



The End Of Ideology

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The collapse of the Soviet Union invalidated at a stroke the foundational geopolitical models of the Cold War. The Manichean power struggle between the competing ideologies of liberal democracy and communism had provided an obvious basis for abstracting the vicissitudes of war and diplomacy into an overarching framework. What emerged from communism's defeat was a more complex and fragmented world.

The academic vacuum was quickly filled by new frameworks, two of which deserve mention. Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* argued that liberal democracy had emerged victorious from the clash of ideologies, and would become the universal creed of a peaceful world, despite the inevitable decades of colour and movement as recalcitrant legacy regimes adapted or were overthrown. Samuel P. Huntington's *The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order* foresaw a different world, in which cultural conflicts would replace

ideological ones, proposing a model of nine competing civilisations to facilitate analysis and prediction of world events. The latter framework has better stood the test of the intervening years.

In the same period, a third author rose to prominence amongst US national security cognoscenti. Robert D. Kaplan did not proffer the same impeccable academic credentials as Fukuyama or Huntington, but something arguably more valuable: experience on the ground. Kaplan's background is as a foreign correspondent in Soviet-era Eastern Europe and the Middle East, Mengistu's Ethiopia, Afghanistan (where he lived with the mujahidin) and, more recently, as a traveller around the Indian Ocean rim and throughout Asia.

From the 1980s onwards, Kaplan has produced insightful books and essays that marry anecdotal experience with strategic analysis. His philosophy is that, 'A good place to understand the present, and to ask questions about the future, is on the ground, travelling as slowly as possible'. While he has shied away from proposing a holistic Fukuyama/Huntington-style framework, Kaplan has increasingly used historical works of geostrategy (many predating the coining of that term) to add theoretical perspective.

His latest work, The Revenge of Geography: What the map tells us about coming conflicts and the battle against fate, further advances his evolution from strategically aware travel writer to empirically minded geostrategic theorist. The underpinning premise of the book is that, in our 20th century obsession with ideology as a driver of human conflict and our post-Cold War euphoria, we lost sight of the importance of geography as a field of study and a basis for understanding and predicting the course of human events.

The Revenge of Geography is divided into three distinct parts. The first is a survey of 'a group of decidedly unfashionable thinkers, who push up hard against the notion that geography no longer matters'. These largely twentieth century thinkers espoused various models for analysing geostrategic power based on geographical reality, coining terms like 'Heartland' (the ex-Soviet heart of the Eurasian continent) and 'Rimland' (attached maritime-facing regions such as Europe, coastal China and the Indian subcontinent).

A balance of power between the controller of the Heartland, and the Rimland powers, is seen as desirable, and can be facilitated by the exercise of maritime power by the United States, protected as it is by two oceans.

As population centres spread, 'the earth's political geography increasingly constitutes a closed, claustrophobic system', increasing the likelihood of conflict on the Eurasian landmass even as technological developments increase the severity of its consequences.

While some of these intellectual models appear overly simplistic, and some of the attempts to retrofit them to history can feel contrived, they have the merit of facilitating practical analysis of overwhelmingly complex events. Kaplan himself recognises that some of his chosen thinkers can appear too crudely deterministic in their approach, seemingly denying the impact of human agency on world affairs. He acknowledges this point repeatedly, and encourages a less rigid interpretation. For instance, 'we delude ourselves in believing that we are completely in control of

our destinies; rather, [geostrategic scholar] Braudel leads us to the attendant realisation that the more we are aware of our limits, the more power we have to affect outcomes within them’.

Having provided the reader with a set of theoretical frameworks, the second part of Kaplan’s book purports to apply them to the contemporary map, in chapters focussing respectively on: (i) Europe and the concept of Mitteleuropa; (ii) the rationale for Russia’s obsession with hegemony beyond its western and southwestern borders and its paranoia over its south-east; (iii) the geography and history underpinning a resurgent and increasingly assertive China; (iv) India’s potential and the geographical challenges that may constrain it; (v) the significance of Iran to Islam and the prospects of a revitalised Persian cultural imperialism; and (vi) the divergence of Turkey from the West even as its economic and political power grows.

This is Kaplan at his best: melding historical and geographical facts, geostrategic theory and anecdotal observation into a compelling overview of the present state and likely future scenarios of each significant region.

For instance, Russia is a largely flat landmass with no natural defences and a consequent history of invasion across its exposed land borders: hence, it seeks security through hegemonic control of buffer states in Central Asia and Central Europe, even as it fears Chinese demographic expansion into resource-rich but lightly populated Siberia.

China’s transition to projecting hard power mainly through its emerging blue water navy may lead it to become ‘benevolent in the way of other maritime nations and empires in history, such as Venice, Great Britain and the United States; that is, it should be concerned mainly with the free movement of trade and the preservation of a peaceful maritime system’. But in the short to medium term, as an ‘immature power, obsessed with the territorial humiliations of the past two centuries’, it ‘thinks territorially, like an insecure land power’ about the sea, viewing Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, the Philippines and Indonesia as ‘archipelagic extensions of the Chinese landmass’.

Successful rule over the Indian subcontinent, or at least the Gangean plain, has historically conformed to a geographical logic which drives Indian policy elites to regard Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh as part of their immediate sphere of influence.

True, Kaplan’s collection of regional perspectives lacks the holistic elegance of the overarching theoretical framework of a Fukuyama or Huntington. His attempt to leverage the theoretical survey in the first part of the book as an analytical toolkit for the second is, at times, contrived; at times, halfhearted; occasionally forgotten. He frequently calls upon the historical consciousness of a people to explain its strategic obsessions, without always linking the borders of the historical empires for which they supposedly yearn to the discipline of the relief map. Geography’s revenge seems far from complete.

Yet his willingness to put theory aside and explore idiosyncratic detail, rather than trying to stuff all facts into the straitjacket of theory, lends his analysis greater accuracy at the cost of simplicity. For the geostrategic practitioner, if not the academic, this is the right trade-off. It may not yield an

easily applicable theoretical framework, but in a world with a finite number of regions, the most significant of which Kaplan analyses in detail, this shortcoming is not critical. And the macro-thesis is still vindicated: geography is a far more significant factor in human affairs than most contemporary commentators suggest.

The third and shortest part of Kaplan's book is a reflection on the geostrategic priorities of the United States. Kaplan argues that 'America faces three primary geopolitical dilemmas: a chaotic Eurasian heartland in the Middle East, a rising and assertive Chinese superpower, and a state in deep trouble in Mexico'. While the first two of these are addressed earlier in the book, it is the significance of the Mexican issue that Kaplan seeks to emphasise in its conclusion.

Kaplan shares in part the view of Huntington, who, in his last book, *Who Are We? The challenges to America's national identity*, argued that cosmopolitan US policy elites were wilfully blind to the largest post-Cold War geostrategic issue facing the country. 'Truly,' Kaplan writes, 'Mexico registers far less in the elite imagination than does Israel or China, or India even. Yet Mexico could affect America's destiny more than any of those countries'.

Yet where Huntington's book was a call for a more muscular assertion of traditional American nationalism, based on the British and Protestant values of the founding fathers, Kaplan's experiences as a long time traveller in the world's worst regions make him both more pessimistic about the sustainability of the cultural status quo, and less deferential towards national borders, which, as he has learnt abroad, are frequently porous and ephemeral.

Kaplan describes 'northern Mexico's ongoing, undeclared, substantially unreported, and undeniable unification with the Southwestern United States, and consequent separation from the rest of Mexico', while noting the appalling levels of violence in the northern Mexican narco-states. But, drawing on Arnold J. Toynbee's analysis of the failure of Roman 'limes', Kaplan concludes that attempts to build an impervious, static boundary between two contiguous states with such different levels of affluence are doomed to failure by the reality imposed by the map, and the incentives of traders and adventurers to breach the border.

Thus Kaplan believes that '... the preservation of American nationalism to the degree that would satisfy Huntington is unachievable unless Mexico reaches First World status.' In his view, the optimal policy is helping northern Mexico eliminate its drug cartels, using US military power allied with Mexican forces, and helping to build an affluent Mexican state.

This is not a means to preserve the border, so much as to render its obsolescence less threatening as a larger North American polity emerges. It is a bold and radical vision, but one which seems daily more realistic compared with the long-term preservation of the late Professor Huntington's America.

All three parts of Kaplan's book are an intellectual treat for the geostrategic dilettante. For those of us not willing to risk our lives in the badlands of the AfPak border, Kaplan is as good a substitute for experience on the ground as one can acquire. A careful reading yields insights that add deeper context and meaning to the frenetic daily news cycle of world affairs.



Kaplan exhorts, 'Just as Stephen Dedalus affirms 'his significance as a conscious rational animal', in effect resisting fate, we must never give in to geography, but must fundamentally be aware of it in our quest for a better world'. Kaplan's book is a good place to start.