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# Geoeconomics in the Long War

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**Abstract:** In Neil Smith's *American Empire*, he makes the case that the current moment of US global ambition is characterised by a network of imperial power that is "exercised in the first place through the world market and only secondarily, when and if necessary, in geopolitical terms". For Smith, it was crucial that in the din of US geopolitics in the post-9/11 period we did not lose sight of "the deeper geo-economic aspiration for global control", in a "war on terror" that is really a war to "fill in the interstices of globalization" (2003a:xiv). In *American Empire*, Smith identified three moments of US global ambition over the last century. In this paper, I extend back the starting point for Smith's third moment to a period in the 1990s when United States Central Command (CENTCOM) became fully operational in the military-economic securitization of the most pivotal region on earth, what it terms the "Central Region". By drawing on the concept of 'geoeconomics', which Smith increasingly used in his later writing, I show how CENTCOM's mission from the outset can be most aptly described as one of 'geoeconomic deterrence'. I highlight in particular how enabling commercial markets has been a key element of grand strategy in what CENTCOM calls its 'long war' in the Middle East and Central Asia. In addition, I outline recent calls for the US military to become further and more broadly involved in what some commentators have called 'messy capitalism'. I ask the question what kind of capitalism and in whose interests, before concluding by reflecting upon Neil Smith's assessment of the fated contradictions of contemporary US imperial ambition.

**Keywords:** American empire, geoeconomics, deterrence, grand strategy, national security

## Introduction

"With our military units tracing their roots to pre-Revolutionary times, you might say that we are America's oldest company. And if you look at us in business terms, many would say we are not only America's largest company, but its busiest and most successful."  
(DoD 101: An Introductory Overview of the Department of Defense 2015)

So begins the introductory overview of the US Department of Defense (DoD) on its official website. Such a succinct envisioning neatly signals the long-established economic concerns of the US military. Both within and beyond the United States, economic and military logics have, of course, been deeply intertwined for centuries –

and not just in the waging of war, but in the support, maintenance and doctrinal teaching of a wide range of military capacities. As early as 1906, Halford Mackinder was lecturing British Army officers at the London School of Economics on such topics as “the influence of geographical conditions on commercial development and trade routes”, and the “effect of issuing paper money in a country occupied by an advancing army” (cited in Kearns 2009:48). Mackinder’s imperial ambition and ideas for a productive coalition of geography and empire were matched by his contemporary on the other side of the Atlantic, fellow geographer Isaiah Bowman. Bowman, the chief protagonist in Neil Smith’s *American Empire*, became a prominent figure in the US State Department through the course of the early twentieth century, acting as territorial advisor to Woodrow Wilson at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, becoming the inaugural director of the Council of Foreign Relations in 1921, and serving as territorial advisor at the State Department during World War II (Smith 2003a). As Smith has illuminated so well, Bowman’s influential geographical envisioning of American *Lebensraum* mirrored two key moments of US global ambition in the twentieth century, comprising both military and economic aspirations in the aftermath of both world wars (see also Smith 2003b). For Smith, a third moment of US ambition, again comprising military and economic designs for global hegemony, came with the launch of the global war on terror in 2001. The military execution of that war fell to United States Central Command (CENTCOM), and the story of its initiation and ongoing military and geoeconomic mission forms much of the backdrop to this paper.

In 1983, CENTCOM was tasked with the securitization of what it terms the “Central Region”, a vast geographical region stretching from the Horn of Africa across the Arabian Peninsula to Central Asia. Its mission from the outset has been focused on two conflated elements of contemporary US foreign policy: ‘military’ and ‘economic’ security interests. CENTCOM’s strategy papers, operational statements and annual reports to Congress have perennially scripted necessary military interventionism in the name of securing the global economy. From the first deployment of CENTCOM forces in 1987, in showing what President Ronald Reagan called a commitment to “the free flow of oil through the Strait of Hormuz”, to the Gulf War, Iraq War and ongoing War on Terror, the most important command of the US military has perennially likened itself as the “Guardian of the Gulf”, tasked with safeguarding the free market global economy (Palmer 1992:122). Below, I trace the idea of the necessary military regulation of the global economy at the heart of CENTCOM’s securitization discourse.

I outline, in particular, how enabling markets and commercial openings were central to CENTCOM's grand strategy from the beginning. I wish to divulge too, however, the rhetorical and nebulous nature of CENTCOM's declared mission of global political economic regulation. The accrued benefits to the global economy are impossible to chart, and hence CENTCOM's reliance on vaguer, yet promissory, logics about 'keeping the global economy open'. My aim is to trouble this neat discursive touchstone, to demonstrate its abstracted formulation over the course of 30 years, and to ask questions of simplified envisionings of military-industrial relations in a period marked by globalization and new forms of capitalist accumulation.

### **Goeconomic critique**

What precisely does it mean to speak about goeconomics? While a visiting fellow at CUNY Graduate Center in 2007 and 2008, I had a number of wide-ranging conversations around the term with Neil Smith. I recall much of those conversations now with both fondness and a deep sense of loss. There is much that Neil had planned to work on in his later years, and certainly one key project he recognised was rejuvenating a critical Marxist perspective on contemporary forms of imperialism and geopolitics. Neil had long argued for a more sustained engagement with the political economy of imperialism in the evolving canon of 'critical geopolitics' that emerged in the 1990s (see, for example, Smith 2000). He pointed to the earlier economic foci of Marxist critiques that were largely ignored. There is, of course, a rich heritage of Marxist analyses of imperialism and global capitalism, which in the US was spearheaded by leading figures including Paul Baran, Harry Magdoff and Paul Sweezy (Baran 1957; Baran and Sweezy 1966; Magdoff 1969; Sweezy 1972). With the establishment of Monthly Review Press, all three were instrumental in the emergence of a radical tradition of leftist academic writing from the early 1950s, a period dominated by the conservative political and intellectual climate of McCarthyism.<sup>1</sup> The current editor of the press, John Bellamy Foster, continues to oversee a strong tradition of Marxist scholarship, while his own work prominently draws upon Marx's historically conditioned analysis in interrogating the dynamism of contemporary forms of capitalism.<sup>2</sup>

At the core of the Marxist critique of imperialism is what Lenin called "the fundamental economic question". Writing in Petrograd in 1917, Lenin wrote that without grasping the "economic essence of imperialism" it is "impossible to understand

and appraise modern war and modern politics” (Lenin 1999:26). Certainly, the economic endgame of late modern imperialism has been critically considered by political geography, with many important contributions emphasising the economic dimensions of global geopolitics (Flint and Taylor 2011; Harvey 2003; Smith 2008; Sparke 2013).<sup>3</sup> Various drawing on the work of Immanuel Wallerstein on world-systems theory, Andre Gunder Frank on dependency theory and Antonio Gramsci on hegemony, political geographers have, in particular, critiqued US hegemony in the contemporary global economy (Agnew and Corbridge 1995; Taylor 1996; cf. Arrighi 2010). And although not always acknowledged, the collective work above is an important forbear to recent work on ‘geoeconomics’ and its concerns for teasing out the patterns of capitalist accumulation defining our contemporary moment.

In considering the extant literature, there is a particular overlap of work on geoeconomics to world-systems theory or world-systems analysis (WSA). WSA has been challenged in various capacities, but geographers have shown how the insistence on contextualised geographies in world-systems theory has been useful in articulating a spatial mode of analysis of the world economy (Flint and Shelley 1996; cf. Wallerstein 1979). Its definition of ‘core’ and ‘periphery’ has often problematically veered into the realm of overly abstracted metanarrative (inevitable perhaps in articulating a grand theory), but its insistence upon the global economy’s unequal asymmetries, maintained and extended by exploitative flows between core and periphery is perhaps WSA’s most salient contribution to critically reading political economy (Flint 2010). WSA conceives a spatiality of imperialism comprising inequalities between core and periphery in the world economy, and certainly there is an imperial dimension to what I present in this paper as CENTCOM’s project of geoeconomic deterrence. However, notions of ‘core’ and ‘periphery’ do not fully capture the nebulous and messy endgame of CENTCOM’s security mission in a world increasingly marked by globalization, corporate capitalism and transnational capitalist accumulation.

Departing from WSA’s concerns with core and periphery, my use in this paper of the concept of ‘geoeconomics’ is to argue for the need to tease out the geographical specificities of commercial opportunities and enterprise enabled by the practices of military interventionism typifying late modern capitalism. My usage of the concept is ultimately twofold. I am interested in the first instance in geoeconomics as a ‘strategic discourse’. Mona Domosh has documented what she terms a “geoeconomic

imagination” at the heart of liberal thinking on “America’s benevolent role” in global affairs (2013:962). As she makes clear, geoeconomic imaginings have long coexisted with geopolitical formulations in US national security discourse, and in this paper I show how CENTCOM’s contemporary mission is predicated by a geoeconomic imagination replete with universalist claims about guarding the free-market global economy. Secondly, I outline how CENTCOM’s security mission seeks to facilitate geoeconomics in practice on the ground in the form of commercial markets (cf. Essex 2013; Palmer 1992). I am interested especially in its territorial tactics of military-economic securitization, and their attendant legal armatures, which enable the key operational strategy of ‘deterrence’, which I explore in some detail.

Neil Smith’s particular preference for the term ‘geoeconomic’ in his later academic career came in part, I think, from a sense of frustration with poststructuralist approaches to geopolitics that tended to elide concerns of political economy. Some of this sentiment was expressed in his 2009 *Antipode* piece with Deb Cowen, in which they put forward “geoeconomic spatiality” as a key concept in critically considering contemporary political geography (Cowen and Smith 2009:25). Drawing upon Cowen’s work on border security, they use the term to emphasise how contemporary configurations of “space, power and security” in the global economic system are being “recalibrated by market logics” (2009:24-25). They begin by outlining how their employment of the term ‘geoeconomic’ departs from Edward Luttwak’s usage in his oft-cited 1990 article in *The National Interest*. In optimistically predicting an end to “military methods” of statecraft, Luttwak reasoned that “economic regulation” had become a more important “tool of statecraft” than “military defenses”, and declared “geo-economics” as superseding the “strategic priorities and strategic modalities” of the Cold War era (1990:17-19). Luttwak’s argument had a number of fatal flaws, of course, which Cowen and Smith make clear. Their most important rejoinder is perhaps their insistence on “the geographical unevenness and radical incompleteness” of the globalized geoeconomic world envisioned by Luttwak (Cowen and Smith 2009:38).

It is the negation of the enduring import of geography and borders that is arguably most spurious in Luttwak’s envisioning of his neoliberal geoeconomic world. And although Cowen and Smith do a wonderful job of laying bare the abstracted essentialism of Luttwak’s argument and insisting upon the dialectics and contradictions wrought by contemporary forms of capitalism, my sense is that they did not sufficiently depart from one specific aspect of Luttwak’s thesis, and that relates to

the question of territory and territorial access. Here is a key distinction they draw respecting 'geopolitics and territory' versus 'geoeconomics and territory':

"Where geopolitics can be understood as a means of acquiring territory towards a goal of accumulating wealth, geoeconomics reverses the procedure, aiming directly at the accumulation of wealth through market control. The acquisition or control of territory is not at all irrelevant but is a tactical option rather than a strategic necessity" (Cowen and Smith 2009:42).

Cowen and Smith are instructive in seeing "territorial borders" as historically representing "a solution to security projects", whereas today posing "a key problem" (2009:30). But I wonder whether territorial access is just a "tactical option", rather than a "strategic necessity" for contemporary forms of imperialism? As I will argue later, CENTCOM's mission in the Middle East and Central Asia has increasingly relied upon what the US military call 'forward presence' to secure vital 'land nodes' and 'choke points', which facilitate practices of deterrence and securitization. Cowen and Smith's paper is important in capturing the contradictions posed by the mechanisms of security defining our contemporary moment. They are especially compelling in showing how "market power and prerogative" have increasingly directed new forms of imperialism overseas (2009:30). But I hope that addressing the question of territorial access will aid in further documenting the specific modalities of imperial interventionism we are witnessing in late modern capitalism. In highlighting CENTCOM's territorial, naval and aerial tactics of 'geoeconomic deterrence', my aim is to attend to the binding of military and economic security concerns and practices of securitization that require and involve specific forms of territorial access and governing legal armatures (for a fuller discussion on the latter, see Morrissey 2011c).

### **A short historical geography of US intervention in the Gulf**

Stretching back to the early nineteenth century, the United States has projected a range of commercial, military and geopolitical interests in the Middle East. Initially, the Middle East offered what Michael Palmer (1992:1) calls "an open field for American capital and industry", which was gradually built up despite British colonial dominion across the region. As Palmer has shown, by the 1920s and 1930s, "American corporations fueled the region's development" (1992:19). To secure this commercial

activity and growing economic interests in the region, the US increasingly assumed Western geopolitical and military leadership with the decline of Britain as a colonial power – particularly so after World War Two, and with acute urgency in the later 1970s in the aftermath of a range of regional political and economic crises (Morrissey 2011b). 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. 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. CENTCOM quickly assumed the role of "Guardian of the Gulf" (Palmer 1992), but it is important to remember that this did not come about in the absence of support from European and other industrial powers such as Japan. There were consistent calls for greater US military leadership in the Middle East from the major industrial powers from the 1970s: a broad neoliberal concern established the Trilateral Commission in 1973 to foster closer economic cooperation between the US, Europe and Japan; British and French war ships were rushed to the Indian Ocean in the late 1970s in support of potential US naval intervention in the Persian Gulf; and the US strategy of reflagging Kuwaiti oil tankers with American ensigns was fully supported politically at the G7 Summit in Venice in 1987 at the height of the so-called Tanker War (Gamlen 1993; Gold 1988).

The US naval presence in the Persian Gulf remained through the later 1980s and its ground presence was to intensify in the aftermath of the Gulf War. Six months prior to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, CENTCOM Commander-in-Chief General Norman Schwarzkopf issued his posture statement to the Senate Armed Services Committee. It is highly revealing:

"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).



In essence, Schwarzkopf had pre-scripted the imminent Gulf War for the US Congress and American people. His command's geoeconomic mission to protect vital US interests in the Gulf 'required' intervention. CENTCOM's subsequent success in its execution of the war confirmed it in its role as "Guardian of the Gulf", and in the war's aftermath a number of CENTCOM-commissioned studies promoted a focused mission for the command thereafter, largely defined around two concepts: "critical economic interests" and "forward deterrence of regional rivals" (Lesser 1991; Pelletiere and Johnson II 1992).

The aftermath of the Gulf War saw the beginnings of a new period in US global ambition, which certainly intensified post-9/11, as Neil Smith has argued, but the seeds were planted through the course of the 1990s. A permanent ground presence of CENTCOM forces started to take shape across the Arabian Gulf, bilateral treaties confirming access sites, logistics sites, free-trade agreements and arms sales were signed with various Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, and a comprehensive weapons pre-positioning programme mirrored an active deterrence policy of military policing in the region (Morrissey 2009, 2011c). Through the course of the 1990s, the command's "mission and vision" were "clear" according to the then Commander-in-Chief General James Peay: "US CENTCOM supports US and free-world interests" (Binford Peay III 1995a:8, 10). To this end, the command's "theater strategy" was equally clear: "maintaining the free flow of oil at stable and reasonable prices" and "ensuring freedom of navigation and access to commercial markets" (Binford Peay III 1995a:2).

### **Geoeconomic deterrence**

David Harvey argues in *The New Imperialism* that contemporary US imperialism "arises out of a dialectical relation between territorial and capitalistic logics of power" and can be understood most clearly with the realisation that the "endless accumulation of capital" produces "crises within the territorial logic because of the need to create a parallel accumulation of political/military power" (2003:183). The US military overseas has played an important role in opening up access to commercial markets for some time, as evidenced above for CENTCOM. I do not wish to frame, however, any neat relationship between the US military, on the one hand, and the economic actors its activities serve, on the other. Certainly, there appears no straight-forward 'national' correlation of military-industrial relations, which existed to some degree during the

Cold War but increasingly less so in the globalized world of multinational corporations and dynamic transnational capital today.

CENTCOM's emergence in the globalized context of late modern capitalism meant that its operational strategy came to be defined by a deterrence policy underpinned by a dialectic of coercion and consent (Harvey 2003; cf. Harcourt 2012). In 1997, General James Peay explained the command's deterrence policy thus to the House Appropriations Committee Subcommittee on National Security:

"we know from experience that [Middle Eastern] leaders are intimidated by military strength [and] consequently we deter these individuals by continuing to organize, equip, and exercise premier joint and combined forces; [and] positioning a credible mix of those forces forward in the region" (US Central Command 1997a).

So what does deterrence look like in practice? Here is General Peay elaborating on CENTCOM's day-to-day theater strategy:

"Every day, sailors and marines [...] show the flag daily conducting frequent naval exercises to demonstrate American naval prowess to friend and foe, enforcing freedom of navigation in narrow channels and vital choke points, and rappelling in the middle of the night onto rolling decks of merchant ships to enforce U.N. economic sanctions against Iraq. Over 12,000 such hoardings have been carried out since August 1990. The sailors and marines are joined by airmen secur[ing] the skies over southern Iraq [...] More than 48,000 sorties have flown over southern Iraq since August 1992" (Binford Peay III 1995a:6).

Between the end of the Gulf War and beginning of the Iraq War, CENTCOM was effectively on a permanent war footing, a point rarely acknowledged. Its overseeing of the Joint Task Force Southwest Asia's implementation of Operation Southern Watch ensured the Iraqi no-fly zone that regulated airspace south of the 32nd Parallel (extended further north, just south of Baghdad, to the 33rd Parallel in 1996). In addition to aerial deterrence, naval deterrence in the Persian Gulf and regional ground deterrence have also been core elements of the command's operations since the early 1990s. For the latter, manoeuvres such as Operation Vigilant Warrior, Operation Desert Spring, and wargame exercise Internal Look, involved frequent mobilisations of ground troops and military equipment, resulting in a "near continuous presence"

surrounding the Iraqi border to “deter conflict, promote stability, and facilitate a seamless transition to war, if required” (US Central Command 1997b, 5).

Deterrence relies on territorial access, and in the case of CENTCOM it has long been, to reverse Cowen and Smith’s broader assertion, “a strategic necessity” rather than a “tactical option” (2009:42). Deterrence was central to CENTCOM’s theater strategy in the later 1990s, and its universalist legitimacy was repeatedly affirmed by CENTCOM Commanders-in-Chief in their annual reports to Congress. In 1999, for instance, CENTCOM Commander-in-Chief General Anthony Zinni asserted that the “ability to project overwhelming and decisive military power is key to CENTCOM’s theater strategy” (US Central Command 1999a; cf. Ullman et al. 1996). Its chief strategy document from 1999 further underlined deterrence as the central means of carrying out its security mission, involving a range of core elements, from air, ground and naval manoeuvres, joint military exercises and war gaming, to the initiation of prepositional programs, infrastructure improvements and access and logistic sites development (US Central Command 1999b; see especially pages 9-13).

Daily deterrence activities across CENTCOM’s regional ‘Area of Responsibility’ (AOR) include: “monitoring and analyzing significant military, political and economic events”; “planning and conducting unit and combined (foreign) military exercises and operations”; and “refining deployment and contingency plans for the region” (US Central Command 2007). The latter concern, refining deployment and contingency plans, is wholly dependent on CENTCOM’s basing strategy, which includes “Forward Operating Sites”, “Cooperative Security Locations”, and the “contingency use of ports and airfields throughout its AOR”; all of which are systematically developed “to assure U.S. access” and legally enabled by the ongoing negotiation of ‘status of forces agreements’ with host countries (Global Security 2015; cf. Morrissey 2011c). Arguably, CENTCOM’s most important concern is ‘rapid deployability’, a concept prominently proclaimed more broadly by the DoD with the publication of the *Global Defense Posture Review* in 2004. Within the review, “bilateral and multilateral legal arrangements” sanctioning and facilitating territorial access and freedom of movement are underscored as critical for the “necessary flexibility and freedom of action to meet 21st-century security challenges” (US Department of Defense 2004:8). The rapid deployment concept has earlier origins than its official policy codification in 2004, of course. From the early 1980s, it was regularly touted in Strategic Studies circles as crucial in the reorganisation of the US military to orientate optimum interventionary

power, and particularly so in the Middle East. In the geopolitically precarious yet geoeconomically pivotal space of the “Central Region”, the argument has long been made for the rapid military regulation of access to resources and free markets (Epstein 1981; Record 1981; Waltz 1981).

Sketching its deterrence mission via a distinctly geoeconomic imagination, CENTCOM 1997 Posture Statement began with the following assertion: “[t]he unrestricted flow of petroleum resources from friendly Gulf states to refineries and processing facilities around the world drives the global economic engine” (US Central Command 1997c, 1). In the same year, CENTCOM Commander-in-Chief General James Peay declared to the House Appropriations Committee Subcommittee on National Security that his command’s mission was critical to a successfully functioning global economy, as any disruption to the flow of oil from the Persian Gulf would “precipitate economic calamity for developed and developing nations alike” (US Central Command 1997a). His successor, General Anthony Zinni, was equally clear in underlining the Central Region’s pivotal geoeconomic importance:

“America’s interests in [the Central Region] reflect our beliefs in access to free markets [...] The vast quantities of oil, gas, and other resources present in the gulf region, which includes 69 percent of the world’s known oil reserves plus significant natural gas fields, are essential to today’s global economies” (US Central Command 1998).

In a subsequent interview to *Joint Force Quarterly*, Zinni pointed out the “obvious” consideration underpinning CENTCOM theater strategy:

“Our theater strategy is built [on] four elements. The first is obvious – providing access to the energy resources of the region, which is a vital national interest. The second element is something often overlooked – the growing commercial significance of the area. The pattern of global trade is shifting from east to west. Investments are flowing into the region because of its geostrategic position. The third is the number of maritime choke points in the region, such as the Suez Canal and Strait of Hormuz. We must ensure these passages remain open to communication and trade. Fourth, there are issues of stability – the Middle East peace process, extremism, and other concerns” (Joint Force Quarterly Forum 2000:26).

General Zinni underlines above the dual logics of military and economic security at the heart of CENTCOM's mission. In essence, it is a mission of 'geoeconomic deterrence'. His successors at Central Command have continued to champion deterrence thus. General John Abizaid outlined to Congress in 2006, for instance, that his command's AOR "incorporates a nexus of vital transportation and trade routes", "encompasses the world's most energy-rich region" and that his forces were postured to "ensure the flow of global resources and deter hostile powers throughout the region" (US Central Command 2006). It is this effective binary of perpetual geopolitical volatility and necessary geoeconomic deterrence that has been at the heart of CENTCOM's securitization discourse for over three decades. Successive commanders have repeatedly affirmed the command's vital function of policing "stability and security" in a region scripted unrelentingly as "integral to the political and economic wellbeing of the international community" (Binford Peay III 1995b:32). And they have shown a firm awareness too of the pivotal role CENTCOM plays in enabling commercial markets, despite never detailing the far from straightforward relationship between militarisation and markets, a point I return to later.

### **Expeditionary economics and enabling "messy" capitalism**

In 1995, CENTCOM Commander-in-Chief General James Peay delivered the keynote address at the Fourth Annual US Mideast Policymakers Conference. His paper, 'Five pillars of peace: a blueprint for achieving peace and stability in the Central Region', was subsequently published by the US-GCC Corporate Cooperation Committee. This committee had been committed to developing private-sector economics in the Persian Gulf since 1986, with a goal to "promote US-GCC trade, investment, and commercial partnerships, and to raise American awareness of the innumerable benefits to the United States from increased relations with the GCC" (US-GCC Corporate Cooperation Committee 1994). Key companies making up the committee from the beginning included some of the biggest corporations globally such as AT&T, Exxon, Ford, General Dynamics, Lockheed, Mobil, Oracle, Parsons Corporation, Philip Morris, and Raytheon. In the foreword to 'Five pillars of peace', the secretary of the US-GCC Corporate Cooperation Committee, John Duke Anthony (himself an influential commentator since the 1970s on US commercial opportunities in the Gulf), enthusiastically heralded the success of CENTCOM's mission through the 1990s in the securitization of the Persian Gulf:

“Countless millions witnessed how CENTCOM was front and center in the internationally concerted action to end the threats that these conflicts posed to regional and global well-being” (Binford Peay III 1995a:iv).

Here is CENTCOM Commander-in-Chief Peay subsequently elaborating on both the “geopolitical dynamics and threats” and “array of commercial activities” in the region:

“Maintaining security and stability in the Gulf region is integral to the economic well-being and political stability of the entire world. Sixty-five percent of the world's proven oil reserves are located in the region, from which the U.S. imports 22% of its energy resources, Western Europe imports 43%, and Japan imports 68% [...] This oil trade produces 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 1995a:2).

The scripting of goeconomic opportunities and their necessary military securitization has consistently underpinned CENTCOM's grand strategy, and the command continues to annually document to Congress its goeconomic deterrence role in what it has been calling since the mid-2000s its “long war” in the Middle East and Central Asia. A recent posture statement to Congress underlines yet again what will “keep U.S. attention anchored in this region”: “oil and energy resources that fuel the global economy” (US Central Command 2013). Some have argued that the US military's broader goeconomic role needs to be extended even further. In May 2010, a notable *Foreign Affairs* article was published by US economist Carl Schramm entitled ‘Expeditionary economics: spurring growth after conflicts and disasters’. In it, Schramm makes a series of impassioned pleas for the US to take seriously the import of post-conflict economic reconstruction and to task the military with what he sees as a global economic responsibility:

“It is imperative that the U.S. military develop its competence in economics. It must establish a new field of inquiry that treats economic reconstruction as part of any successful three-legged strategy of invasion, stabilization or pacification, and economic reconstruction. Call this ‘expeditionary economics’” (Schramm 2010:90).

For Schramm, although the US record of ‘expeditionary economics’ in Afghanistan and Iraq is poor, its military is nonetheless “well placed to play a leading role in bringing economic growth to devastated countries” because, despite having “little resident economic expertise”, it has “both an active presence and an active interest in places where economic growth is sorely needed” (2010:91). Schramm sees capitalism as necessarily “messy”, and appears oblivious to, or uninterested in, its human geographical effects: “a successful entrepreneurial system requires a willingness to accept messy capitalism even when it appears chaotic, trusting that the process will eventually bring sustained growth” (2010:98). He is a leading champion of entrepreneurship (he is the former President and CEO of the Kauffman Foundation, the world’s largest foundation dedicated to entrepreneurship), and although he acknowledges that entrepreneurial capitalism is disordered and unstable he ultimately argues that a broader econocentric approach to US military interventionism would be the “most potent way of projecting soft power” in its long war of neoliberal securitization (2010:99). He is not alone, of course, in his envisaging of an expanded role of military-economic securitization for the US armed forces overseas, nor is his argument particularly new. From Jeffrey Record’s treatises on expeditionary “rapid deployment” in the 1980s through to the current abstracted visions of Robert Kaplan, one can trace a now familiar arc of aggressive US geopolitical and geoeconomic discourse, which has been hegemonically advanced by a plethora of strategic studies institutes in and around Washington, DC (Kaplan 2012; Record 1981; cf. Fernández 2011; Morrissey 2011a).

Soon after the publication of Schramm’s piece in *Foreign Affairs*, the Kauffman Foundation published an inaugural research series paper ‘Building expeditionary economics: understanding the field and setting forth an agenda’ (Patterson and Stangler 2010). The authors begin by asking what they see as a vital question: what to do with the interventionary capacity of the contemporary US military. Citing primarily “the Marshall Plan in Europe” and the “postwar rebuilding of Japan”, they argue for an expansion of “stability operations” and urge that this must take place in conjunction with private sector development that will coalesce to yield a fruitful “military-private sector partnership” (Patterson and Stangler 2010:15-16). Their conclusion implicitly signals the enduring dialectic of crisis and opportunity at the heart of capitalism:

“Expeditionary Economics must be a key component of our national strategy to turn conflict or disaster abroad into an opportunity for sustained economic growth. That the success of past military engagements was often only a qualified one is due largely to the missing component of economic recovery” (2010:17).

Not everyone agrees with the US military being tasked with “economic” stability operations, or trust to their competencies to this end. Responding to Schramm’s (2010) article, the then Chair of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Congressman Howard Berman, argued that it is “civilian, not military, forces” that “should lead in this regard”:

“What is needed, instead of a military doctrine of ‘expeditionary economics’ is a civilian-led peacebuilding corps that can operate in conflict zones and help local communities lay the foundations for robust economic growth” (Kaufman and Berman 2010:175-176).

Yet liberal notions of spurring economic growth and enabling economic opportunity still implicitly foregrounds such pleas for civilian-led developmental interventionism. And as Mark Duffield has shown so well, the development-security nexus of our contemporary moment is far from bereft of capitalist intervention in the seemingly permanent insecurity of unending war (Duffield 2001, 2007; cf. Klein 2007).

Alexander Benard, Managing Director of Gryphon Partners, an advisory and investment firm focused on the Middle East and Central Asia, recently called for the US to embrace “commercial diplomacy” as a key element of foreign policy:

“For too long now, Washington has almost entirely neglected commercial diplomacy, ceding too many economic battles to China. The United States needs to find a happy medium in which business promotion again becomes a strong pillar of its foreign policy” (Benard 2012).

Others go even further. Jason Thomas, Director of Majorca Partners, a human terrain specialist company, calls for “a strategic partnership between multi-national corporations and the US military” in future interventions, citing specifically the “extractive industries” sector as the ideal partners as they have “the financial capacity, long project time frames and deep footprints in a foreign country’s local and national political landscape required” (Thomas 2012). Thomas goes on to offer a tendentious



postscript on any legal and political checks on the US military's "entrepreneurial mindset":

"if we can hold back the legal and political affairs departments, who are an anathema to disruptive thinking, then we may enable the US military to recalibrate their own efforts and resources across a wider AO [Area of Operation]. Given the US military is one of the most adaptable in the world, with an entrepreneurial mindset there may be merit in factoring this new partnership into current or future stability operations" (Thomas 2012).

### **The US military and commercial opportunity in the long war**

The US military's "entrepreneurial mindset" has long been encouraged and supported by expertise in strategic planning and operational infrastructure with close links to industries that have a vested interest in US interventions overseas. Defense Acquisition University, for instance, was established in 1992 at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, in close proximity to the Pentagon, with a mission to educate professionals in support of the US armed services. It now houses an Acquisition Community Connection Practice Center where "the defense acquisition workforce meets to share knowledge" and access portals to a wide range of expertise on, for instance, "contingency contracting", "joint rapid acquisition", "overseas contingency operations", and "risk management" (Defense Acquisition University 2015a). The "joint rapid acquisition" site, for example, is dedicated to "the assessment, validation, sourcing, resourcing, and fielding of operationally driven urgent, execution-year combatant commander needs" (Defense Acquisition University 2015b). All of this forms part of a broader knowledge assemblage emphasising innovation, flexibility and rapidity, and involving the quickening of capitalist accumulation for a wide range of attendant military industries.

Other important military-industrial links include those facilitated by the US Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Logistics and Materiel Readiness), which hosts, for example, an annual "Materiel Readiness Product Support Manager Conference" – a three-day conference that engages with "government officials, industry executives, and academia on integrating government and industry for improved product support processes and procedures" (US Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense 2013). In 2012, the keynote speakers were Lou Kratz, Vice-President at Lockheed Martin and Sue Dryden, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense. Another key paper in 2012 was presented by Jim Farmer from the Logistics and Materiel Readiness Office on 'rapid

acquisition', which he had earlier likened to the "'Wild Wild West' of acquisition" in a "reactive world" in which "the logistician must never waiver from his proactive stance" (Farmer 2012:46). And there are a wide range of reports on the success of rapid acquisition for efficient and accelerated security operations (cf. Romero 2012; Vinch 2012; Weigelt 2009).

The kinds of validations above of accelerated US interventionary power are part of a broader discourse that binds rapid acquisition with flexible force deployment for enhanced military and economic security. There is a wide array of defense companies and strategic studies experts promising this endgame. Retired US Army Colonel Douglas Macgregor, for example (who centrally advised CENTCOM Commander-in-Chief General Tommy Franks for the offensive strike on Iraq in 2003), urges "American political and military leaders" to finally break with "the industrial age paradigm of warfare" by building a "21st-century scalable 'Lego-like' force design", which would not only facilitate a "more efficient and integrative [use of] manpower and resources", as Macgregor appeals (2011:22), but would also, of course, open up new opportunities for defense companies like Burke-Macgregor Group where Macgregor is now Executive Vice-President. Burke-Macgregor Group support "national security and economic prosperity objectives" by partnering with "federal and state governments to identify innovative co-evolution of concepts and technologies" and working with "select domestic and international commercial partners to capture the resulting evolving market opportunities" (Burke-Macgregor Group 2015a). In seeking to lead that market, they anticipate "future conflicts" to revolve "around the competition for energy, water, food, mineral resources and the wealth they create", and advocate that in "this volatile setting, the alternative to direct American military intervention must include the use of commercial partnerships to resolve conflicts and disputes through economic development" (Burke-Macgregor Group 2015b).

The broad link between the US military and powerful defense contractors has long been known. What has been less clear is the extent of overlap of influential former high-ranking military officers such as Macgregor above. Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington (CREW) recently published a detailed examination of this so-called "revolving door" phenomenon. In an extensive report, they interrogated the top 100 federal defense contractors in the US, and revealed that "70 percent (or 76 of the 108) of three- and four-star generals and admirals who retired between 2009 and 2011 took jobs with defense contractors or consultants" (CREW 2012:1). They also

found that in 2011 alone the DoD spent over \$100 billion on contracts with the five largest defense contractors: Boeing, General Dynamics, Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, and Raytheon. Between 2009 and 2011, many of the top-level retiring generals and admirals took positions with these five companies and some “continue to advise the Pentagon” (CREW 2012:2). Tellingly too, 68 percent of lobbyists for the top five contractors had previously worked for a federal agency or Congress (and many had worked for the pivotally important House or Senate Appropriations Committees) (CREW 2012:5).

CREW’s research reveals the extent of the Pentagon’s revolving door, in which retired officers and former federal government employees capitalize on their years of service by taking leading and lucrative positions in the defense industry. The aforementioned former Commanders-in-Chief of CENTCOM, John Abizaid, James Peay and Anthony Zinni are all cases in point: Abizaid is on the board of directors at Defense Venture Group, a portfolio company of J.F. Lehman & Company, a leading private equity investment firm in the defense, aerospace and maritime industries; while Peay and Zinni are directors at BAE Systems Inc., the US component of one of largest defense contractors in the world. The posture statements of Abizaid, Peay and Zinni for CENTCOM over the last 20 years, variously cited through the course of this paper, reveal how they have been especially conscious of the dual military-economic remit of their security mission. Who better then to advise the defense industry on the military infrastructural delivery of commercial opportunities in the ongoing wars of late modern capitalism?

## Conclusion

“The whole language of a war on terrorism is a pernicious cloak, deploying all the liberal tropes of a beneficent global universalism to hide the narrow self-interest of a transnational ruling class which has its command center in the United States [...] the point about this war is that it continues more than it breaks from the ambitions of US globalism. It is above all a geo-economic not a geopolitical war” (Smith 2003b:251, 265).

In this paper, I have sought to show how the military enabling of geoeconomic opportunities has been a key element of US foreign policy over the last 30 years. Critically considering how US global ambition centrally involves a geoeconomic

interventionary imagination prompts us to see how corporations and the military coalesce in the strategic and technological enactment of military-economic securitization. The quickening of commercial opportunities is being repeatedly promised in a long, seemingly unending war of securitization (Duffield 2007; Morrissey 2011b). This 'long war' requires "21st-century scalable 'Lego-like' force design", "rapid acquisition", "rapid deployment", and "a willingness to accept messy capitalism" to "capture the evolving market opportunities" (Burke-Macgregor Group 2015a; Macgregor 2011; Schramm 2010; US Department of Defense 2004; Vinch 2012). How much of this is actually new is debatable, of course. Through the paper, I have highlighted how such calls merely mirror a long-established CENTCOM grand strategy of military-economic securitization, orientated for the geoeconomic shaping of the most energy-rich region on earth. But the question remains what is the geoeconomic endgame? What kind of capitalism, in essence, is CENTCOM supporting through its forward presence and deterrence practices? And in whose interests is deterrence enacted at such an enormous annual human and financial cost? This cost is one that we sometimes forget is being paid for maintaining a standing overseas military force vaster than any nation in the era of high colonialism.

In seeking to answer the questions above, Neil Smith's work and spirit has long inspired many. His unrelenting and incisive critique of US imperialism has been one of his most vital intellectual and political contributions. His insistence on revealing the historical political economy of empire at the heart of contemporary US interventionism has been particularly important, an argument he brilliantly theorized in *American Empire* (Smith 2003a). In that book, Neil charted three moments of US global ambition over the last century, and in this paper I have extended back the starting point for the third moment to a period in the 1990s when CENTCOM became fully operational in the military-economic securitization of the most pivotal region in the global economy. For Smith, the "endgame of globalization" and the high point of this third moment came with the launch of the global war on terror and Iraq War (Smith 2005). These wars confirmed for Smith that although geopolitical calculation and geopolitical discourse still count it would be a mistake to convert US imperial ambition today into "the old language of resource-driven geopolitics" because this would serve to "blind us to the deeper geo-economic aspiration for global control" (Smith 2003a:xiv).

Neil Smith's conceiving of geoeconomics departs in important ways from both earlier Marxist and WSA critiques of the political economy of imperialism and

simplified Luttwakian conceptions of flat-earth globalization. For Smith, contemporary US imperialism is signified best through the concept for arguably two key reasons: first, because of the dynamic modalities of late modern transnational capitalism; and, second, because the concept captures the ambition of imperial control of the global economy rather than simply resources and territory within. There are certainly historical antecedents to this imperial 'geoeconomic imagination' in US foreign policy (Domosh 2013; Sparke 2013), but Smith's insistence on the term has a particular relevancy today in charting the kind of imperialism occurring in a globalized world in which capital is less bounded and fixed. In this paper, I have in part sought to show how CENTCOM's military-economic security mission over the last 30 years illuminates much of Smith's thesis: its interventions from the outset mirrored a commitment to neoliberal capitalism on a global stage that combined the inherent contradictions of "narrow national self-interest" with universalist values of "global good" (Smith 2003a:xii). Accordingly, its core operations have involved fashioning itself in a neoliberal 'world policeman' role in a period of dynamic globalization, and to that end it has employed a deterrence strategy that is explicitly about 'safeguarding the global economy'. The endgame of CENTCOM's mission is 'geoeconomic deterrence', and through this concept I have sought to conceptualise US imperialism today as marked by a grand strategy of shaping 'geographical pivots', controlling 'choke points' and enabling 'commercial opportunities' in a global economic network. Extending Smith's argument further, I have sought to underline too the enduring import of military, territorial access as a tactical and strategic necessity for US global ambition. 'Territory' for CENTCOM is not important in the sense of older imperial requirements of territorial control. Rather, its primary mission of deterrence is dependent upon a necessary level of territorial access that is sanctioned and enabled via specific legal constellations confirming access rights, operational limits and rules of engagement (Morrissey 2011c).<sup>4</sup>

For the past 30 years, a period marked by dynamic globalization, CENTCOM's grand strategy has consistently held fast to a commitment to neoliberal capitalism and an ostensibly free-market global economy. Loïc Wacquant (2009) makes the point that neoliberalism today typically manifests itself in a centaur-like form, comprising a liberal head and authoritarian body. He has in mind the confines of the state here, and draws extensively on the example of the US. However, his analogy seems equally as useful in considering the extension of US state power in efforts to fashion and secure

neoliberalism on a global scale; involving appeals to neoliberal open markets and the common good on the one hand, but involving, on the other, the same devastating use of imperial violence familiar to any reader of colonial history. There are multiple contradictions in the neoliberal interventionist project, of course, which Neil Smith has long insisted upon: national interventions on a global stage, in the name of national vital interests and global common good, yet ultimately for the securitization of transnational capital. CENTCOM appears to intrinsically trust to the notion of so-called free markets, and it seems oblivious to the contradictions and failures of its self-declared mission to secure them – in part perhaps because such failures necessitate new cycles of military interventionism and economic correction in a seemingly never-ending Western imperial moment. Mary Kaldor and Joseph Stiglitz argue that there is “no longer confidence in the ability of free and unfettered markets to assure economic security”, and moreover that there is “no longer confidence in the ability of the United States to assure the world of its military security, let alone the rest of the world’s security” (Kaldor and Stiglitz 2013:5). I doubt CENTCOM military strategists see it this way. They would no doubt point to military deterrence continuing to provide a vital security blanket in enabling markets in the Middle East and Central Asia. They would perhaps point too to other levels of interventionary power that are important in the relationship between militarisation and market provision, and certainly the signing of free trade agreements, status of forces agreements (often comprising arms sales) and other bilateral agreements are key modalities of goeconomic interventionism that legally frame market relations (Morrissey 2011b).

Ultimately, it is impossible for CENTCOM to disaggregate any national or global economic benefit from its project of goeconomic deterrence and securitization. Instead, it employs grand narrative to signal a broad and rather vague goeconomic *raison d’être*: the guardianship of the global economy and free markets. And although this is unambiguously and repeatedly scripted in its annual posture statements to Congress, what is less clear is how well its ‘goeconomic imagination’ matches with evidence of goeconomics on the ground. In military planning parlance, CENTCOM evidently does ‘tactical’ and ‘operational’ well; its ‘strategic’ level of interventionism, incorporating broader goeconomic designs, however, is perhaps at best aspirational. Hence, there is a danger of abstracting too much from its grand imperial projections – an old postcolonial question, of course. We may take some solace then from Neil Smith’s definitive assessment of US imperialism today, that it mirrors more than ever

the “contradictions inherent” within and that it is “destined to failure” (Smith 2005:182). As Smith frequently defiantly observed, however, we should never fail to see the full picture of that failure: its brutal human consequences and ongoing dialectical repetitions.

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## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> Sweezy's landmark victory for academic freedom at the US Supreme Court did not happen until 1957.
- <sup>2</sup> Bellamy Foster's recent new edition of *The Theory of Monopoly Capitalism* (2014) extends Baran and Sweezy's 1966 thesis on 'monopoly' capitalist accumulation on a global scale, while his co-writing with Robert McChesney has brought important critiques to bear upon the economics of contemporary US imperialism (see, for example, Bellamy Foster and McChesney 2004).
- <sup>3</sup> Although not the focus here, a rich tradition of historical and cultural geography has also addressed the complex and overlapping political, economic and cultural dimensions of imperialism (cf. Lester 2000; Blunt and McEwan 2002; Clayton 2004; Morrissey et al. 2014).
- <sup>4</sup> As Stuart Elden notes, 'territory' as a concept is perhaps best understood as a mode of "spatial organization" that is "dependent on a number of techniques and on the law", which are "historically and geographically specific" (2013: 10). In the case of CENTCOM, its broader military presence in the Middle East and Central Asia is dependent upon an amalgam of specific bilateral legal agreements with nation-states across its AOR, as I have detailed elsewhere (Morrissey 2011c). Despite the perception, furthermore, that borders are less important in our contemporary globalized world, Mary Atkinson (2014) observes the recent phenomenon in the region to secure "[p]orous borders", pointing to a number of Middle Eastern states who are "increasingly turning to construction companies to secure their boundaries".