

Michael Klare

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Geopolitics and War

I'm going to talk about the resurgence of geopolitics as the driving force in international competition and conflict.

Geopolitics has been the driving force behind most large-scale conflicts of the past few centuries, is driving current international crises, and will be the primary cause of any new great-power conflict that may arise.

Preventing conflict will therefore require an understanding of contemporary geopolitics, and the development of strategies for curbing the geopolitical impulse. Strategies for peace that fail to take account of geopolitics will not succeed.

So first, what do I mean by geopolitics, and how is it shaping the current international environment?

Geopolitics represents the intersection of geography, the pursuit of power, and material interests like access to vital raw materials such as land water, minerals, and energy.

History tells us that the great powers continuously struggle amongst themselves for political and economic advantage, and that struggle usually takes the form of a struggle for colonies, cropland, slaves, vital raw materials, markets, and key geographical positions like Gibraltar, Singapore, Hong Kong, the Dardanelles, and the Strait of Hormuz. Control over these assets determine whether a state will rise and prosper, or decline and fail.

All major wars are driven by the pursuit of such geopolitical assets, or efforts to prevent their seizure by rival powers.

Of course, warring powers always provide a religious or ideological justification for such forays: the spread of Christianity, the spread of Communism or Democracy, the prerogatives of the Master Race, and so on.

WWI was driven by a combination of geopolitical drivers – competition among the major European empires for control over colonies, resources, and markets, and maneuvering for geopolitical advantage in Europe and its environs.

WWII was driven by Germany's, Italy's, and Japan's drive for control over territory, colonies, markets, and raw materials.

Most recent wars involving the great powers, including the Persian Gulf War of 1990-1991 and the 2003 US invasion of Iraq were sparked by a similar combination of drivers.

These wars all may have been cloaked in ideological terms, but geopolitics produced the underlying drive for war.

At one time, it was common for political leaders to be explicit about their geopolitical intentions.

This was the explicit reasoning behind Britain's acquisition of a global empire, for the so-called "scramble for Africa" in the 19th and early 20th century, for America's drive to occupy and exploit the lands beyond Appalachia, for America's acquisition of a global empire of its own during the Spanish-American War.

Teddy Roosevelt, one of the key architects of that war, was outspoken in his call for the establishment of an American empire to satisfy America's material interests.

But in time it became impolite to talk about geopolitics in this century.

To mobilize US forces for participation in World Wars I and II, Woodrow Wilson and F.D. Roosevelt were compelled to espouse ideological reasons – the pursuit of freedom and democracy – to justify what they viewed as an essential geopolitical conflict, to prevent the triumph of threatening rival powers.

Germany, we were told, practiced a particularly nefarious form of geopolitics, and so had to be stopped. But we, the good guys, did not practice anything as crass as geopolitics – God forbid.

But this did not prevent FDR from forging an oil-for-protection alliance with King Abdul Aziz of Saudi Arabia February 14, 1945, ensuring exclusive US access to Saudi Arabia's oil.

During the Cold War, this outlook became more pronounced. When the Soviet Union made a drive to control Iran in 1946-1947, thereby threatening US oil interests in Saudi Arabia, we were told that the US must resist tyranny and injustice – This is the origin of the so-called Truman Doctrine.

When Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, again threatening US interests in Saudi Arabia, President Bush I said we must fight to protect access to the region's oil. But the backlash was so great in Congress and the streets of American cities that he stopped mentioning oil, and only talked about Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction and human rights abuses.

His son G.W. Bush followed the same rule book in justifying the US invasion of Iraq.

So geopolitics has proceeded apace, even though we're not allowed to use this language in polite discourse, such as institutions of higher education. You won't find geopolitics in the curriculum of most US academic programs in International Relations, despite the fact that geopolitics drives most of what happens in the world.

No wonder US foreign policy analysts are so lost when it comes to explaining world affairs.

But despite such myopia, the reality of geopolitics is creeping its way into public discourse – Vladimir Putin's drive in Eastern Ukraine, for example, is often described as the result of a "geopolitical" drive.

Likewise, China's assertive actions in the South China Sea and Central Asia are often described in these terms. Of course, the USA and its allies do not practice such backward uncivilized behaviors!

What explains this resurgence of geopolitics and geopolitical thinking?

In part, it's the failure of ideological impulses to explain world affairs, but more importantly it is an expression of growing for food, land, water, and energy to sustain a growing world economy, with voracious new resource consumers like China and India and the depletion of many existing sources of supply, with the resulting competition for what is left.

I describe these two phenomena in my two most recent books – [Rising Powers, Shrinking Planet](#) and [The Race for What's Left](#). If you truly want to understand the underlying forces behind today's international politics, I suggest you read these books.

We see these dynamics at work in two of the most dangerous areas of the world today – the periphery of the former Soviet Union and the periphery of China. These areas have been the site of wars throughout the centuries, and are the site of dangerous tensions today. Both of these broad strips of territory are essential to the geopolitical interests of the major powers today – the US, Russia, China, the major European powers, and Japan.

Let's start with the periphery of China.

During the era of the great empires and the rise of the US as a world power, these areas – once under Chinese domination – were seized by the Europeans and the Americans. I'm talking about Tibet, SE Asia, central Asia, and the maritime periphery of China in the East and South China Seas.

Now, as it regains its strength, China seeks to re-assert its strength, China seeks to re-assert its authority over these territories by any means necessary, putting inevitable conflict with the USA, India, Japan, and other great powers.

I don't condone this or justify this or seek to apologize for this. Many of China's actions in this regard have been violent and brutal. But this is what rising powers *do* – they struggle for geopolitical advantage. The US seeks this as a threat because in its time of expansion, in the years before and after the Spanish-American War, it behaved in a similar manner and asserted control over the islands in the Western Pacific, including the Philippines.

Now these imperial assertions are described as our "vital interests," and thus sacrosanct – any challenge to them is a potential source of conflict.

This is the underlying dynamic behind the struggles now underway in the East and South China Seas.

China views these areas as part of its national territory – and who are we to tell them otherwise? – While Washington views them as the outer edge of our defense perimeter in Asia, who can blame China for finding this illegitimate?

This dynamic has been gaining momentum for many years now, ever since China emerged from hibernation under Mao, but has become far more volatile in the 2010s because of the convergence of power for geopolitical impulses.

On the one hand, the US reduced its presence in the area during the Bush years in order to concentrate its strength in defeating Saddam Hussein and insurgent forces in the Middle East. That's *old geopolitics* in action.

Meanwhile, a newly emergent China took advantage of America's preoccupation with Iraq and Afghanistan to promote its own interests, notably control over strategically located islands in the South and East China Seas.

When the Obama leadership woke up to this reality in 2010-2011, they concluded that the US needed to "pivot" back to Asia in order to halt China's advance. This, in turn, led to a drive to refurbish US military ties with its regional allies, especially Japan and the Pacific Islands.

But these allies have interests of their own – and in return for their support for the US pivot are demanding that Washington embrace these interests.

This is the other hand – the collective pursuit of valuable energy resources beneath the water of the East and South China Seas.

There are thought to be massive deposits of oil and natural gas in the waters surrounding those contested islands you hear about – the Spratlys and Paracels in the South China Sea, the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea.

All of the surrounding powers – China, Japan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia – want to be able to exploit these valuable resources, and all have asserted claims under the UN CLOS for exclusive ownership of large bits of them – or, in China’s case, all of them.

This is what’s driving these seemingly “irrational conflicts.

And because none of the parties have shown any inclination to compromise, and the USA is being forced by the geopolitics of its own struggle to side with some of the belligerents, we stand at the precipice of a world war today.

The other area for risk, as I indicated, is the periphery of the former Soviet Union. This area stretches from the Baltic States in the North to Ukraine in the West, and the Caucasus and Central Asia in the South and East.

These areas are of strategic significance because they contain the invasion routes for empires in each direction.

East to West and West to East, North to South and South to North, and because they harbor valuable geographical features and resources that have triggered wars for centuries, including, of course, WWI and WWII.

As so many times in the past, these areas are the source of friction and conflict today.

Russia seeks to prevent inroads by the Western powers in Ukraine, the Caucasus, and Central Asia, and to control the flow of oil, water, and gas from the territory of the former USSR – including the Caspian Sea states - to markets abroad. The Western powers seek to frustrate these efforts, and exploit for themselves the oil and gas of the Caspian Sea basin, without interference from Russia.

No one is blameless in this contestation, no one is justified in their behavior. They are simply pursuing their perceived geopolitical interests – as states and empires have done for centuries.

And we know the outcome of such geopolitical competition and confrontation – crisis, escalation, and, ultimately, full-scale war.

If we hope to avoid war, then we must identify and oppose the geopolitical impulses that put us all at risk, and find ways to suppress these impulses.

This means opposing specific policies that increase the risk of war – most notably today, the Obama administration’s “pivot” strategy in Asia, and the West’s drive to expand NATO ever closer to the borders of Russia. These, in my mind, are the most dangerous trends in the world today.

This is not to say that this is a one-sided picture – Russia is pursuing an extremely dangerous and provocative strategy in Ukraine, and China is pursuing an extremely dangerous and provocative policy in the East and South China Seas. To the extent that we can, we should support civil society forces in those communities that oppose war and militarism.

But beyond this, we have a greater task: to eliminate economic dependence on non-renewable resources. It is the pursuit of such resources – gold, silver, diamonds, ivory, slaves, farmland, oil, and so on – that has triggered most wars in ancient and modern history, and will continue to do so until we create a new type of economy based principally on renewable resources, locally acquired.

This is going to be a difficult, monumental task. Under normal circumstances, I would say it's *impossible*.

But these are not normal times. If we persist in relying on non-renewable carbon-based sources of energy – oil, coal, and natural gas – the planet will become uninhabitable for most humans and every economy will collapse.

So, more and more people are coming to understand that a transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy is essential for civilizational survival.

Accordingly, those of us who are driven by the pursuit of peace have a natural, inescapable common cause with the climate action movement – the most rapidly growing mass movement in the world today. And so we must add our strength to this movement, and help ensure its success. This, in my mind, is the best and *only* way to avoid future wars.