls the functionality of feudalism. Just as medieval Al-Andalus in Spain and Portugal saw a rich confection of Muslim, Jewish, and Christian civilizations, where the Arabs ruled but forced conversions to Islam did not occur, this emerging world – outside of conflict zones, of course – will be one of tolerance and pungent cultural mixes, into which the liberal spirit of the West will dissolve and only in that way have its place. As for the regional conflicts, they almost always will have global implications, owing to how every part of the earth is now increasingly interwoven with every other part. To wit, local conflicts involving Iran, Russia, and China over the decades have led to terrorist and cyber attacks on Europe and the Americas.

Geographical divisions will be both greater and lesser than in the 20th century. They will be greater because sovereignties will multiply; that is, a plethora of city-states and region-states will emerge from within existing states themselves to achieve more consequence, even as a supranational organization like the EU wanes and one like ASEAN is destined to have little meaning in a world of intimidation and power.[7] Geographical divisions also will be lesser because the differences – and particularly the degree of separation – between regions like Europe and the Middle East, the Middle East and South Asia, and South Asia and East Asia will decline. The map will become more fluid and baroque, in other words, but with the same pattern repeating itself. And this same pattern will be encouraged by both the profusion and hardening of roads, railways, pipelines, and fiber-optic cables. Obviously, transportation infrastructure will not defeat geography. Indeed, the very expense of building such infrastructure in many places demonstrates the undeniable fact of geography. Anyone in



Greater Europe

the energy exploration business, or who has participated in a war game involving the Baltic states or the South China Sea, knows just how much old-fashioned geography still matters. At the same time, critical transportation infrastructure constitutes yet another factor making geography – and, by inference, geopolitics in our era – more oppressive and claustrophobic. To be sure, connectivity, rather than simply leading to more peace, prosperity, and cultural uniformity as techno-optimists like to claim, will have a much more ambiguous legacy. With more connectivity, the stakes for war will be greater, and the ease in which wars can proliferate from one geographic area to another will also be greater. Corporations will be the beneficiaries of this new world, but being (for the most part) unable to provide security, they will ultimately not be in control.

Nothing is more illustrative of this process than the Chinese government's attempts to build a land bridge across Central and West Asia to Europe, and a maritime network across the Indian Ocean from East Asia to the Middle East. These land and sea conduits may themselves be interlinked, as China and Pakistan, as well as Iran and India, hope to join the oil and natural gas fields of distant, landlocked Central Asia with the Indian Ocean to the south.[8] China is branding these infrastructure projects "One Belt, One Road" – in effect, a new Silk Road. The medieval Silk Road was not a single route but a vast and casual trading network, tenuously linking Europe with China both overland and across the Indian Ocean. (The Silk Road was only named as such – the *Seidenstrasse* – in the late 19th century by a German geographer, Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen.) The relative eclectic and

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multicultural nature of the Silk Road during the Middle Ages meant, according to historian Laurence Bergreen, that it was "no place for orthodoxy or single-mindedness." Medieval travelers on the Silk Road encountered a world that was, furthermore, "complex, tumultuous, and menacing, but nonetheless porous." Consequently, with each new traveler's account, Europeans saw the world not as "smaller and more manageable," but as "bigger and more chaotic."[9] This is a perfect description of our own time, in which the smaller the world actually becomes because of the advance of technology, the more permeable, complicated, and overwhelming it seems, with its numberless, seemingly intractable crises that are all entwined. The late 13th-century Venetian merchant Marco Polo, who traveled the length and breadth of the Silk Road, is most famously associated with this world. And the route he traveled provides as good an outline as any for defining the geopolitics of Eurasia in the coming era.

Faded Empires In Marco Polo's Path

Marco Polo, who began his 24-year-long trek to Asia by sailing down the eastern shore of the Adriatic in 1271 A.D., would spend considerable periods of time in Palestine, Turkey, northern Iraq, Iran in its entirety (from the Azeri and Kurdish north to the Persian Gulf), northern and eastern Afghanistan, and China's ethnic-Turkic Xinjiang Province, before arriving at the court of the Mongol emperor, Kublai Khan, in Cambulac (modern-day Beijing). From Cambulac he would make forays across the whole of China and into Vietnam and Myanmar. His return route to Venice would take him across the Indian Ocean: through the Strait of Malacca to Sri Lanka, up India's western coast to Gujarat, and on side trips to Oman, Yemen, and East Africa. If the early 21st-century world has a geopolitical focus, this would be it: the Greater Indian Ocean from the Persian Gulf to the South China Sea, and including the Middle East, Central Asia, and China. The current Chinese regime's proposed land-and-maritime Silk Road duplicates exactly the one Marco Polo traveled. This is no coincidence. The Mongols, whose Yuan Dynasty ruled China in the 13th and 14th centuries, were, in fact, "early practitioners of globalization," seeking to connect the whole of habitable Eurasia in a truly multicultural empire. And Yuan China's most compelling weapon was – despite the Mongols' bloody reputation – not the sword but trade: gems, fabrics, spices, metals, and so on. It was trade routes, not the projection of military power, that emblemized the "Pax Mongolica."[10] Mongol grand strategy was built on commerce much more than on war. If you want to understand China's grand strategy today, look no further than Kublai Khan's empire.

Yet, for Kublai Khan it didn't altogether work. Persia and Russia were beyond Chinese control, and the Indian subcontinent, separated from China by the high wall of the Himalayas, with seas on both sides, remained its own geopolitical island. All the while,

Persian and Ottoman Empires

though, the Great Khan strengthened his base in what always has been Chinese civilization's arable cradle, in central and eastern China, away from the Muslim minority areas of the western desert. In all of this, the geopolitical characteristics of Marco Polo's world roughly approximate our own.

To be sure, Marco Polo equated the future itself with China. Coal, paper money, eyeglasses, and gunpowder were Chinese marvels unknown in Europe at the time, while the city of Hangzhou, with a giant moat and hundreds of bridges over its canals, was in Marco Polo's eyes as beautiful as Venice. But traveling in Tibet he also saw the dark side of Yuan Chinese rule, with its wanton destruction and forced incorporation of a distant province.

Aside from the geopolitical island of India, two especially consequential territories that Marco Polo describes in his *Travels* are Russia and Persia (or Iran, as it is now called). Russia he describes, just barely and from afar, as a profitable wasteland rich in furs, whereas Persia dictates much of his route. Persia, that is, Iran, is second only to China in Marco Polo's eyes – in a similar way that the Persian Empire dominated the paths of both Alexander the Great and Herodotus. For Persia was history's first superpower in antiquity, uniting the Nile, Indus, and Mesopotamia with trade links to China. As was so often the case in history, it was all about Persia, whose language by the High Middle Ages was the main vehicle for the spread of Islam throughout the East.[11] Thus, a map of 13th-century Eurasia during Marco Polo's lifetime – overlaid by the "Empire of the Great Khan" and the "Khans of Persia" – is now the backdrop to something far more complex and technological.[12]

In all this complexity, keep in mind that empire remains the organizing principle of world affairs, given that the imperial experiences of Turkey, Iran, Russia, and China explain the geopolitical strategy of each country to this day. That same legacy also explains how each country could weaken or partially disintegrate. For it is the constancy of history that continues to define Eurasia – not only the stability wrought by empire, but also the chaos that emerged in the interregnum between imperial dynasties, as crises in the capital led to ungovernability in the far-flung provinces. And because of the way communications technology empowers individuals and small groups – in addition to the instability that erupts from the increasing interconnectedness of crises worldwide – threats to imperial-oriented power centers are now greater than ever. And this is to say nothing of the acute economic challenges all these states face, particularly Russia and China, whose own internal stability can never be taken for granted.

For what makes Russia and China especially vulnerable is the fact that these states still encompass territory of truly imperial dimensions, stretching beyond the homelands of their ruling ethnic and religious groups.

So think of the first cartographic stratum of the new Eurasian map as composed of Faded Empires: undeclared empires albeit, though still operating from an imperial mindset, whose official territorial control, in the cases of Turkey and Iran, is far less than that of their former imperiums – and greater in the cases of Russia and China. For what makes Russia and China especially vulnerable is the fact that these states still encompass territory of truly imperial dimensions, stretching beyond the homelands of their ruling ethnic and religious groups. George Kennan said that the strongest argument for imperialism was "contingent necessity," meaning "unless we took those territories, somebody else would and that this would be still worse."[13] For this reason, imperialism in one form of another will never die.

Turkish, Iranian, And Central Asian Power

Turkey and Iran, thanks largely to their long and venerable imperial legacies, are the most coherent states in the Near East, further buttressed by their natural geographies neatly encompassing the Anatolian land bridge and the Iranian plateau. By coherent I do not mean that their current regimes are altogether stable, only that their institutions have a degree of depth far greater than in the Arab world, so that they will likely recover from bouts of instability, such as the failed coup and consequent crackdown in Turkey in the summer of 2016. Turkey and Iran are messes, but don't think for a moment that much of the Arab world isn't an even greater mess. Take Saudi Arabia: a comparatively young and artificially drawn kingdom with no imperial legacy to draw upon, and with great regional differences between Najd and the Hejaz, whose water-starved population may double in a few decades, making it, in political terms, less and less coherent. Moreover, mainly because of the natural gas revolution in the United States, Saudi Arabia is no longer the global swing producer of hydrocarbons. Energy expert Daniel Yergin writes, "The new Saudi strategy is to use oil revenues to diversify the economy and build the world's largest sovereign wealth fund as the investment engine for development." The target, he writes, "is to increase non-oil government revenues at least sixfold by 2030."[14] Nevertheless, even if the Kingdom achieves all or part of this goal – and that is very doubtful – it is safe to say that Saudi Arabia's geopolitical power has, at best, peaked.

Turkey's dynamic regional policies under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan mark a return to a more historically rooted Ottoman imperial strategy – something, in turn, that was first introduced by the late Prime Minister Turgut Ozal in the 1980s and early 1990s. Ozal, a deeply religious Muslim like Erdoğan (but without the latter's authoritarian tendencies), saw so-called neo-Ottomanism as pluralistic and multi-ethnic, thus providing a basis for

peace between Turks and their fellow-Muslim Kurds, and also allowing for Turks to reach out to Turkic peoples in Central Asia, as well as to fellow Muslims in the Arab and Persian worlds. It was not an aggressive and anti-democratic strategy, in other words. To be sure, the "narrow . . . western orientation" of Turkish foreign policy that we in the West both admired and considered normal during the middle decades of the Cold War, when the military ruled Turkey, was actually an aberration – the singular invention of that fierce secularist, Mustafa Kemal "Ataturk," who abjured Ottoman imperialism, and by the way, was no democrat.[15] The dictatorial Kemalist state so geopolitically convenient to the West will never come back. Turkish society has become too sophisticated for that. And yet, it must also be said that Erdoğan, in his own very compulsive authoritarianism, and in his attempt to subdue the Kurds within Anatolia itself, is to some degree a Kemalist, striving in vain for a monoethnic Turkish state, even as his vision of Turkey as a power broker in the Levant is very Ottoman. This is not a contradiction, though. Because of the way that ethnic Kurdish areas overlap Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran, protecting Turkey's modern, Kemalist borders at a time of war in Syria and Iraq requires a forward policy of Ottoman-like expansion. Turkey's worst nightmare is losing control of ethnic-Kurdish areas in eastern Anatolia. Thus, it must always be on the offensive in some oblique form.

Because of the way that ethnic Kurdish areas overlap Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran, protecting Turkey's modern, Kemalist borders at a time of war in Syria and Iraq requires a forward policy of Ottoman-like expansion.

That is why we see Turkey building an oil pipeline in northern Iraq and supporting the Kurdish Democratic Party there against the pro-Iranian Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, while also working against Kurdish defense units in Syria. Clearly, Kurdistan itself is weak and fragmented, despite its media image as being the only success story to emerge from the Iraq War. Kurdistan will increasingly provide the ultimate geopolitical battleground for Turkey versus Iran: something that is a revival of the Ottoman-Safavid imperial conflicts of early modern history.

Whereas Turkey's imperial tradition (Seljuk and Ottoman) lay wholly within the Islamic ages, making the values of Erdoğan's rule actually very natural, Iran's imperial tradition (Median, Achaemenid, Parthian, and Sassanid) predates Islam. The exception was the Safavid Dynasty, whose adoption of Shi'ite Islam in 1500 led to a disastrous war with the Sunni Ottoman Empire that cut off Iran from Europe.[16] It is this history that creates a certain tension between Iran's Islamic ideology and Iran's idea of itself as a successful great power in the Near East. To wit, Hassan Rouhani, the Iranian president whose ministers negotiated the nuclear agreement with the West, would like Iran to evolve into a regional economic power, with a revitalized capitalist-style system, open to the world, much like China has become. But the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, sees Iran as more like the old Soviet Union, whereby if it compromises its Islamic ideology it is likely to disintegrate, given how ethnic Persians dominate Iran's mini-empire of minorities. Karim Sadjadpour of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace calls this division "the Pragmatists versus the Principlists [those who believe in first Principles]." Ali Vaez of the International Crisis

Former Soviet Republics of Central Asia

Group divides each of these two groups, in turn, into those who are more and less radical, so that there are at least four distinct factions competing for influence within Iran's multiple power centers. This extremely decentralized arrangement "inherently favors continuity," according to Vaez.[17] Both Vaez and Sadjadpour suggest that Iran will not move over the coming years – despite the nuclear agreement – toward the Chinese model. The model of the old, pre-Gorbachev Soviet Union is more likely to hold. That is, rather than become a truly dynamic postmodern empire-of-sorts and attractor force in both the Middle East and Central Asia, with a normalized relationship with the West, Iran may continue for a number of more years as a corrupt, resource-rich, grievance-driven state.

Though smaller in numbers than those who want to see a more revitalized Iran, the clerical and Revolutionary guard elites will fight and die to stay in power because they have literally nowhere else to go – while many of Rouhani's supporters in the government could always flee to the West (where they were educated at the same time that the hardliners were fighting in the trenches of the Iraq-Iran War). As one analyst advises, considering the mass violence that the Iranian hardliners are perpetrating in Syria to keep Bashir al-Assad in power, just imagine what they are prepared to do to keep themselves in power inside Iran. Remember that dictatorships collapse often when the dictator himself – because of age and infirmity – loses the sheer will to remain in power. Examples of this include the Iranian Shah in 1979, Nicolae Ceausescu in Romania in 1989, and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt in 2011. That certainly won't happen soon to the murderous elites now ruling Iran.

Iran will likely continue onwards as a semi-dysfunctional power with an aggressive foreign policy in the Levant. There may be small uprisings in future years in places like Baluchistan in the southeast of the country and in Khuzestan in the southwest, but they will be containable. Iran, with a civilizational sense of itself to no less a degree than China or India (or Turkey even) will not dissolve like the artificial states of the Levant and other parts of the Arab world; but nor will Iran progress. In terms of atmosphere, if not in the specifics, both Iran and Turkey in the coming years might come to resemble the Turkey of the long decade of the 1970s, when Turkey was nominally democratic, but a political and institutional mess, dominated by the cult of the military, with a weak, center-left prime minister, Bulent Ecevit, who ended up invading Cyprus.

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Turkey and Iran, both slowly calcifying under very different types of authoritarian regimes, elected or not, will, nevertheless, remain safe from outright collapse. Their old-new rivalry over Kurdistan eventually will come to overshadow the greater disintegration of Syria and Iraq, whose formal power centers in Damascus and Baghdad will never again govern effectively because of all the regional players – with their vastly different geopolitical agendas – implicated in the fighting everywhere between the Mediterranean and the Iranian Plateau. The map of former Syria and Iraq will continue to resemble a child's messy finger-painting with Sunni and Shi'ite war bands expanding and contracting their areas of control – the result being flimsy and radical microstates, with cities like Mosul and Aleppo oriented as much toward each other as toward their former respective capitals, in the way of old caravan routes. Given a somewhat diminished Saudi Arabia to the south, the continued cratering in the desert reaches of the Levant will further leverage the strength of the politically troubled Turkish and Iranian plateaus. Remember that right now there are millions of Arab refugees from these wars stuck in the region whose children are not being educated, making the next generation even more prone to radical Islamist propaganda. Concomitantly, it is in both the Turkish and Iranian national interest – whatever Ankara and Tehran may say publicly – to keep the Arabs weak, divided, and warring against each other. In sum, even the collapse of ISIS and the survival – or removal – of the Bashar al-Assad regime will not lead to any real form of stability.

Turkish and Iranian influence, because of the deep religiosity of the regimes in Ankara and Tehran, is strikingly limited in the post-Soviet Caucasus and Central Asia. The energy powerhouse of Azerbaijan helps illustrate what I mean. Azerbaijan's ethnic and linguistic affinity with Turkey resulted in extremely close relations between Baku and Ankara in the 1990s when Turkey, like Azerbaijan, was secular. But the more Islamic that Turkey becomes, the more it becomes estranged from Azerbaijan, which still unabashedly reveres Ataturk's devotion to secularism, even if Turkey itself no longer does. Then there is Turkey's decision to work with Russia to develop a gas pipeline from Siberia to Europe under the Black Sea, which competes with Azerbaijan's own gas export plans.[18] As for Iran, theoretically, it should

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wield considerable influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia – owing to its demographic, cultural, and linguistic weight – for Persia remains, in historical terms, the organizing principle of this entire region. Moreover, Iran is traditionally a Central Asian power as much as a Middle Eastern one. But Tehran's sterile Islamic ideology repulses these countries, whose traditions are still influenced by Soviet atheism, as well as by Turkic syncretism and shamanism (which, along with the brutal repression of regime opponents, are the real reasons why Islamic rebellions have not taken hold, at least yet, in the region). This is where Iran's Islamic ideology interferes with its largely pre-Islamic imperial tradition. Thus, as we move eastward along Marco Polo's path and leave behind the faded imperial influence of Turkey and Iran, we very quickly run up against that of China, whose prestige here is greater than that of either Turkey, Iran, Russia, or America for that matter.

The Russian invasion of Greater Georgia in 2008 was a pivot point in this process. Until then, Armenia was aligned with Russia, and Georgia was aligned with the United States and Europe. Also aligned with the West was energy-rich Azerbaijan, owing to its oil and natural gas pipelines that bypass Russia and run from Baku through Georgia and Turkey to the Mediterranean. But the Muslim Azeris saw the American desertion in 2008 of Georgia – a Christian nation, no less, during its hour of need – and realized that Washington no longer could be trusted in a crisis, even if the Azeris themselves continued to detest the Russians. And yet, the Russians now sell arms to the Azeris, even while they take the Armenians for granted. In the late 1970s, Moscow deserted its ally Somalia for Somalia's arch-enemy Ethiopia, because the latter was a wealthier and more populous country. Moscow would like to similarly trade up in the Caucasus, from Armenia to Azerbaijan. But it cannot as yet since the regional situation is actually far more complicated still.

Here is the context: The Azeri leadership, as well as the leaderships of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and other former Soviet republics in inner Asia – secular and authoritarian all – have been terrified by the Arab Spring and the Islamic uprisings that subsequently have taken advantage of it. They also have been terrified by Russia's aggression in Ukraine, as well as by tensions between Russia and Turkey, and by the drop in energy prices. They have no friends in this unraveling world, it seems, and the United States appears to matter increasingly less to them, especially as its eventual withdrawal – perhaps in defeat – from nearby Afghanistan could leave a vacuum there. So gradually, with the help of Chinese economic and political support, these former Soviet republics have been strengthening their institutions, quietly removing pro-Russian elements from their bureaucracies and delinking their economies measurably from Russia's. In general, they have been standing up to the Russians – so that Russia's leverage only remains pivotal in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan (because of the former's very long border with Russia and the latter's institutional weakness). The larger picture here is that state legitimacy in Central Asia, despite the artificial creation of many of these republics by Stalin, in the short run at least has proven somewhat stronger than expected. (The

small states of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, with their divisive mountainous geographies, are obvious exceptions. Uzbekistan, following the death of leader Islam Karimov, will be the real test case, though.[19]) In sum, Russia, with its own declining economy, is stymied in the region, and the Chinese, with the roads, railways, bridges, tunnels, and pipelines they are building, are recalling the days of the Tang Dynasty in the 8th and 9th centuries, when Chinese imperial influence extended across Central Asia into northeastern Iran. In 2013, China moved demonstrably ahead of Russia in terms of regional trade, doing $50 billion in commerce with the five former Soviet Central Asian republics compared to Russia's $30 billion. Chinese companies now own almost a quarter of Kazakhstan's oil production and over half of Turkmenistan's gas exports.[20]

"Central Asia is unique in that it is the only place where all the great powers converge," writes Zhao Huasheng, a professor at Fudan University in Shanghai. After all, historic Central Asia consists not only of the former Soviet republics, but also of Mongolia, Chinese Xinjiang (East Turkestan), and Afghanistan. And in addition to the impact of China and Russia in the former Soviet republics (shaped, in turn, by their own imperial legacies), the United States remains militarily engaged in Afghanistan, while Iran through much of its imperial history has been dominant in western Afghanistan, as has India in eastern Afghanistan.[21] Indeed, while we have been accustomed to conceptually seeing the former Soviet republics as a separate unit, their destiny increasingly will be interwoven with what happens next door in restive Xinjiang and war-torn Afghanistan.[22] This does not mean that Central Asia is where world power will be predominantly decided, but it does mean that Central Asia will be a register of those power relationships. That is, Central Asia will show us who has the upper hand, and who does not.

Russia And The Intermarium

To the north of all this complexity and turmoil lies Russia, whose Eastern Orthodox imperium did not take part in the historical ages (the Renaissance and the Enlightenment) that made Europe what it is today, even as the medieval czars long before Napoleon and Hitler faced invasion from Swedes, Poles, and Teutonic Knights – and thus chose to ally with the Mongols. Vladimir Putin's Eurasianism is deeply rooted in this past, and so "empire is the Russian state's default option."[23] Putin knows that the mid-17th century czarist imperial expansion south into the medieval heartland of Kievan Rus (Ukraine, that is) toward the Black Sea paid great dividends, for it marked the early disintegration of Russia's ultimate enemy, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.[24] Stalin knew this history in his bones, too, and was therefore guided by a so-called *revolutionary-imperial* paradigm to defend Russia against real and perceived threats, especially those coming from Central and Eastern Europe. And because the Middle East adjoins Central-Eastern Europe, its anarchy is something that Putin also cannot now ignore, especially given Russia's equities in the adjacent Caucasus. Therefore, Putin looks at the Greater Middle East and Central-Eastern Europe and sees a single region. Russia's own Eurasian geography lends itself to this realization.

What all this adds up to is that the geographical heart of the challenge posed by Russia becomes the Black Sea Basin: here is where Russia intersects with Ukraine, Turkey, Eastern Europe, and the Caucasus. Or explained another way, where Europe meets the Near East and where the former Russian, Ottoman, and Habsburg imperial conflict systems all merge. To be sure, the Greater Black Sea region constitutes a geopolitical concept that unites the wars in Syria and Ukraine, and puts Turkey front and center alongside the Caucasian and Balkan pivot states of Azerbaijan and Romania to counter Russia.[25] The Black Sea is no less a conflict

system than the Caribbean was in the 19th century and the South and East China seas are today. Yet the Black Sea does not register within the logic of Cold War area studies around which the U. S. defense and security bureaucracy remains organized. This is because the Black Sea falls within and among other regions, and thus emblemizes the fluid and organic geography that now gives definition to Eurasia in the first place. Putin intellectually grasps this better than we do. His tactical skill is rooted in an accurate geographical conception.

Thus, both Ukraine and Syria are inseparable from Putin's challenge to the Baltic States and the Balkans. This reality rejuvenates the 1920s' concept of the *Intermarium*, Latin for "between the seas" – the Baltic and Black seas, that is. The *Intermarium* constitutes the contested rimland from Estonia in the north to Romania and Bulgaria in the south, and to the Caucasus in the east that once framed the conflict zone between Germany and Russia and now frames the conflict zone between the United States and Russia.[26] American power worldwide will therefore be heavily determined by its ability to keep Russia from "Finlandizing" this contested rimland.

Meanwhile, Europe is no longer geopolitically protected from Russia the way it was during the Post Cold War: nor, as I've said, is Europe protected from the Levant and North Africa, as the Mediterranean Basin by way of Muslim migration becomes truly unified for the first time in hundreds of years. Thus, we are back to a much older cartography that recalls the High Middle Ages, in which "the East" did not begin in any one particular place because regions overlapped and were more vaguely defined, even as the sense of a homeland was strictly local, limited to a city or town and its surrounding countryside. To wit, the Near East, however much it may be denied, begins inside Europe itself now, given the comparatively weak institutions, the comparatively high levels of corruption, and the demonstrable presence of Russian organized crime groups that burden the states of the Balkans with a higher level of political instability than the states of Central and Western Europe. This is itself a legacy of communism and the Long European War. Yes, the dichotomy of the Orient and the Occident is breaking down the world over, even as subtle gradations continue to persist.

The Russian Empire

Tang China And The Lesson Of Afghanistan

In Eurasia, Russia will be contained by China much more than by the United States. In fact, the whole underlying logic of Russia's Eurasian Customs Union is to limit, to the extent that it can, Chinese influence.[27] China constitutes a very distinct imperial mindset. Because it was a vast empire for thousands of years under many dynasties, China simply takes for granted its superiority, and consequently has never sought to influence others in the proper way of governance. (This puts it at odds with the democratic universalism of the United States, which has sought religious-like conversion to its principles worldwide.[28]) China's particular imperial tradition allows it to deal with all sorts of regimes, good and evil, without any notion of guilt. For untold centuries, Beijing's only problem was the so-called barbarians on the steppelands partially encircling Han China's arable lowland cradle: the Tibetans, the Turkic Muslim Uighurs, the Inner Mongolians, and others, who either had to be violently subdued, bribed, or demographically overwhelmed, exactly as they must be today.

China's 22 urban clusters, each containing at least one megacity, all happen to be located within Han China's arable cradle, which constitutes the territory of Chinese imperial dynasties throughout history and excludes this semicircle of steppelands. It was only in the mid-18th century when the last of those dynasties, that of the Qing or Manchus (who were themselves outsiders), expanded into the barbarian desert and steppe regions, thus preparing the geographical context of the current Chinese state – a state that overlaps with Muslim Central Asia. And yet this dangerous periphery that has threatened the Han cradle still exists – not only inside China, but beyond its current borders.[29] China hopes its Silk Road development strategy can make a political end-run around these volatile minority regions, economically pacifying these minorities as it were, though it also might bring Muslim Uighur separatists in western China into greater contact with radical Islamists in South Asia, Central

Asia, and the Middle East. Uighur separatists already have received training in the Pakistan-Afghanistan border area.[30] In other words, connectivity does not necessarily lead to a more peaceful world, especially because changes in the status quo, even for the better, can lead to more ethnic unrest.

For example, in Xinjiang (East Turkestan), the very process of economic modernization, in which the Muslim Uighurs actually can benefit, plays a part in shaping a more radical identity for them, immersed as the Uighurs are in economic competition with the Han Chinese.[31] Whereas the Han have viewed the Tibetans somewhat like the Americans have viewed the Navajo – as exotic reminders of how they successfully conquered a continent – the Han view the Uighurs with absolute dread. For Islam represents an alternative identity for the Uighurs, one unconnected to the Chinese state. Unlike the Tibetans with their Dalai Lama, the Uighurs don't have an elite leader and educated bureaucracy with which to communicate with Beijing; rather, they represent an inchoate, undirected force of upheaval that could be triggered by an environmental or other emergency. The Uighurs, as one astute China observer told me, are the bomb under the carpet of the Chinese state. Remember that the core argument of the late Harvard Professor Samuel Huntington's theory of a *clash of civilizations* – which those who criticized Huntington either overlooked or completely failed to grasp – was that ethnic and cultural tension is central to the process of modernization and development itself.[32] China's rapid-fire modernization is now mightily testing Huntington's thesis.

China's infrastructure expansion across Central Asia is directly related to its maritime expansion in the South and East China seas. After all, China is only able to act aggressively in its adjacent seas because it is now, for the time being, secure on land to a degree it has never been in its history. Threatened constantly by the peoples of the steppe in the west, southwest, and north, with the exception of the voyages of the Ming Dynasty Admiral Zheng He in the early 15th century, China never actually did have a maritime tradition in the east. But globalization, with its exaggerated emphasis on sea lines of communication, has necessitated Chinese power projection into the blue-water extensions of its own continental land mass. Because that requires China to remain secure on land, it also means the permanent subjugation of the Muslim Uighurs, Tibetans, and Inner Mongolians. And thus we have the One Belt, One Road strategy. In short, China's ethnic demons within its borders lead it to push out militarily and economically well beyond its borders.

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China's new Silk Road is very much in keeping with its medieval precedent, when Tang armies threaded their way through the space between Mongolia and Tibet to establish protectorates as far as Iranian Khorasan. Indeed, almost touching China's dangerous steppeland periphery through much of Late Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the early modern era was Persia, whose linguistic and imperial domain stretched from the Mediterranean to Central Asia. Both China and Persia were rich, settled agricultural civilizations besieged by warlike desert peoples, even as they were in contact with each other because of the Silk Road. And both were great empires humiliated by Western powers during the modern era.

Tang Empire

Such is the emotional and historical bedrock for sustaining Sino-Iranian relations today.[33] Iran's deputy head of railways, Hossein Ashoori, says "Our goal in the Silk Road plan is first to connect Iran's market to China's [rather than to Central Asia per se]."[34] Thus, even as the theme of the Eurasian interior is weaker and weaker states, with the great former empires weakening at a somewhat slower pace than the rest, there also will be more intensified linkages and interactions between all of them.

So forget the dichotomy between the pessimists who predict anarchy and the optimists who predict greater connectivity: Both trends will happen simultaneously. And there is no contradiction in this, as long as one thinks outside the paradigm of linear progress with which the liberal mind is obsessed. Think again of Marco Polo's world: one of great, overwhelming danger for the traveler in which a Silk Road nexus – with all its sinews of wealth creation – nevertheless existed.

Of all these countries, Pakistan will be the chief register of China's ability to join its Silk Road across Eurasia with its maritime Silk Road across the Indian Ocean. This branch of the Silk Road will require the full force of China's proposed $46 billion investment, in order to build an 1,800-mile superhighway and high-speed railway from Pakistan's Arabian Sea port of Gwadar (a port that China already has built) north across the Baluchistan desert and the Karakoram mountains into China's western Xinjiang Province. Nothing since independence

in 1947 has the potential to help stabilize Pakistan – calming its frontier insurgencies – than the completion of this project, and nothing would do more to firm up China's domination of its own steppeland periphery. In fact, Chinese pressure, much more than American pressure, may have caused the Pakistanis to crack down on terrorist networks in North Waziristan some years back, since the proposed Silk Road gives Beijing leverage in Islamabad that Washington can only dream of having.

It is doubtful, however, that China can save Pakistan. While it is true that Pakistan's government is increasingly being held accountable by a burgeoning media and nongovernmental organizations – thereby expanding civil society at the top end of the spectrum in Islamabad and Lahore – and it is also true that interparty warfare in Islamabad has lessened somewhat, the country in fundamental ways continues to deteriorate. Electricity blackouts ("load shedding," as they are called) are reportedly more persistent than ever (though they may be alleviated soon by coal imports), and water shortages are worsening. Pakistan's population growth is still above 2 percent annually, meaning its population doubles every 35 years. (The median age is 22.7 years old.) Corruption is rife, even as there are no significant anti-corruption drives. Karachi, a sprawling city of slums and fortified villas with a population of 24 million, is defined by criminal networks and refugees from the violent tribal areas abutting Afghanistan. Because of security concerns, more and more Pakistani political conclaves have been held not in Pakistan at all, but in Dubai. Still, the Pakistani state will not collapse, as it basically consists of around 100 wealthy families. (It is such families who will benefit the most financially from the Silk Road project.) This oligarchy is actually similar to the one in the Philippines, another vast, institutionally weak, overcrowded state with a difficult geography. Of course, Pakistan, unlike the Philippines, has a reported 200 nuclear weapons, even as it is reportedly building smaller, tactical ones and dispersing them around the country, so that they may be harder for the Americans to locate.

Marco Polo's Route

The pattern continues, in other words: In the vast area between a cratering Levant and an internally troubled China, no state is improving its capacity to govern effectively. They are all either weakening or headed nowhere good.

Pakistan's chronic instability could well limit China's ability to complete its Silk Road project from the Indian Ocean northward into western China, with a band of separatist violence

from Baluchistan in the south to Xinjiang in the north perpetually simmering along the whole route. In this way, China, as a secure domestic entity, might only exist within, say, its greater arable cradle, from which tentacles of lucrative trade protrude outward. Thus, the true map of China and its shadow zones, again, would resemble the medieval one that Marco Polo knew. In terms of the dry-land portion of the earth, no region will do more by itself to tell us who wields more power and how stable things really are in the early 21st century than Greater Central Asia, encompassing the Caucasus, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.

Consider Afghanistan for a moment. The U.S. military can arguably save face in Afghanistan, but it cannot stabilize it. If anyone holds the key to economically and perhaps even politically stabilizing Afghanistan, it is mainly China through resource extraction, and also the Caspian Sea countries through the building of a natural gas transport network south through Afghanistan to the Indian Ocean. Meanwhile, India and Iran work together to counter the influence of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia in Afghanistan. If the Indians and the Iranians can build the Char Bahar port and transport project, linking that Iranian port on the Indian Ocean with Central Asia, with a spur line into Afghanistan, it can then compete with the China-Pakistan Silk Road project extending northward from Gwadar. As for the Russians, who have an interest in fighting Islamic extremism in Afghanistan because of Afghanistan's contiguity with the former Soviet Union, they continue to develop their intelligence contacts with both Pakistan and Iran. Afghanistan provides a signal lesson about the limits of American power, coupled with the continued relevance of geography that Washington elites fail to respect at their peril.

Afghanistan, which has been at war in one form or another for almost four decades, and Pakistan, which has never really been safe from tribal insurgencies and political turmoil for almost seven decades, demonstrate that the configuration of the Indian subcontinent into two larger states and several smaller ones may not be the last word in human political organization there. To wit, the political map may evolve over time: Pakistan can partially crumble into a rump-Greater Punjab with Baluchistan and Sind gaining more de facto independence, with vast implications for India. And it is the Indian subcontinent that I am talking about: Since parts of Afghanistan were incorporated into various Indian imperial dynasties, governments in New Delhi always have considered Afghanistan in conceptual terms as part of a Greater India, stretching from the Iranian Plateau in the west to the Burmese jungles in the east. Whereas China seeks to expand vertically south to the Indian Ocean, India seeks to expand horizontally along or close to the Indian Ocean, with an especial growing influence in the Persian Gulf.[35] Therein lies the contest between these two faded empires.

The Flattening Himalayas and the Nationalist Undercurrent

Indeed, the defeat of distance effected by military technology has created a new strategic geography of rivalry between India and China. Indian ballistic missiles can reach cities in China's arable cradle while Chinese fighter jets can reach the Indian subcontinent. Indian warships are in the South China Sea while Chinese warships sail throughout the Indian Ocean, with China deeply involved in port development projects in the Bay of Bengal and Arabian Sea that virtually surround India on three sides. The high wall of the Himalayas no longer separates these two great civilizations, and hasn't for some time. Trade routes linking China and India, by way of Tibet, Nepal, West Bengal, and Myanmar – joining Lhasa, Kathmandu, and Kolkata – will only further mature, with peaceful commerce cushioning the impact of this new strategic geography.[36] But these widened tentacles of vehicular transport also might be used for Chinese tanks to enter India. Again, connectivity does not necessarily presage a more peaceful world. Eurasia is cohering into both a single trade and conflict system.

Oxford historian and archaeologist Barry Cunliffe writes that the maritime network of the Portuguese in the late 15th and early 16th centuries – whose ports and trading posts punctuated the entire Indian Ocean seaboard – helped bring the vast Eurasian land mass into a new global system.[37] The Chinese, with their investments in Indian Ocean ports (in Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Djibouti, and Tanzania) are doing for the postmodern era what the Portuguese did for the late medieval and early modern ones, even while the map lines connecting these new and expanded ports approximate Marco Polo's return route. The "nexus" of China, the Middle East, and Africa now accounts for more than half of world trade, writes Parag Khanna.[38]

This is truly a Chinese maritime empire we are talking about. Like that of the Portuguese, it is mainly limited to the coast, and does not guarantee China pivotal influence inland. Myanmar's political liberalization offers the example of a country reaching out to India and the United States to avoid domination by China: Geography still rules, but globalization and the communications revolution amplify the opportunities for out-of-area powers. Furthermore, while the ships of the Portuguese and the Spanish may have invented the global system, that system's very complexity now has reached a point where it embraces a multidimensional and interlocking tendency for violent conflict.

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And keep another thing in mind: China – and Russia, too – have influence of increasing imperial dimensions, even as they weaken internally from economic stresses of a profound and structural kind. The very fragility of these highly centralized, Politburo-style regimes inside their own countries makes them increasingly aggressive beyond their borders, since nationalism can serve as a unifying element in times of societal stress. China and Russia are the hinge states on which the organization of this entire Eurasian conflict system depends, and given the constricted and copious interactions from one end of the supercontinent to the other, future palace coups and intrigues in Beijing and Moscow can trigger fires throughout the Eastern Hemisphere.

The surface of this world will be cosmopolitan, but with nationalism – as China and Russia demonstrate – still composing the bedrock. To be sure, city-states such as Qatar, Dubai, and Singapore illustrate that cosmopolitan surface. One can't help but think of the eclectic cities of the Levant at the turn of the 20th century: Alexandria, Smyrna, and Beirut, where, writes historian Philip Mansel, "people switched identities as easily as they switched languages."[39] And regarding Odessa of the same period, there was "nothing national" about this cosmopolitan city.[40] Salonica, too, fell within this exciting category; but here, more darkly, as ethnic nationalism began to take hold, "Muslims turned into Turks, Christians into Greeks," explains Columbia Professor Mark Mazower.[41] For the easygoing Ottoman imperial tolerance, which allowed for such a high degree of cosmopolitanism in the first place, was giving way to the hardened national and ethnic divides that have been a feature of the Industrial and Post-Industrial ages. Imperialism and cosmopolitanism go together, in other words, since empires are by definition multi-ethnic and multi-religious, whatever their bad reputation. But the end of formal imperialism and the continued internal weakening of faded empires that we see now are not friendly to postmodern forms of those multicultural Levantine cities. The city-states of the Persian Gulf and Singapore, with their international workforces, may somewhat resemble old Alexandria and Smyrna – but certainly not Aleppo, Mosul, or Karachi, where the collapse of European imperial rule spawned authoritarian and sectarian states that either have disintegrated or (in the case of Pakistan) are extremely dysfunctional. In such places, communal violence is the norm, and there is no sense of a *patria*.

Because the Gulf states and Singapore depend upon a vibrant world trading order, which in turn depends on a stable balance of power, they provide little fundamental security of their own and, therefore, in geopolitical terms constitute an illusion. Violent Shi'ite separatism in eastern Saudi Arabia, a war between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and warfare in the South China Sea could wreck these city-state economies. The continued accumulation of corporate wealth, which these city-states represent, is more fragile and contingent than we think.

Consider the port of al-Duqm, which I visited recently, built midway along a largely bleak and uninhabited Omani coastline. A multi-billion-dollar rail and shipping complex taking advantage of Indian Ocean traffic between Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, Al-Duqm did not even exist a few years ago. It is a testament to the continued power of location – of geography. Because al-Duqm lies just outside the Persian Gulf, but is proximate to it, conflict within the Gulf actually increases the importance of al-Duqm, whose rail and pipeline terminuses (in the future originating as far north as Kuwait) will fill waiting ships that dock in safety outside the Strait of Hormuz. Moreover, Al-Duqm was built in the expectation that the U.S. 5th Fleet soon will want a more secure harbor than those available inside the Gulf. Al-Duqm, which shrinks the Eurasian trading system down to one port complex, is a monument to pessimism: It assumes future conflict and the instability that comes with connectivity.

The Contracting Rimland and the Meaning Of Bulgaria

This increasingly crowded and interconnected world will have so many layers of horizontal linkages between one part of Afro-Eurasia and another that it will be increasingly difficult for the United States to exert pressure on it. China, Russia, and Iran will be part of the same supply chain of trade and transportation that works to thwart U.S. influence. In the past, Eurasia was simply too vast to work to the advantage of any one power. The Mongol Empire from Genghis Khan to Tamerlane (and including Kublai Khan) was the singular, stunning exception to this. But as technology has collapsed distance, advancing the possibilities of trade and supply chains, there is now the possibility of some semblance of Eurasian unity among China, Russia, and Iran, with China as the first among equals, just as in Marco Polo's day. But whereas in the High Middle Ages the Yuan Empire posed no challenge to Europe, in a more shrunken, tightly wound world of high- technology, the challenge to the United States of such a Eurasian trading network is obvious.

Of course, opportunities will arise for the United States, ironically due to this very connectivity – as when Myanmar uses the United States to balance against China. And as the principal geographical satellite of the Afro-Eurasian land mass,[42] North America will remain pivotal to world history even while it is protected from many of the disruptions that will overtake Afro-Eurasia itself. For this is a world that will be more volatile precisely because of the growth of middle and working classes which are less stoical than the rural poor, of which there will be less. Indeed, it is the shanty town, the incubator of misery and utopian ideology, that will help define the megacities of Afro-Eurasia. The more urbanized, the more educated, and even the more enlightened the world becomes, counterintuitively, the more politically unstable it becomes, too.[43] This is what techno-optimists and those who inhabit the world

of fancy corporate gatherings are prone to miss: They wrongly equate wealth creation – and unevenly distributed wealth creation at that – with political order and stability.

Nevertheless, the United States has a problem. For a century it has sought to prevent any one power from gaining the same degree of dominance in the Eastern Hemisphere that it itself possesses in the Western Hemisphere. And that is still certainly possible. While one power per se may not gain such dominance, however, a grouping of powers might, with a de-Westernized Europe, Russia, Turkey, and Iran leveraging the power of China through trade and Silk Road connectivity. Eurasia is getting smaller, and that may make it harder for the United States to play one power on the supercontinent off against the other. Think of a world with more conflict and disruption, amplified by technology and the growth of megacities, while at the same time evincing a degree of economic unity, encouraged by new infrastructure on land and maritime platforms at sea in the Greater Indian Ocean, that will thwart American influence in the Old World. The United States will remain the most potent individual power, but that will mean less and less as powers on the same supercontinent find themselves more closely linked by trade.

Yet, given the political weakening and stagnation I have described throughout the Greater Middle East and Central Asia, this is a very contradictory picture I have laid out. And that is the point. For the world is going in different directions, and the sheer scale of activity will make dominance from any one geographical point like ours harder.

Perhaps no place provides an insight into the challenge faced by the United States more than Bulgaria, just one of the many countries that is invisible to the Washington policy elite and consequently is never part of its conversation. Bulgaria is a member of NATO and the European Union, but it is located at the far southeastern end of Europe – historically part of the Near East or "Turkey in Europe," as much of the Balkans were labeled in the late 19th century. Bulgaria was the most loyal Warsaw Pact satellite of the Soviet Union during the Cold War. In the 1990s and 2000s, following America's victory in the Cold War, and a time when NATO and the EU appeared invincible, Bulgaria saw its future wholly inside the West. American and Western power back then was such that, even as few in Washington focused on the country, it was safe within our embrace. Bulgaria's border with Turkey, its proximity to Russia, and its closely related Slavic language

Bulgaria

did not seem to matter as much as they used to. American power, it appeared, had defeated geography. Fast-forward to today: Bulgaria is still in NATO and the EU, but the Russians and the Turks are aggressively competing for the destiny of the country, with Turkey being among Bulgaria's biggest trading partners and the Russians, especially, involved in various forms of subversion, from organized crime to encouraging nationalist parties. Bulgaria, because of its weak institutions, and the increasing inability of Brussels to project power into its own far-flung hinterlands, is a compromised country whose political integrity nobody trusts. The unipolarity that defined the Post Cold War is over, the West itself is dissipating, and we are back to classical geography – particularly in Europe.

Indeed, what was supposed to have been a monochrome superstate from Iberia to the Black Sea, integral to the very conception of the West, is now decaying into various color tones on a neo-medieval map, with various layers of political and even civilizational identity: There is still the EU, but also individual states, regions, and city-states, with liberalism still holding off the forces of populist nationalism. To say that this does not undermine the strength of NATO is to be in denial, especially as regional military groupings (Baltic-Scandinavia, Visegrad) strengthen within Europe. NATO will continue to exist in full, but even more so in the future than in the past, emergencies will require the United States to force the alliance into action. Without powerful arm-twisting by the United States, even an Article 5 violation by Russia may not rouse NATO on its own, beyond the holding of meetings and more meetings.

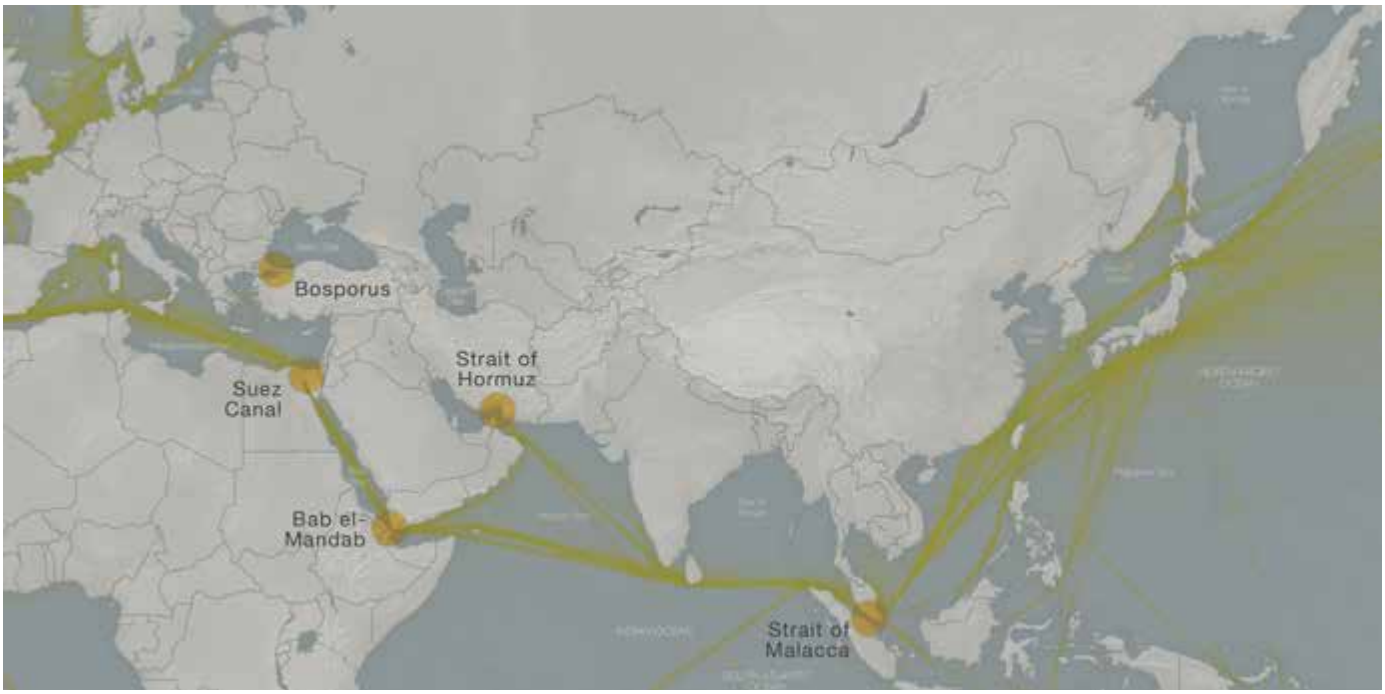
Yet, as the example of Bulgaria indicates, Russia does not require an invasion, only a zone of influence in the Intermarium that it can achieve by gradually compromising the democratic vitality of rimland states. (Hungary, in particular, is well on its way in this regard.) Again, Eurasia and the Near East increasingly begin inside Europe.

A stark realization emerges: America can defend its interests modestly defined, but it cannot change the world into a version of itself. In a word, we cannot ultimately defend Bulgaria – let alone Iraq or Afghanistan – from within.

The Geopolitics Of A Naval Power

Our response to this entire dilemma begins with defining accurately who we are. In geopolitical terms, the United States is a maritime power, operating from the greatest of the island satellites of the Eurasian supercontinent, whose mission is to defend a free trading order from which we ourselves benefit. In the tradition of the British imperial navy, we protect the global commons. Free trade works in tandem with liberal democracies, but does not necessarily require them. Countries such as Morocco, Egypt, Jordan, Oman, Taiwan, and Singapore have fallen over the span of the decades under the category of enlightened dictatorships that, nevertheless, have been conducive to liberal values worldwide. Our allies are mainly democracies but not always so, as these examples suggest. The world is intractable enough (and becoming more so) without us needing to impose our values on other countries' internal systems. Thus, we should start with asking how we can act with caution and restraint, without drifting into neo-isolationism. Air and naval power are actually suited to a restrained foreign policy, since it is about projecting power over broad reaches of the earth without getting bogged down with land forces in any one place, and without incurring significant casualties. We must keep our limitations in mind, especially as the two signal advantages of U.S. power projection since the end of World War II have been steadily eroding: the advantage of being the only major country whose infrastructure was not either decimated or severely damaged between 1941 and 1945, and the advantage of having had a big internal market that for a long time protected its workers from the rigors of global competition. Our middle class was built on this internal market, and thus was willing and able for decades to support vast military expenditures.

But while our position has been eroding, the internal positions of Eurasia's two principal hinge states, Russia and China, have been eroding further. They have ethnic, political, and



Naval Shipping Lanes

economic challenges of a fundamental, structural kind compared to which ours pale in significance. Their very future stability and existence as unitary states can be questioned, whereas ours cannot. And the world I have been describing in Eurasia, defined by non-stop crises and political stagnation and weakness – a world where chaos and wealth creation go hand-in-hand – is one that will help keep our competitors preoccupied. State capacity in Eurasia is declining. Meanwhile, energy rich and self-sufficient, bordered by oceans and the Canadian Arctic, we have breathing room that the Eurasian powers do not, even if we will not be able to influence the power balance on the supercontinent in the way that we used to. The age of comparative anarchy is upon us.

Here it is wise to review why we have had so much influence in the Asia-Pacific region, even as we are located half a world away, and even in the face of a rising China, which constitutes East Asia's geographic and economic core. It isn't only our naval presence that buys us so much influence there. It is our naval presence merged with the realization among all Pacific nations that – precisely because we are only a distant geographical satellite of Eurasia – we have no territorial ambitions in their region. To repeat, North America's very distance from East Asia means our influence there cannot be overbearing, and thus we are trusted. We are the reputational power and honest broker, defending a system of free trade upon which every regional economy depends.

Therefore, it is time now to extend the concept of the Asia pivot to encompass the entire navigable rimland of Eurasia, including not only the Western Pacific but the Indian Ocean as well, with our influence following exactly the path of Marco Polo's return by sea, from China

to Venice. Sea power is the compensatory answer for shaping geopolitics – to the extent that it can be shaped – in the face of an infernally complex and intractable situation on land. Here is where the ideas of Alfred Thayer Mahan meet those of Halford Mackinder.

Sea power does not mean domination at sea. It does not necessarily mean a significant expansion of our navy. It means conceptually merging our presence in the Persian Gulf region with that in the South and East China seas. It means leveraging the growing naval presence of India, a de facto American ally, in the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal. More specifically, we will require the 21st-century equivalent of coaling stations in rimland countries whose stability is defensible, where we can pre-position supplies and conduct long-range strikes off ships: Oman, Diego Garcia, India, and Singapore come to mind.

Our land strategy should be secondary, and should follow from our air and naval strategy, not the other way around. A land strategy that is paramount defines an imperial military more than does an air and sea strategy, since land forces are synonymous with occupation. We must move away from domain control to domain denial, since our only motive to be on the ground in the Greater Middle East and Central Asia is for smackdown or disruption purposes. (In retrospect, that is how we should have handled Afghanistan after 9/11.) As we learned to our horror at the turn of the 20th century in the Philippines, as well as in the 1960s in Vietnam, and again in the last decade in Iraq, *to invade is to govern*. Once you decide to send in ground forces in significant numbers, it becomes your job to administer the territory you've just conquered – or to identify someone immediately who can. (I, for one, wish I had thought this through better before I supported the Iraq War after 9/11.) That's why, particularly since the end of the military occupation of Japan in 1952, we have been both more comfortable and better off as a status quo power, accepting regimes as they are, democratic or not.

Thus, there will not be more, but actually fewer opportunities to intervene successfully on a grand scale, even as the temptation to do so may grow.

The geopolitical situation I have outlined in the vast space between Europe and China is such that America should use every opportunity to stay militarily disengaged, unless an overwhelming national interest forces our hand. (And that may happen from time to time in a world of cyber attacks and nuclear proliferation.) Still, the instability and complexity that we see now will only intensify in inner Asia. Thus, there will not be more, but actually fewer opportunities to intervene successfully on a grand scale, even as the temptation to do so may grow.

Our interests in terms of the bar for military intervention are mainly negative: to prevent a non-state actor – or a state actor working in sync with a non-state one – from planning or launching an attack on ourselves or our allies; and to prevent a Silk Road trading network from creating a demonstrably hostile Eurasian superpower or alliance-of-sorts, with the same level of influence in the Eastern Hemisphere that the United States enjoys in the Western Hemisphere. Britain's historic effort to prevent any one power from gaining dominance over the European mainland is similar to ours now in Eurasia. But our Western Pacific and Indian Ocean sea power can work to prevent such a development, without the need for large-scale ground force intervention. To be sure, China's island reclamations in the South China Sea

and its port development projects in the Indian Ocean all work to push our navy away from the Eurasian mainland. This is where the Iranian-Indian alliance to develop the Char Bahar port in Iranian Baluchistan, to undermine the Chinese-Pakistani port project in Pakistani Baluchistan, actually works in our favor.

At least along Marco Polo's route we always should seek to occupy the territory between neo-isolationism and imperial-style interventionism. That means more drones, more precision-guided missiles, more cyber capabilities, and more special operations forces for various missions, not less. We must be comfortable operating at levels smaller than that of a brigade, in other words. This is how we guard our negative interests and shape the battlespace to the degree that we can, while lessening the risk of outright occupation anywhere. Foreign Internal Defense – the low-key training of local forces that compete with forces hostile to U. S. interests – is the way we will forge outcomes, where such a possibility even exists. To this end, we will need to strengthen our Foreign Area Officer program with first-tier recruits, not second- and third-tier ones as we often do now. The decline of states in general in inner Asia means a future of more refugees. We will have to become expert at using refugee camps for intelligence gathering, at a time in history when our adversaries try to weaponize refugees. Obviously, diplomacy will be altogether crucial in many of these efforts, in which there will be no victory parades, even as the Westphalian system of modern states weakens and calcifies.

Of course, we must maintain robust land forces for the sake of unpredictable contingencies, and also to demonstrate clearly that we always reserve the right to intervene – even if we don't, or shouldn't. The fact is, a robust land force in and of itself affects the power calculations of our adversaries to our advantage. This may seem like a prohibitively expensive insurance policy, but the cost of not maintaining deployable land forces would be far greater in terms of the temptations offered to expansionist, autocratic states such as Russia, China, and Iran, especially as they internally weaken and consequently employ nationalism as a solidifying force.

Yet, despite the threats of Russian and Chinese expansionism, particularly in the Baltic, Black, and South China seas, the more important underlying dynamic will be the crises of central control inside Russia and China themselves as their authoritarian systems degenerate. This will happen alongside decaying Turkish and Iranian imperial structures, even while Europe itself becomes more fractured and less trustworthy – and besieged as the years go on with refugees from sub-Saharan Africa, to say nothing of the Middle East. Alas, as I've indicated, modernism with its neatly defined bureaucratic states and borders is receding in the rearview mirror across Eurasia. The current bout of populist nationalism that we see is merely its swan song.

To recap: At a more profound and yet less obvious level, there is, as the French philosopher Pierre Manent intimates, a growing emphasis on city-states and the half-hidden traditions of empire, even while the problems of modern states increase.[44] We may be back to what Manent calls the age-old political formulations of city, empire, and tribe, or *ethnos*. Meanwhile, across Eurasia, the state itself – that more recent invention – suffers. Thus, the map increasingly will be defined by a new medievalism, as the Westphalian model, with which the United States has traditionally been comfortable intervening and interacting, becomes increasingly less relevant. Europe will form the crucible of this age of comparative anarchy – the place that millions from these weakening states desperately want to get into. But an America that consciously seeks to keep its powder dry and maintains a degree of sea control in the Eastern Hemisphere will be, at least in geopolitical terms, relatively safe.

The Peloponnesian War?

But can America keep its powder dry? As I write, Washington elites are busy demonizing the rulers of Russia and China, and are obsessed with going toe-to-toe with those two autocratic powers in the Baltic, Black, and South China and East China seas. There may be grounds for arguing, as I and others have, for a more robust response to Russian and Chinese probing operations in these areas. After all, an altogether weak response to probing tempts the other side to miscalculate its strength – a common cause of wars. But given just how many scenarios exist for an outbreak of hostilities in these increasingly fraught conflict zones, the question nobody asks, and that is utterly absent from the policy debate, is: Once violent hostilities begin, how do you *end* a war with Russia or China?

Like the nations involved in World War I, the United States, Russia, and China in the 21st century will have the capacity to keep on fighting even if one or the other loses a major clash or missile exchange. This has far-reaching implications. For the problem is, both Russia and China are dictatorships, not democracies. Therefore, losing face for them would be much more catastrophic than it would be for an American president. Politically speaking, they may be unable to give up the fight. And so we, too, might have to fight on, until there is some form of a regime change, or a substantial reduction in Moscow's or Beijing's military capacity. The world would not be the same after. We imagine a war in the Baltic Sea Basin or the South China Sea as short, intense, and contained. But who knows what it might unleash? Washington has done almost no thinking about that. After World War I, after Iraq even, we never should imagine war as easy, or surgically confined to one place.

We assume, without too much thinking, that any regime change in these places will be for the better. But it easily could be for the worse. Both Putin and Xi Jinping are rational actors, holding back more extreme elements. They are bold, but not crazy. The idea that more liberal

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regimes might replace them is an illusion. Given their decaying authoritarian systems and the build-up both of ethnic tensions and economic problems inside Russia and China, the alternative danger is that rather than another strong ruler or a move toward stable democracy, we will see a partial breakdown of order itself in Moscow and perhaps even in Beijing, upon which, as I have written, the very coherence of Eurasia hinges. Remember the overarching theme of this essay: the tightly wound interconnectedness of weakening states and faded empires across Eurasia. The world of the digital age is like a taut web. Tweak one string and the whole network vibrates. This means a flare-up in the Baltic or South China Sea is not only about the Baltic or South China Sea. Nothing is local anymore. Connectivity itself magnifies the effect of military miscalculation. The Peloponnesian War that engulfed all of Greece had its origins in relatively minor conflicts involving Corcyra and Potidaea, which helped drive tensions between Athens and Sparta to the breaking point. Because of the way technology has collapsed distance, Eurasia is now no less a coherent conflict system than were the city-states of ancient Greece. And the basic unit of our world, the state, is itself in decline in too many places. In the interest of thinking tragically in order to avoid tragedy, policymakers need to worry about how not to provoke more anarchy than the world has already seen.

Beginning in the late-19th century leading up to World War I, the "Eastern Question" – what to do about the weakening Ottoman Empire in the Balkans and the Middle East – dominated European geopolitics. The Eastern Question has now been replaced by the Eurasian Question: what to do about the weakening of states on the super-continent, as older imperial legacies move to the forefront.

Endnotes

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