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Imperial Geopolitics

By John Morrissey

In the Geography Department at West Point hangs a poster with the following reminder to the cadets:

“You can make your own history, but you have to live with your geography...”

I wonder how Robert Kaplan would read this. He would no doubt argue that those very cadets should one day be "making their own geography" too. That is certainly his grand vision and endgame in "The Revenge of Geography": volatile yet vital spaces across the old heartland, Eurasia, secured by his imperial grunts.

A provocative writer, Kaplan's observations are brief, essentialist, and ultimately orientated for a conclusion we already expect. In fact, it begs the question: why, when his world-view is so absolute and fully formed, does he visit so many dangerous and unruly places? "The Revenge of Geography" is void of any engagement with today's key works on geopolitics, security, and environment-society relations in the actual discipline of Geography. Instead, Kaplan gives us eighteenth- and nineteenth-century imperialists and military strategists, and resurrects doomsayers to support his geopolitical vision.

Kaplan's geographical determinist logic neatly couples the identification of volatility and threat with the idea that military action is necessary. For Kaplan, that binary has enabled the various geopolitical scriptings running so reductively through his piece: the Orientalist mapping of the world into areas of security and chaos; the Malthusian production of a planet of population excess, material scarcity, and inevitable resource wars; the positing of governmental dysfunctionality and disorder due to causal environmental instability; and the identifying of ongoing and future geopolitical challenges and threats overseas – hence the persuasive argument about permanent military intervention.

Using geographical determinism as a form of analysis and explanation in Political Geography has been obsolete for nearly a century. For Kaplan, however, the logic offers an uncomplicated justification for the ongoing project of militarily securing the world's most volatile yet vital strategic spaces. For that enduring endgame, "land power" and the primacy of "land nodes" (bases, security sites, pre-positioned equipment, and so on) become the essential military mechanisms to facilitate geopolitical practice. The geographical determinism position then acts as a means to talk about effecting "liberal principles" in the "shatter zones" of an American neoliberal empire (for the good of the global political economy). For Kaplan, this is the long war his imperial grunts are fighting.

Indeed his answer to what he views as the inevitable rise of regional threats to American hegemony in the Middle East is geographical containment and deterrence via a military ground presence. According to Kaplan the value of “order above freedom” is also the answer to what he sees as the defining question in international relations: who can do what to whom?

Such a tragically limited vision for humanity is not without precedent. The grand strategists of imperial and geopolitical ambition through history would undoubtedly agree, but why is it that the most important lessons from history are so easily forgotten? Kaplan’s geographical determinist argument, for example, echoes an earlier admirer of Mackinder, the German geopolitician Karl Haushofer, the founding father of a geopolitics that inspired Nazi foreign policy.

In seeking to understand the complex world we live in, geographical analyses that are historically, politically and culturally informed are vital. Robert Kaplan’s hijacking of the discipline of Geography for his geopolitical ends belongs more in the nineteenth century than today. His writings espouse an astonishingly unproblematic discourse of unilateral geopolitics that too neatly links scriptings of insecurity and threat to the necessity, and indeed inevitability, of U.S. military interventionism for geopolitical and geoeconomic hegemony. Geographers have a responsibility to call out such dangerously ill-informed and potentially influential work. We must insist that it is real people, with real histories and real geographies, who fall under the geopolitical gaze of grand strategists everywhere.

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