**Geopolitics and the New World Order** Robert D. Kaplan March 20, 2014

**Geography increasingly fuels endless chaos and old-school conflicts in the 21st Century.**

This isn’t what the 21st century was supposed to look like. The visceral reaction of many pundits, academics and Obama Administration officials to Russian President Vladimir Putin’s virtual annexation of Crimea has been disbelief bordering on disorientation. As Secretary of State John Kerry said, “It’s really 19th century behavior in the 21st century.” Well, the “19th century,” as Kerry calls it, lives on and always will. Forget about the world being flat. Forget technology as the great democratizer. Forget the niceties of international law. Territory and the bonds of blood that go with it are central to what makes us human.

Geography hasn’t gone away. The global elite–leading academics, intellectuals, foreign policy analysts, foundation heads and corporate power brokers, as well as many Western leaders–may largely have forgotten about it. But what we’re witnessing now is geography’s revenge: in the East-West struggle for control of the buffer state of Ukraine, in the post–Arab Spring fracturing of artificial Middle Eastern states into ethnic and sectarian fiefs and in the unprecedented arms race being undertaken by East Asian states as they dispute potentially resource-rich waters. Technology hasn’t negated geography; it has only made it more precious and claustrophobic.

Whereas the West has come to think about international relations in terms of laws and multinational agreements, most of the rest of the world still thinks in terms of deserts, mountain ranges, all-weather ports and tracts of land and water. The world is back to the maps of elementary school as a starting point for an understanding of history, culture, religion and ethnicity–not to mention power struggles over trade routes and natural resources.

The post–Cold War era was supposed to be about economics, interdependence and universal values trumping the instincts of nationalism and nationalism’s related obsession with the domination of geographic space. But Putin’s actions betray a singular truth, one that the U.S. should remember as it looks outward and around the globe: international relations are still about who can do what to whom.

Putin’s Power Play

So what has Putin done? The Russian leader has used geography to his advantage. He has acted, in other words, according to geopolitics, the battle for space and power played out in a geographical setting–a concept that has not changed since antiquity (and yet one to which many Western diplomats and academics have lately seemed deaf).

Europe’s modern era is supposed to be about the European Union triumphing over the bonds of blood and ethnicity, building a system of laws from Iberia to the Black Sea–and eventually from Lisbon to Moscow. But the E.U.’s long financial crisis has weakened its political influence in Central and Eastern Europe. And while its democratic ideals have been appealing to many in Ukraine, the dictates of geography make it nearly impossible for that nation to reorient itself entirely toward the West.

Russia is still big, and Russia is still autocratic–after all, it remains a sprawling and insecure land power that has enjoyed no cartographic impediments to invasion from French, Germans, Swedes, Lithuanians and Poles over the course of its history. The southern Crimean Peninsula is still heavily ethnic Russian, and it is the home of Russia’s Black Sea fleet, providing Russia’s only outlet to the Mediterranean.

Seeing that he could no longer control Ukraine by manipulating its democracy through President Viktor Yanukovych’s neo-czardom, Putin opted for a more direct and mechanical approach. He took de facto control of pro-Russian Crimea, which for all intents and purposes was already within his sphere of influence. Besides, the home of Russia’s warm-water fleet could never be allowed to fall under the sway of a pro-Western government in Kiev.

Next, Putin ordered military maneuvers in the part of Russia adjoining eastern Ukraine, involving more than 10,000 troops, in order to demonstrate Russia’s geographical supremacy over the half of Ukraine that is pro-Russian as well as the part of Ukraine blessed with large shale-gas reserves. Putin knows–as does the West–that a flat topography along the long border between Russia and Ukraine grants Moscow an overwhelming advantage not only militarily but also in terms of disrupting trade and energy flows to Kiev. While Ukraine has natural gas of its own, it relies on Russia’s far vaster reserves to fuel its domestic economy.

Putin is not likely to invade eastern Ukraine in a conventional way. In order to exercise dominance, he doesn’t need to. Instead he will send in secessionists, instigate disturbances, probe the frontier with Russian troops and in other ways use the porous border with Ukraine to undermine both eastern Ukraine’s sovereignty and its links to western Ukraine.

In short, he will use every geographical and linguistic advantage to weaken Ukraine as a state. Ukraine is simply located too far east, and is too spatially exposed to Russia, for it ever to be in the interests of any government in Moscow–democratic or not–to allow Ukraine’s complete alignment with the West.

Back to a Zero-Sum Middle East

Another way to describe what is going on around the world now is old-fashioned zero-sum power politics. It is easy to forget that many Western policymakers and thinkers have grown up in conditions of unprecedented security and prosperity, and they have been intellectually formed by the post–Cold War world, in which it was widely believed that a new set of coolly rational rules would drive foreign policy. But leaders beyond America and Europe tend to be highly territorial in their thinking. For them, international relations are a struggle for survival. As a result, Western leaders often think in universal terms, while rulers in places like Russia, the Middle East and East Asia think in narrower terms: those that provide advantage to their nations or their ethnic groups only.

We can see this disconnect in the Middle East, which is unraveling in ways that would be familiar to a 19th century geographer but less intuitive to a Washington policy wonk. The Arab Spring was hailed for months as the birth pangs of a new kind of regional democracy. It quickly became a crisis in central authority, producing not democracy but religious war in Syria, chaos in Yemen and Libya and renewed dictatorship in Egypt as a popular reaction to incipient chaos and Islamic extremism. Tunisia, seen by some as the lone success story of the Arab Spring, is a mere fledgling democracy with land borders it can no longer adequately control, especially in the southern desert areas where its frontiers meet those of Algeria and Libya–a situation aggravated by Libya’s collapse.

Meanwhile, Tripoli is no longer the capital of Libya but instead the central dispatch point for negotiations among tribes, militias and gangs for control of territory. Damascus is not the capital of Syria but only that of Syria’s most powerful warlord, Bashar Assad. Baghdad totters on as the capital of a tribalized Shi’ite Mesopotamia dominated by adjacent Iran–with a virtually independent Kurdish entity to its mountainous north and a jihadist Sunnistan to its west, the latter of which has joined a chaotic void populated by literally hundreds of war bands extending deep across a flat desert terrain into Syria as far as the Mediterranean.

Hovering above this devolution of Middle Eastern states into anarchic warlorddoms is the epic geographic struggle between a great Shi’ite state occupying the Iranian Plateau and a medieval-style Sunni monarchy occupying much of the Arabian Peninsula. The interminable violence and repression in eastern Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Sunnistan (covering both western Iraq and Syria) are fueled by this Saudi-Iranian proxy war. Because Iran is developing the technological and scientific base with which to assemble nuclear weapons, Israel finds itself in a de facto alliance with Saudi Arabia. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu can be defined by his zero-sum geographic fears, including that of the tyranny of distance: the difficulty of his relatively small air force to travel a thousand miles eastward, which bedevils his search for an acceptable military option against Iran. This helps make him what he is: an obstinate negotiating partner for both the Palestinians and the Americans.

Pacific Projection

Then there is the most important part of the world for the U.S., the part with two of the three largest economies (China and Japan) and the home of critical American treaty allies: the Asia-Pacific region. This region too is undeniably far less stable now than at the start of the 21st century, and for reasons that can best be explained by geography.

In the early Cold War decades, Asian countries were preoccupied with their internal affairs. China, under Mao Zedong’s depredations and Deng Xiaoping’s economic reforms, was inwardly focused. Vietnam, the current territory of Malaysia and to a lesser extent the Philippines were overwhelmed by internal wars and rebellions. Singapore was building a viable city-state from scratch. And South Korea and Japan were recovering from major wars.

Now these states have consolidated their domestic affairs and built strong institutions. They have all, with the exception of the poverty-racked Philippines, benefited from many years of capitalist-style growth. But strong institutions and capitalist prosperity lead to military ambitions, and so all of these states since the 1990s have been enlarging or modernizing their navies and air forces–a staggering military buildup to which the American media have paid relatively scant attention.

Since the 1990s, Asia’s share of military imports has risen from 15% to 41% of the world total, and its overall military spending has risen from 11% to 20% of all global military expenditures. And what are these countries doing with all of these new submarines, warships, fighter jets, ballistic missiles and cyberwarfare capabilities? They are contesting with one another lines on the map in the blue water of the South China and East China seas: Who controls what island, atoll or other geographical feature above or below water–for reserves of oil and natural gas might lie nearby? Nationalism, especially that based on race and ethnicity, fired up by territorial claims, may be frowned upon in the modern West, but it is alive and well throughout prosperous East Asia.

Notice that all these disputes are, once again, not about ideas or economics or politics even but rather about territory. The various claims between China and Japan in the East China Sea, and between China and all the other pleaders in the South China Sea (principally Vietnam and the Philippines), are so complex that while theoretically solvable through negotiation, they are more likely to be held in check by a stable balance-of-power system agreed to by the U.S. and Chinese navies and air forces. The 21st century map of the Pacific Basin, clogged as it is with warships, is like a map of conflict-prone Europe from previous centuries. Though war may ultimately be avoided in East Asia, the Pacific will show us a more anxious, complicated world order, explained best by such familiar factors as physical terrain, clashing peoples, natural resources and contested trade routes.

India and China, because of the high wall of the Himalayas, have developed for most of history as two great world civilizations having relatively little to do with each other. But the collapse of distance in the past 50 years has turned them into strategic competitors in the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. (This is how technology abets rather than alleviates conflict.) And if Narendra Modi of the Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party is elected by a significant majority in elections in April and May, as is expected by many, India will likely pursue a fiercely geopolitical foreign policy, aligning even more strongly with Japan against China.

China, meanwhile, faces profound economic troubles in the coming years. The upshot will be more regime-stoked nationalism directed at the territorial disputes in the South China and East China seas and more rebellions at home from regionally based ethnic groups such as the Turkic Muslim Uighurs, in the west abutting Central Asia, and the Tibetans, in the southwest close to India. Can the Han Chinese, who inhabit the arable cradle of China and make up 90% of the country’s population, keep the minorities on the upland peripheries under control during a sustained period of economic and social unrest? The great existential question about China’s future is about control of its borderlands, not its currency.

Practically anywhere you look around the globe, geography confounds. Burma is slowly being liberated from benighted military dictatorship only to see its Muslim minority Rohingyas suffer murder and rape at the hands of Burmese nationalist groups. The decline of authoritarianism in Burma reveals a country undermined by geographically based ethnic groups with their own armies and militias. Similarly, sub-Saharan African economies have been growing dramatically as middle classes emerge across that continent. Yet at the same time, absolute population growth and resource scarcity have aggravated ethnic and religious conflicts over territory, as in the adjoining Central African Republic and South Sudan in the heart of the continent, which have dissolved into religious and tribal war.

What’s New Is Old Again

Of course, civil society of the kind Western elites pine for is the only answer for most of these problems. The rule of law, combined with decentralization in the cases of sprawling countries such as Russia and Burma, alone can provide for stability–as it has over the centuries in Europe and the Americas. But working toward that goal requires undiluted realism about the unpleasant facts on the ground.

To live in a world where geography is respected and not ignored is to understand the constraints under which political leaders labor. Many obstacles simply cannot be overcome. That is why the greatest statesmen work near the edges of what is possible. Geography establishes the broad parameters–only within its bounds does human agency have a chance to succeed.

Thus, Ukraine can become a prosperous civil society, but because of its location it will always require a strong and stable relationship with Russia. The Arab world can eventually stabilize, but Western militaries cannot set complex and highly populous Islamic societies to rights except at great cost to themselves. East Asia can avoid war but only by working with the forces of ethnic nationalism at play there.

If there is good news here, it is that most of the borders that are being redrawn–or just reunderlined–exist within states rather than between them. A profound level of upheaval is occurring that, in many cases, precludes military intervention. The vast human cataclysms of the 20th century will not likely repeat themselves. But the worldwide civil society that the elites thought they could engineer is a chimera. The geographical forces at work will not be easily tamed.

While our foreign policy must be morally based, the analysis behind it must be cold-blooded, with geography as its starting point. In geopolitics, the past never dies and there is no modern world.

Source: <http://roilogolez.blogspot.com/2014/03/geopolitics-and-new-world-order-robert.html>

