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US Central Command and Liberal Imperial Reach: 'Shaping the Central Region for the 21st Century'

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For over 30 years, the grand strategy of one of the most important commands in the US military, CENTCOM, has consistently held fast to a commitment to neoliberal capitalism and an ostensibly free-market global economy. Any accrued national or global economic benefits are impossible to chart, of course, and so CENTCOM's securitization discourse relies upon vaguer, yet promissory logics about 'keeping the global economy open'. My aim in this paper is to show how the story of CENTCOM's mission is crucial to understanding how US military interventionism works today through a discursive geoeconomic imagination that is vague yet persuasive in its universalist dimensions. In a period marked by globalisation and new forms of capitalist accumulation, CENTCOM's mission has nevertheless habitually involved fashioning itself in a neoliberal 'world policeman' role, and to that end has employed a strategy that can be best described as one of 'geoeconomic deterrence'. The paper outlines the entwined military and economic security logics of this strategy, which have resulted in the Middle East and Central Asia being repeatedly conditioned as requiring forms of corrective military interventionism. Since its establishment in 1983, CENTCOM's strategy papers, mission statements and annual reports to Congress have collectively scripted practices of intervention and deterrence that rely upon dominant registers of military and economic risk. In critically considering CENTCOM's mission, the paper shows how the command's initiation fundamentally changed US foreign policy by solidifying the Carter Doctrine and subsequently committing to the geoeconomic shaping of the most energy-rich region on earth.

KEY WORDS: United States Central Command, geoeconomic deterrence, securitization

It is difficult to imagine a region at once so vital economically and so volatile politically as the Persian Gulf today.

– Joshua Epstein, RAND Corporation consultant, 1981

In over 30 years of supporting US forces in the Central Command area of responsibility, I have never witnessed it so tumultuous.

– CENTCOM Commander General James N. Mattis, 2012

Introduction

United States Central Command (CENTCOM) was established on 1 January 1983; it was a watershed moment for contemporary US geopolitics. It signalled a new era of global ambition in the aftermath of the failure of US grand strategy in Southeast Asia, and it solidified the Carter Doctrine and a renewed focus of US foreign policy on the world's most energy-rich area. For the past 30 years, CENTCOM has been a vital appendage of the US national security state in enacting US foreign policy in the Middle East. From its inception, it was tasked with the military-economic securitization of what it calls the 'Central Region'. Looking to the 21st century in the late 1990s, the command published a key strategy paper, *Shaping the Central Region for the 21st Century*; outlined within is a military mission for the new century to 'protect, promote and preserve U.S. interests in the Central Region to include the free flow of energy resources, access to regional states, freedom of navigation, and maintenance of regional stability' (US Central Command 1999a). The precarious and pivotal nature of the so-called Central Region, its energy resources and aleatory future have long been persuasive registers in CENTCOM's national security discourse. This paper explores CENTCOM's military production of the Middle East and Central Asia by examining the command's key geopolitical and geoeconomic scriptings over the last 30 years. These are commonly reductive and imperial, yet form part of a broader abstracted envisioning of US national security that has been instrumental in the 'making' of the region as intrinsically a space of insecurity necessitating intervention, regulation and ultimately saving from itself (Sidaway 1998; Gregory 2004). I consider, in particular, interventionary tactics familiar to any reader of colonial history, namely the identification of threat, disorder and volatility, with the simultaneous signalling of liberal correction and universalist special mission. In the case of CENTCOM, the successful championing of a necessary US ground presence in its 'Area of Responsibility', tasked with a mission of geoeconomic deterrence, has been achieved via a consistent conflation of military and economic 'vital' security interests. The resultant operation of military-economic securitization involves a number of concerns to political and cultural geography, including especially the enduring role of geopolitical

abstraction in imperial interventions, and the logics and mechanisms of interventionary security that enable commercial opportunities.

The paper begins by discussing some of the challenges and developments in writing critically about geopolitics, geoeconomics and the modalities of security that have come to define late modern war. It then presents a short historical geography of the US in the Middle East and Central Asia in recent years, to offer a backdrop to CENTCOM's successful military grand strategy that has resulted in the US going from no bases in the region in the early 1980s to an unprecedented level of territorial access and fully operational bases today. I then focus on CENTCOM's forward deployment, and major military interventions over the last 30 years, including the Tanker War in the 1980s, the Gulf War and its aftermath in the 1990s, and the command's spearheading of the so-called war on terror in Iraq and Afghanistan. Threading through my analysis is a focus on the strategy of 'deterrence', which captures precisely how CENTCOM has sought to 'shape' military and economic security and its attendant commercial opportunities. This is exemplified, in particular, by examining CENTCOM's extension into Central Asia in 1999, as part of a broader US global liberalization project in the aftermath of the break-up of the Soviet Union. Finally, attention is drawn to CENTCOM's current posturing of bases, logistic sites, prepositioned equipment and forward-deployed troops as part of a grand strategy to preemptively secure the aleatory future of the world's most energy-rich region.

Geopolitical and geoeconomic critique

Geographers have long encountered the difficulty of writing critically about geopolitics, given the discipline's classical geopolitics tradition advanced by influential figures such as Halford Mackinder and Karl Haushofer (Kearns 2009; Dodds 2010; Kuus 2010; Flint 2011). Their imperialist, Malthusian and geographically determinist logics, moreover, continue to be persuasive today for a wide range of popular international relations writers and commentators such as Robert Kaplan (Kaplan 2012; cf. Kearns 2013). Indeed, some have argued that perhaps the 'only genuinely critical form of geopolitics is an anti-geopolitics which rejects the entire edifice' (Heffernan 2000, 351). The emergence of 'critical geopolitics' in the early 1990s, however, marked a significant moment in political geography, which opened up a wide range of critical examinations of geopolitical statecraft and the key role of geographical knowledges therein (Dalby 1991; Ó Tuathail 1996a). The

evolving canon of work has been critiqued for its sometimes exclusive focus on discourse and for its arguable reluctance to adopt a transformative envisioning of geopolitics, but it has undoubtedly been vital in energising a critical political geography focused on international relations (Kearns 2009; Dalby 2010). The subsequent emergence of feminist geopolitics, furthermore, has added to the breadth and politics of geographical perspectives on geopolitics and to a focus especially on the lived experience of its everyday human geographies and complexities of political, social and cultural productions (Dowler and Sharp 2001). Perhaps not always fully acknowledged is a strong tradition too of historical geography that has offered important historicizations of contemporary geopolitics, from the role of reified geographical knowledges over time to the functioning modalities of the various academic and industrial complexes of the military today (Driver 2001; Smith 2003; Kirsch 2005; Farish 2010). My intention here is not to parse out separate sub-disciplinary traditions, however. They have, of course, intersected and enriched each other greatly. Collectively, over the last two decades, critical accounts of formal, practical and popular geopolitics have variously called out dangerous geographical formulations of international relations and insisted upon human geographies that work to resist the kinds of abstracted and reductive knowledges that continue to influentially script our world (Gregory; 2005; Hyndman 2007; Kuus 2010).

A concern for the place of 'political economy' in the emergence of critical geopolitics has been a feature of debate from the beginning. Gerard Toal, for example, in an early exchange with Simon Dalby, asserted that the consequences of an 'evisceration of political economy for the detailed analysis of the practice of foreign policy' are considerable (Ó Tuathail 1996b, 652). Toal later conceded that more is needed on 'the embeddedness of geopolitical formations and discourses in structures of political economy' (Ó Tuathail 2000, 393), and a similar concern was frequently voiced by the late Neil Smith, who argued that the political economy of imperialism, along with the 'social relations giving rise to [it]', were not sufficiently examined (2000, 370). In more recent years, Smith, with Deb Cowen, has argued for 'geoeconomic spatiality' as being vital to 'the ongoing transformation of political geography' (2009, 25). Citing the impossibilities of contemporary border security, Cowen and Smith challenge 'geopolitical conceptions' of international relations, which they argue may 'better be captured today by a "geo-economic" conception of space' (2009, 24). Their argument echoes a number of theorizations of security that have drawn upon Micheal

Foucault's translated lectures on biopolitics and security at the Collège de France in the late 1970s – Miguel de Larringa and Marc Doucet, for example, reasoning that one of the 'key dynamics' in 'the relationship between security and circulation' is that 'security's object remains beyond its grasp, that the deployment of the technologies of security is done within a context marked by the impossibility of eliminating insecurity altogether' (2008, 524; cf. Foucault 2007, 2008). This, of course, opens up new fields of capitalist intervention. As Stephen Collier and Andrew Lakoff (2009, 3) note, 'the very success of industrial and social modernity in managing risks has in fact generated new risks'. A related point concerns the evolving relationship between neoliberalism and practices of securitization in late modern capitalism. For Deb Cowen (2010, 600), although 'neoliberalism has long been credited with expanding capitalist markets', a necessary 'geography of logistics' has 'quietly put the cold calculation of cost' at the centre of practices of neoliberal securitization. As she points out, vital logistical global networks and trade routes have become 'a security threat', thereby requiring the 'securitization of "logistic space"' (2010, 602).

A broader debate about geoeconomics and/or geopolitics has also been engaged in recent years, which has served to illuminate the role of geoeconomic calculation in international relations, in the opening up of new fields of commercial geography, in the shaping of uneven development, and in the perpetuation of international conflict (Dalby 2007; Smith 2008; Sparke 2013). Yet, the old concerns of geopolitical calculation, territory and access still matter too, as I hope to argue below. For Matt Sparke (2007, 340), both geopolitics and geoeconomics are ultimately 'better understood as geostrategic discourses' (2007, 345), a point most recently echoed by Mona Domosh who has charted the discursive strategies of US interventionism in the early decades of the twentieth century, historicizing the gestation of geoeconomics at the heart of developmentalist discourses on 'America's benevolent role' in world affairs (2013, 962). As Domosh shows, both geopolitical and geoeconomic imaginings have long coexisted in a discursive field of US global ambition that 'encompasses a way of seeing the world' in which strategies of intervention 'come to be seen as plausible and desirable' (2013, 945). Below, I draw upon such a composite theorization of geopolitics and geoeconomics to critically reflect upon CENTCOM's production of the Middle East and Central Asia as a distinct regional geography, possessing not only 'vital interests' for the US and global economy but also a precarious and unpredictable geopolitical dynamic requiring a stable regulatory military presence. By

detailing CENTCOM's grand strategy of basing, forward deployment and deterrence, I hope to make clear how its military-economic security mission has long involved entangled geopolitical and geoeconomic visions.

Basing and geopolitics: a short historical geography of the US in the 'Central Region'

From the mid-twentieth century, US military power overseas has depended on a network of secure resupply, refuelling and maintenance facilities on the peripheries of conflict regions. For World War II, Britain served that function in Europe, while Australia initially served it for the Pacific campaign. For the Korean War, Japan was the staging post, and for Vietnam, it was the Philippines and Thailand. For US strategy in the war on terror, an extensive network of bases, access sites, and prepositioning locations in the Middle East and Central Asia has been crucial. This is the Area of Responsibility (AOR) of CENTCOM, seen in figure 1, which currently extends from Egypt across the Arabian Peninsula to Iraq, Iran and the former Soviet Central Asian republics. CENTCOM calls this vast and diverse geography the 'Central Region'. Historically, the current extent of CENTCOM facilities and forces represents a high point of US geostrategic presence in the Middle East and Central Asia. In the early years of CENTCOM's inception in the 1980s, however, the contemporary scenario could only have been dreamed of by military and foreign policy strategists in Washington.

Concerns for safeguarding energy security in the Middle East has been a component of US foreign policy for successive administrations since at least 1945 (Vitalis 2007; Morrissey 2009). However, it was the turbulent 1970s, marked by oil crises, the collapse of the US-supported Shah in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which precipitated the designation of the Persian Gulf region as an area of 'vital interest' to the US and triggered the establishment of a specific military force for its defense. Reacting to a range of political and economic crises across the Middle East and Central Asia in the late 1970s, President Jimmy Carter's State of the Union Address in January 1980 declared that 'any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force' (Carter 1980). Two months later, the establishment of the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force signalled the first formal commitment of US military force to the Persian Gulf region, and with CENTCOM's succession in 1983 as a full regional command the US government had fully committed to the Carter Doctrine and the

securitization of the Persian Gulf. However, in the early 1980s, in the vast region spanning the Philippines to Turkey, the US possessed no military bases. As then Undersecretary of Defense Robert Komer lamented, countries ‘emphatically do not want formal security arrangements with us’ (US Department of Defense 1980, 484). This geopolitical climate prompted the Department of Defense (DoD) to pursue four alternative objectives to secure strategic capabilities in the region: (i) the extension of facilities on the Indian Ocean island of Diego Garcia; (ii) the development of enhanced sea- and air-lift capabilities to transport troops and equipment rapidly; (iii) the creation and maintenance of Maritime Prepositioning Ships in the Indian Ocean; and (iv) the securing of contingent/limited access sites in the region (US Department of Defense 1980, 318).



Figure 1 CENTCOM Area of Responsibility, 2014

By the time CENTCOM came into being in 1983, the stationing of prepositioning ships as 'floating warehouses' was crucial to increasing its 'strategic mobility' by providing 'a stockpile of combat and support equipment for immediate use by arriving forces' (US Congressional Budget Office 1983, 38). A core concern of contemporary military planners, however, was that prepositioning was ultimately a limited war strategy on its own. Jeffrey Record, at the Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, for instance, saw secure 'land access' as the key to effecting US foreign policy in the region (Record 1981). Record's contemporaries were similarly anxious to underline the import of territorial access (Halliday 1981; Waltz 1981; Brzezinski 1983; McNaugher 1985), and subsequently an active strategy to forge military links in the region was incrementally pursued in the 1980s by establishing joint military training exercises. One such exercise, *Bright Star*, initiated for the first time in 1980 with Egypt, was heralded by the Carter administration as the first step in establishing a foothold in the Middle East. Subsequent exercises in 1981, 1983, 1985 and 1987, saw up to 10,000 US troops at a time training with troops from Egypt, Jordan, Oman, Somalia and Sudan.

In addition to establishing military exercises such as *Bright Star*, the DoD concurrently pursued a policy of securing contingent access rights for its armed forces with several countries across the Arabian Peninsula and Horn of Africa. By the end of 1980, agreements had been reached with Oman, Somalia and Kenya, for instance, to include 'standard access and status of forces arrangements' (Record 1981, 58). By the mid-1980s, the US had also secured facilities use for the US Air force at the Egyptian air bases of Qena and Cairo West, and a significant US military presence was also initiated in Saudi Arabia through US support for Saudi airbase modernization programs and the loaning of Airborne Warning and Control System aircraft (Gold 1988). Throughout the later 1980s, the US subsequently developed basing capabilities in Saudi Arabia, which ultimately enabled the rapid response to Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and the subsequent launch of Operation Desert Storm. In addition, land access was also vital for CENTCOM's declared stabilizing function in the pivotal regional and broader global economy, as I outline below.

The Gulf wars, deterrence and geoeconomics

After the Gulf War, a substantial contingent of CENTCOM forces remained in Saudi Arabia as part of a new US deterrence policy in the Gulf. Their presence in the region throughout the

1990s was annually presented in CENTCOM's posture statements to the United States Congress as vital to both the US and world economy, despite the typically nebulous and promissory logic of economic security being outlined (US Central Command 1997, 1998, 1999b). By the late 1990s, CENTCOM had extended its basing structure and land prepositioning program to countries such as Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (Krepinevich and Work 2007). By the mid-2000s, 'U.S. strategy toward the region centered on the uninterrupted flow of Arabian Gulf oil, security of coalition partners and allies, regional peace and security and access to commercial markets' (US Overseas Basing Commission 2005, G2). At this point, the global geoeconomic import of the region had been firmly established by CENTCOM:

the Central Region has continued to grow in importance and is the overseas area where U.S. interests are most likely to be directly threatened. Maintaining stability in this volatile region is key to the free flow of oil and other commerce essential to the world economy (US Central Command 2005).

For CENTCOM's first major military operation in 1987, Operation Earnest Will, in addition to signalling geopolitical support for existing and potential regional allies, the interventionary rationale of protecting and reflagging Kuwaiti oil tankers with American ensigns was presented in explicitly geoeconomic terms. Preventing regional economic collapse and ensuring freedom of navigation was a demonstration of US commitment to 'the free flow of oil through the Strait of Hormuz', according to then President Ronald Reagan (Palmer 1992, 122). Some three years later, in 1990, CENTCOM's geoeconomic deterrence mission became even clearer. Six months prior to Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, CENTCOM Commander-in-Chief General Norman Schwarzkopf outlined his command's *raison d'être* to Congress:

the greatest threat to U.S. interests in the area is the spillover of regional conflict which could endanger American lives, threaten U.S. interests in the area or interrupt the flow of oil, thereby requiring the commitment of U.S. combat forces (US Central Command 1990).

Given its assigned military-economic mission to protect US vital interests in the Gulf, CENTCOM was compelled to militarily intervene in early 1991. The swift success of the CENTCOM-led war further crystallised US military-economic grand strategy for the region. A

series of CENTCOM-commissioned reports in the war's aftermath argued for a focused stabilization role for the command thereafter (Lesser 1991; Pelletiere and Johnson II 1992). Pelletiere and Johnson II, for example, rejected the idea of the Gulf Cooperation Council states taking responsibility for the security of the broader region, arguing at length that '[o]nly CENTCOM can do that' – by becoming 'the Gulf's policeman', and by performing 'mounting patrols' across the command's AOR (1992, v).

Mounting patrols and military policing and deterrence are precisely what were pursued throughout the 1990s by successive CENTCOM Commanders-in-Chief. General James Binford Peay III defined CENTCOM's mission in 1995 as primarily supporting 'US and free-world interests by assuring access to Mid-east oil resources', and outlined two key US 'vital interests in the region': 'maintaining the free flow of oil at stable and reasonable prices', and 'ensuring freedom of navigation and access to commercial markets' (Binford Peay III 1995, 2, 10). To this end, CENTCOM's theater strategy throughout the 1990s revolved around one core element – deterrence – which involved a range of practices including air, ground and naval manoeuvres, joint military exercises, war gaming, prepositional programs, infrastructure improvements and the development of access and logistic sites (US Central Command 1999a, 9-13). The deterrence strategy has been consistently formulated for stated military and economic ends, and relies centrally upon the mobilisation of an instrumental risk-securitization binary (Morrissey 2011a). That binary persuasively captures a strategy of risk management, replete with an interventionary logic of preemption and involving a well-established neo-Malthusian register of resource scarcity (Klein 2007; Martin 2007). Securitization is invoked, furthermore, via a universalist neoliberal logic to protect and safeguard the global economy (Harvey 2003; Smith 2005; cf. Domosh 2013).

CENTCOM's extension into Central Asia

CENTCOM's deterrence mission throughout the 1990s culminated with the publication of an ambitious envisioning of future global security in its 1999 publication, *Shaping the Central Region for the 21st Century* (US Central Command 1999a). Signalling an implicitly imperial interventionary role long into the new century, outlined therein is a committed strategy of military deterrence for a straight-forward geoeconomic rationale: '[a]ccess to the region's petroleum resources is vital to the stability of the global economy' (US Central Command 1999a, 4). A further key development in 1999 was the addition of the five former Soviet

Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan into CENTCOM's AOR. This extended the command's primary mission – the securing of energy and the global economy – as noted by General Anthony Zinni in CENTCOM's posture statement a year earlier:

When the Central Asian States are added to CENTCOM's AOR in 1999, the addition of their energy resources, currently estimated at 15-25 billion dollars of oil, will only increase the importance of the region to economies worldwide (US Central Command 1998).

The backdrop of national security thinking in the then Clinton administration is important in considering CENTCOM's extension into Central Asia. President Clinton's flagship national security document *United States Security Strategy for the Middle East* made clear that he saw the orientation of an effective national security posture as coinciding with a dominant and proactive global economic posture (US Department of Defense 1995). To this end, diplomatic and military liaison efforts to extend CENTCOM's AOR to Central Asia mirrored a strategy of advancing global military posture in tandem with global economic liberalization. In 1997, two years before the five Central Asian states were formally incorporated into CENTCOM, Clinton sent a high-level delegation, comprising Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Catherine Kelleher and General John Sheehan, Commander-in-Chief of US Atlantic Command, to Kazakhstan to attend the inaugural joint military exercise, *Operation CENTRAZBAT*, in which 500 US paratroopers took part with forces from Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic and Uzbekistan (Klare 2002). The military and diplomatic mission was touted by the Clinton administration as a major success, and in subsequent CENTRABAZAT exercises in 1998 and 2000 CENTCOM solidified ties to the region.

CENTCOM paid attention to Central Asia 'before it mattered in 2001', claim Derek Reveron and Michelle Gavin (2004, 3), and 'when it was time for the United States to request basing rights [they] already had a solid foundation on which to build secure bases'. Then US Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, indeed thanked Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan for opening their bases to US forces and thereby 'saving Afghan lives' (US Department of Defense 2002a, 2002b). Yet Rumsfeld's and Reveron and Gavin's emphases on the 'military dimensions' of CENTCOM's successful connections in Central Asia fail to acknowledge the concomitant 'economic dimensions' of the command's extension into the

region and what its widening security blanket enabled commercially (Nichol 2003). On 21 March 2003, just as the Iraq War was beginning, Kazakhstan Deputy Prime Minister Karim Masimov declared that over the next 15 years, US investments in Kazakhstan would exceed \$80 billion, and would target connecting the Aktau-Baku oil pipeline with the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline (US Department of Defense 2005a, 2181). Earlier that month, Steven Mann, special adviser to the US Secretary of State on Caspian Sea energy issues, had met with Kazakhstan's Foreign Minister Qasymzhomart Toqaev in Astana to discuss 'the investment climate in Kazakhstan's energy sector for American firms interested in developing newly discovered oil and natural-gas deposits and how to make that climate more attractive' (EurasiaNet 2003). Geoeconomic calculations, in other words, as well as military-strategic concerns, were intermeshed in CENTCOM's mission in Central Asia from the beginning. As CENTCOM Commander General John Abizaid affirmed in his posture statement to Congress in 2006, the region's resources and pivotal global economic position were simply too important to not endeavour to securitize:

In a region at the crossroads between Europe and Asia, the stability and further development of transportation and energy networks is increasingly important for global economic health. CENTCOM continues to work to deepen our engagement with the states of Central Asia (US Central Command 2006a).

Global posture and imperial reach

CENTCOM's extension into Central Asia in the late 1990s mirrored a broader US global ambition of liberal imperial reach. That imperial reach continues to be enabled by what the US military calls 'forward presence', comprising forward-deployed troops, military hardware and security mechanisms on the ground, including bases, access and logistics locations and prepositioning sites. By the late 1990s, CENTCOM had built these up over the previous decade to the point where General Anthony Zinni underlined 'overwhelming force' as 'key' to his command's theater strategy across the Middle East and Central Asia (US Central Command 1999b). In the aftermath of the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq in 2001 and 2003, the command supported 128 operating bases in its AOR, unprecedented in any imperial age (US Central Command 2006b; cf. Morrissey 2011b). Their geographical locations mirror vital nodes in the political economy of regional oil production, which CENTCOM has long proclaimed to police as 'Guardians of the Gulf' (Palmer 1992). The bulk

of CENTCOM's ground presence is in the energy-rich Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries of the Arabian Peninsula. Immediately prior to, and after, the Gulf War in 1991, the US forged close relationships with all six GCC countries. Broad bilateral defense and access agreements were signed between each state: Bahrain, Oman and Saudi Arabia in 1990; Kuwait in 1991; Qatar in 1992; and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in 1994 (Hajjar 2002). CENTCOM maintains a combination of bases, access rights, logistics sites and prepositioning locations in all six countries today, which continue to enable its operational strategy of deterrence.

For CENTCOM's deterrence strategy, everyday activities of forward-deployed personnel include: 'planning and conducting unit and combined (foreign) military exercises and operations'; 'monitoring and analyzing significant military, political and economic events'; and 'refining deployment and contingency plans for the region' (US Central Command 2007). The latter occurs in conjunction with CENTCOM's evolving basing strategy, which alters in line with ongoing revisions to the US military's broader global defense posture, which have been propelled in recent years by the ambition of 'rapid deployability'. In August 2004, US President George W. Bush declared that the world had 'changed a great deal' and that US global posture 'must change with it' by redistributing forces 'stationed at overseas locations where the wars of the last century ended' (US Department of Defense 2004a). With a nod to an increasingly cited temporality of preemption in DoD circles, Bush relayed how it was not just 'today's threats' that needed to be securitized but also 'emerging threats' and 'unexpected threats', and that 'a more agile and flexible force' would enable the capacity to 'surge quickly' (US Department of Defense 2004a). A month later, in September 2004, the US Global Defense Posture Review, begun three years earlier, was published. Within it, the military doctrine of 'rapid deployability' is centrally underlined for a grand strategy designed for the 'necessary flexibility and freedom of action to meet 21st-century security challenges' (US Department of Defense 2004b, 8).

The objective of rapid deployability continues to be proffered as key to the effective engagement of the US military in late modern war. It promises a leaner, more efficient use of taxpayers' money in fiscally restrained times, and it involves too a therapeutic registering of a technological fix for the world's security challenges – then US Secretary of Defense, Leon Panetta, for example, extolling in 2012 a 'Joint Force for the future' that will be 'smaller and leaner' but 'ready and technologically advanced' (US Department of Defense

2012, v). The concept of rapid deployability has much earlier origins, however, extending back to the early 1980s when it was first championed as critical to the reorganisation of the US military in the aftermath of failure in Vietnam (Record 1981). The concept was originally formulated in the context of intervention in the Middle East and Central Asia and a core element of the rationale for rapid interventionary power involved the ability to shape the regional and global economy (Epstein 1981; Waltz 1981). This was part of CENTCOM's original geoeconomic mission, of course.

From the beginning, CENTCOM's geoeconomic mission ostensibly involved the enabling of 'commercial opportunities' for the 'good of the global economy', as successive Commanders-in-Chief have declared. General James Binford Peay III, for example, underlined how ensuring 'access to commercial markets' brought about 'a vibrant economic relationship between the U.S. and Middle Eastern states that includes an array of commercial activities, ranging from military hardware to construction, health services, and consumer goods' (Binford Peay III 1995, 2). General Anthony Zinni too emphasised a core element of CENTCOM grand strategy that is 'often overlooked': the 'growing commercial significance of the area' and the pattern of global investments 'flowing into the region because of its geostrategic position' (Joint Force Quarterly Forum 2000, 26). More broadly, the military successes of CENTCOM in projecting and maintaining an effective US ground presence in the region has heightened the confidence of a wide range of defense experts, national security advisors and former US ambassadors to the region to speak openly and confidently about the economic opportunities gained by US military hegemony (Freeman 1995; Byman and Wise 2002; cf. Morrissey 2015).

Since the war on terror began in 2001, a host of US foreign policy commentators have anticipated the geostrategic and geoeconomic opportunities it has presented (Barnett 2004; Friedman 2005; Kagan 2008; Kaplan 2012). For Bradley Thayer (2003, 4), for instance, 'the war on terrorism provides the opportunity to increase significantly American military and economic power in the Middle East'. The US has more overseas military bases today than any nation in history. Even after the military success of the Gulf War, CENTCOM commanders preferred to maintain an 'over-the-horizon' presence in the Gulf, and rather than mount a large-scale military presence in any one area, it developed sites with prepositioned military equipment and supplies. This all changed, of course, with the orientation of an aggressive foreign policy pursued by the Bush administration in the wake

of the September 11 attacks in 2001. While acknowledging the undeniable aggressive military interventionism pursued by the Bush administration in the aftermath of September 2001, which many commentators ascribe as 'neoconservative empire', what has been less considered about the national security strategy of George W. Bush is that it also bore many of the hallmarks of 'neoliberal empire' discernible in the previous Democratic administration of Bill Clinton (Dalby 2007; Sparke 2013). Little-discussed, for example, is Bush's economic liberalization and integration project in the Middle East and Central Asia, which built upon Clinton's earlier efforts to 'close the gaps' of an open neoliberal economy in the region. In the 2006 *US National Security Strategy*, for instance, four of its nine chapters address issues of economic integration and globalization (US National Security Council 2006). And as Kenneth Katzman (2006) notes, an integral aspect of Bush's national security strategy involved an expressly geoeconomic policy of securing free trade agreements, which the US signed with Bahrain in 2004 and Oman in 2005, for instance – both of which served to secure key markets for oil and gas companies Exxon Mobil, Royal Dutch Shell and Totalfina Elf.

The Bush administration's *National Defense Strategy* could also be cited in terms of a dual military and economic grand strategy professed to safeguard 'the integrity of the international economic system' (US Department of Defense 2005b, 6). This is precisely the strategy operationalised by Paul Bremer in his first week of taking up office as head of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in Iraq in 2004 (Ferguson 2007). While still in Washington, Bremer began issuing tailored legal decrees and executive orders such as Order 39, which removed the statutes in the Iraqi Constitution that prevented the privatization of national energy assets and foreign ownership of Iraqi companies. As Neil Smith (2005, 179) observes, this 'put US energy corporations and related interests in the driver's seat', and opened the door for both neoliberal privatization and repatriation of profits. Bremer oversaw the integration of Iraq into the global economy without negotiations with the World Bank, IMF or even the 'coalition of the willing'. It was, as Naomi Klein has shown, 'free trade heavy, without proxies or puppets, seizing new markets directly for Western multinationals on the battlefields of preemptive wars' (2007, 343). Bremer's almost exclusive economic focus left little room for post-war planning. Gregory Hooker, the then senior intelligence analyst for Iraq at CENTCOM, has documented the abject failings of preparations for any post-conflict environment in Iraq:

the interagency planning process for the post-hostilities environment for Iraq was weak [...] 'ownership' of the post-hostilities phase fell to civilian agencies, which were not well coordinated, had no empowered leadership, and suffered from political influence (Hooker 2005, xii).

That the war in Iraq deteriorated into chaos and resulted in hundreds of thousands of Iraqi deaths and everyday terror for those spared that fate did not prevent Bremer receiving the highest honour that can be bestowed on a US citizen, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, from President George W. Bush in December 2004. Why? Because, as Neil Smith observes, he 'actually did the job he was sent to do' (Smith 2005, 180). CENTCOM's more recent mission statements prefer to signal the notion of US-led 'international' 'cooperation' and 'development' and have tended to erase explicit references to US 'national interests':

US Central Command, working with national and international partners, promotes development and cooperation among nations, responds to crises, and deters or defeats state and transnational aggression in order to establish regional security and stability (US Central Command 2009).

Such a shift in 2009 had much to do with the new the new Obama administration's efforts to distance itself from the previous Bush administration. Ultimately, however, the new mission statement did not deviate from CENTCOM's longstanding commitment to the defense of the global economy, and it mirrors too the characteristic masking of US national ambition in declarations of universalist 'special mission' (Smith 2003; Sparke 2013).

Conclusion: securing the 'Central Region' from itself

In an age of transnational global capitalism, many of the companies availing of the commercial opportunities enabled by CENTCOM's security architectures in the Middle East and Central Asia have a distinctly multinational hue. However, CENTCOM's self-fashioned neoliberal 'world policeman' role has meant that its mission has not significantly altered since the US government committed to the Carter Doctrine with the establishment of the command in 1983. Its grand strategy has consistently been one of global 'geoeconomic deterrence'. This paper has outlined the dual military and economic security logics of this strategy, which have resulted in the Middle East and Central Asia being repeatedly scripted as requiring regulative military interventionism. For CENTCOM, the 'Central Region' has long

needed securitization from itself. Its energy resources and global geographical position, coupled with its seemingly perpetual political instability and irregular military threats, implicitly assign CENTCOM an enduring mission. In this mission, securing resources have often been theorised as the primary objective; Michael Klare (2004), for example, envisaging the Iraq conflict as yet another illustration of the contemporary world's 'resource wars' (cf. Le Billon 2004). However, does such a reading overly emphasise what Neil Smith (2003, xiv) calls 'the old language of resource-driven geopolitics'? As Smith remarks, America's contemporary imperial wars may well force 'geopolitics to the fore', but should not 'blind us to the deeper geo-economic aspiration for global control' (Smith, 2003, xiv). CENTCOM's intervention in Iraq was never simply about resources, but rather forms part of a much longer US regional grand strategy whose mission has combined both military and economic security interests in endeavouring to shape the regional and global economy.

From its first forward deployment in reflagging Kuwaiti oil tankers with American ensigns in the US strategic tilt towards Iraq in the Iran-Iraq war, CENTCOM's mission centrally involved what Mona Domosh (2013, 945) theorises at the heart of a longstanding US liberal interventionary urge: a 'geoeconomic imagination'. CENTCOM first intervention in the Persian Gulf served a range of elite, corporate economic interests. In more recent times, defense companies such as Raytheon have posted unprecedented global sales (\$16.8 billion in 2002) on the back of securing large-scale contracts to supply CENTCOM with various electronic and IT services for its then new deployable headquarters in Qatar (PR Newswire 2003). The myriad security think-tanks and policy institutes in Washington and elsewhere, which serve the DoD in frequently complicit ways, are also an elite interest. And, of course, the interested parties served by CENTCOM's mission are not just those in, or related to, the military. Operating as 'Guardians of the Gulf' by patrolling vital assets, key access points and pivotal transportation networks serves as a security blanket for a raft of Western companies that are increasingly expanding to the region (Smith 2005; Gillem 2007; Klein 2007).

Since 1983, successive CENTCOM Commanders have annually affirmed the conflation of military and economic 'vital interests' at the heart of US national security. CENTCOM's most recent posture statement underlines once more what will continue to 'keep U.S. attention anchored in this region': 'oil and energy resources that fuel the global economy' (US Central Command 2013). US global ambition and military imperial reach today is given important context by reading the history of CENTCOM in the so-called 'Central Region', which has been

consistently posited as a geoeconomic pivot, vital to US and global economic health. The command's military strategic calculus has been perennially mobilised in tandem with a discursive identification of future economic risk whose potential volatility must be preemptively guarded against for the broader global economy. The US military has long orientated a 'global special mission', which it reaffirms repeatedly with renewed rhetorical verve. 'Our global responsibilities are significant; we cannot afford to fail' concludes the Obama administration's most recent national security document (US Department of Defense 2012, 8). The global future is never entirely 'controllable', of course, as Foucault notes, and so securitization must 'take into account precisely what might happen' (2007, 20). For the past 30 years, CENTCOM's military-economic strategy to secure the aleatory future of the most energy-rich region on earth has been one of forward presence, deterrence and readiness to intervene. Perhaps the DoD describes this strategy best: 'shaping activities' (US Department of Defense 2001, 32).

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