Cold War Geopolitics

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Swiftly following World War Two, the Cold War between a Soviet-led alliance and an American-led one might appear to be a clearcut case of a continuity with Mackinder's 1904 perspective. In practice, there was the significant intervening stage of the earlier ideological-political contest of 1918-41 between the Soviet Union and a British anti-Communist system.

There was certainly concern about many of the same regions. Thus, from 1944, the British Chiefs of Staff were actively considering post-war threats to the British world. This included concern about the Soviet Union and Chinese Nationalist pressure on British India. For example, the Post-Hostilities Planning Staff produced a map in 1944 about projected Soviet lines of advance against India, a map that looked back to nineteenth-century anxieties. More specifically, this map was consistent with the view in British India that Baluchistan (and the Herat-Kandahar-Khojak-Bolan route) formed India's "front porch", as opposed to the route via Kabul and the Khyber Pass. To the British in 1944, western Afghanistan also formed a kind of pivot on which a Soviet force might turn toward southern Iran and, more particularly, the Straits of Hormuz bottleneck to the entrance to the Persian Gulf (Brobst 2005, 48, 79-83, 95-98), an area that remains of geopolitical significance to this day. So also with British anxiety about Soviet expansion into Persia (Iran), a longstanding issue that looked back to the nineteenth century, and about Soviet intervention in Chinese politics, which had been of major concern in the 1920s. Poland had been a front-line of anti-Soviet effort in 1920.

Theory also played a part. Nicholas Spykman, a Dutch immigrant who was head of the Institute for International Studies at Yale, in his *The Geography of the Peace* (1944), developed an anti-isolationist "Rimland thesis" for America in order to offset what he saw as a dangerous Soviet Union. He died, aged 49, in June 1943, but was already troubled by Soviet power and the prospect of the Soviet's dominating

Eastern Europe. At the same time, confident in the potential of the "Rimland," Spykman emphasised the value of maritime power alongside continental allies, the two necessary in order to prevent the dominance of Eurasia by any one power:

> "The influence of the United States can be brought to bear on Europe and the Far East only by means of seaborne traffic and the power of the states of Eurasia can reach us effectively only over the sea. This is true in spite of the growing importance of air power because the preponderant element in the transport of all but the most specialised items will continue to be the ships that saw the oceans… The United States will have to depend on her sea power communications across the Atlantic and Pacific to give her access to the Old World. The effectiveness of this access will determine the nature of her foreign policy … a continental ally who can provide a base from which land power can be exercised." (Spykman 1944, 25, 57)

This, ironically, suggested a fallacy of his geopolitical argument, because the shift to air power over the next decade was to be dramatic, and was to be shown over the next few decades in the aerial deployment of troops and/or equipment, as by the Western Allies to Berlin in 1948-9, the Soviets into Czechoslovakia in 1968, and American supplies to Israel during the Yom Kippur War in 1973. Furthermore, there was no real threat to the American position at sea until the Soviet Union built up a significant submarine force in the 1970s and 1980s.

Spykman's ideas and arguments continued to be influential beyond the Cold War. Thus, in 2022, Seth Cropsey, a former Deputy Under Secretary of the Navy, arguing the significance of the naval dimension of the Ukraine war, wrote:

> "To paraphrase Nicholas Spykman's idea, Ukraine's Black Sea coast is to the Ukraine war as the rimland is to the Eurasian landmass. Control of Eurasia's coastal regions is essential to control of the interior land; so it is with Ukraine." (Cropsey 2022)

In contrast to Spykman, Mackinder in a 1943 piece in *Foreign Affairs*, presented the Soviet Union as an ally against any German resurgence. It was an instructive aspect of the change in weight between allies that Mackinder's piece appeared in an American journal. Moreover, in terms of discussing the postwar world, it was the Americans who played a more original role than the exhausted British. In part, this contrast reflected the resources and confidence of America, and the determination to ensure that the post-war world did not lead to an international crisis for America comparable to that which had eventually followed World War One, a result attributed, somewhat unreasonably, to a lack of American engagement with the League of Nations, the precursor to the United Nations.

The agreements and policies of 1944-49 initiated by America were designed to produce a global order that would rectify the deficiencies of that after World War One (Neiberg 2015; Sharp 2018, Ill). As with the League of Nations, the United Nations

was supposed to be a universal way to handle flaws in the peace treaties as well as to confront revisionism and new crises. Indeed, this American determination was to be transformed because the post-1945 world rapidly became far more threatening, and was seen as such both in Western Europe and in America.

That also affected Britain although less so in some respects as there was less of an engagement there with the fate of China. Instead, the geopolitics of concern for Britain focused on imperial territories and roles, notably in the Middle East and South Asia. There was therefore a survivalist character to British geopolitics after World War Two. In turn, independence for Britain's South Asian possessions in 1947-48 greatly affected these geopolitics. The nature of British imperial geopolitics changed, not least with the loss of the support of Indian manpower.

Choice was a major element at the time, choice in analysis and choice in response. Indeed, the degree to which geopolitics was a field for debate, rather than a clear-cut prescription, was repeatedly clear with American policy during the Cold War. This involved a whole series of choices, not least in how the world was to be visualised. This was a question not simply of which cartographic projection was to be employed, but also the centring of any projection. Mackinder's generation had very much adopted the Greenwich Meridian, but this process put America toward the margin. A projection centred on America, and on mid-America at that, created a very different impression, as indeed remains the case. So, psychologically, did the view that continents were not necessarily the basic building blocks but, rather, oceans, as in the North Atlantic.

There was a continuity in (some) alliances and (most) bases, but not in the tasking and prioritisation that are central to strategy and that provide the context for geopolitics. Indeed, largely unexpected tasks for America threw areas to the fore, notably South Korea from 1950 and Israel from the late 1960s.

The usual presentation would be very different, focusing not on major changes in American geopolitics, but, instead, on the Cold War as the very goal and means of American policy, with rivalry with the Soviet Union treated as geostrategic as well as ideological, and grafted onto much of the assessment of earlier British policy toward, first, Russia and, then, the Soviet Union. Indeed, there was a continuity in the shape of the major role of Britain in the first Cold War, that with Soviet Communism from 1917 to 1941. Alongside a potent ideological contrast, this role drew on the earlier British rivalry with Russia that had only ended with the entente of 1907, and then had still left a degree of mistrust and competition. Returning from Moscow in March, the British diplomat Frank Roberts saw long-term geopolitical factors, rather than simply Communist ideology, as crucial:

> "There is one fundamental factor affecting Soviet policy dating back to the small beginnings of the Muscovite state. This is the constant striving for security of a state with no natural frontiers and surrounded by enemies. In this all-important respect the rulers and people of Russia are united by a common

fear, deeply rooted in Russian policy, which explains much of the high-handed behaviour of the Kremlin and many of the suspicions genuinely held there concerning the outside world." (The National Archives 1946)

The Cold War would then be discussed in terms of NATO (1949) and the National Security Council's NSC 68 document (1950), and a strategic architecture based on containment would be defined. This was very different to the earlier confidence in air power that was seen immediately after World War One, a confidence that was the rationale for the establishment in 1947 of the United States Air Force (Call 2009).
Containment is very much a geopolitical concept. America in 1941-45 had faced a two-front war but with Germany in no real position to mount an offensive and with that from Japan largely held to the western Pacific. From 1949, America again appeared faced by a two-front challenge, one in Europe with the Soviet Union and in East Asia with Soviet allies. America's alliance system and bases represented a forward commitment that had been present prior to Pearl Harbor, notably with the American position in the Philippines, but that had not been so central to American strategy. However, in 1940-41, the path to war in part was seen with American actions in response to Axis expansionism. What would happen from 1949 was unclear.

Containment as a concept that was to be applied in American policy and strategy received its intellectual rationale in an 1947 article in *Foreign Affairs* by "Mr X," George Kennan, the acting head of the American diplomatic mission in Moscow. The emphasis on inherent Soviet antagonism under Stalin in Kennan's "long telegram" of February 22, 1946 had an impact in Washington and elsewhere and was the basis for the article. In 1947, Kennan became Director of Policy Planning in the State Department.
The concept of containment was far from new, having been advanced in particular by the French after World War One in response to the Soviet threat to Eastern Europe. Moreover, similar geopolitical attitudes and narratives provided a way to manage the transition from British leadership, notably at sea, to American predominance (Wells 2017).

With geopolitics, however, it was not novelty in conceptualisation that was important, but, rather, application. In this case, the key element was arguing that America had a major role to play in containment. In the public debate this was accompanied by a supposed "lesson" from history, namely that an American lack of commitment to European power politics after World War One had led to the failure to restrain Hitler that, in turn, had obliged America to act against Germany in World War Two. As a first state, the prospect of chaos was to be limited by the offer that June of Marshall Plan Aid, an economic aid policy to aid recovery. Marshall, Secretary of State from 1947 to 1949, had earlier sought, in 1945-47, to mediate the Chinese Civil War, which would have brought a stabilisation conducive to American interests. This was an unrealistic and futile goal, in part because countries are not readily deployed units, but nevertheless a goal that was worth trying, in part because the cost in effort was low, and there was no real alternative.

The Cold War was to be presented in large part in terms of spatial threat, notably as perceived by the Soviet Union, being surrounded by NATO and other American allies and bases. Thus, Japan resumed its role as an adjunct of the anti-"Heartland" coalition, with its navy, in its focus on opposition to Soviet submarines, looking to America as it had at one time looked to Britain (Palatano 2015).

There was also an American sense of threat in the shape of the forward projection of Soviet power, notably to Cuba in 1962 and Egypt later in the decade, but also as Soviet bases, for example in Somalia, tested any idea of containment. Thus, the "Global South" played a role in terms of the wider struggle. This spurred American concern about the decline of the Western European empires and the "vacuum" of power that would be followed there by the Soviet Union. The very idea of such a "vacuum" was inherently a spatial one focused on a specific geopolitics. The latter, in the Cold War case, also led to familiar policies, notably keeping allies aligned, enemies weak, and neutrals such as Cambodia to co-operate (Rust 2016).

Yet what containment, and indeed the Cold War, meant for American policymakers was far from fixed. Instead, there was an essential fluidity. This extended to areas and to threats. For example, on January 5, 1957, Eisenhower announced to Congress what was to be termed the Eisenhower Doctrine, permitting the commitment of forces in the Middle East "to secure and protect the territorial integrity and political independence of such nations, requesting such aid against overt armed aggression from any nation controlled by international communism." (Hahn 2006) This might appear clear, but in practice the threat in the Middle East at that point was from Arab nationalism and internationalism, and not from the Soviet Union. Aside from deliberate or unintentional obfuscation about the international situation, one seen later when Iraq was attacked in the post 9/11 "War on Terror," the fluidity in American policy in part arose from domestic political, social and cultural pressures helping cause hostility to foreign powers that were presented as themselves linked to the internally dangerous. As a result, the Cold War has been presented as a socially-constructed development (Hajimu 2015).

This approach underplays the real tensions at the level of the great and other powers across Eurasia; but these tensions and the apparently necessary responses in turn were perceived in a perspective of rising hostility and the related distrust. Moreover, at a functional level, much of the fluidity in perception and policy was due to the degree to which geopolitics does not occur in a one-sided perspective and on a comparable platform, but, instead, involves a response to the moves of opponents and other powers (House 2020). The end of the Western European empires was the key element in the latter, creating, as it did, opportunities and problems aplenty as a range of new states were established. They had opportunities to manoeuvre both between the global blocs and in terms of pursuing regional geopolitical ambitions of their own as with Egypt which had primacy and geopolitical interests across the Arab world.

There was optimism with decolonisation, notably in the shape of growth and social and political development through modernisation, whether American or Communist in its agenda. This was, as it were, an alternative theory and practice to colonialism, imperial control, and conventional geopolitics. Modernisation was regarded as a form of global New Deal, able to create liberal, capitalistic, pro-American democracies.

At the same time, there were the dynamics of threat and fear for the West, and they ensured that the nature and amount of hard power that might be required to accompany international liberalism attracted attention. Thus, by 1950, the Soviet atomic warheads test and Mao Zedong's conquest of China in 1949 had transformed the parameters for American strategy. The pre-emptive action that the possibility of airborne nuclear attack appeared to make necessary (Albertson 2019) provided a new take on geopolitics as the space-time sequence was radically altered. In part this was a matter of the range of aircraft, and the greater practicality of such attack; but, alongside technology, there was also the learned experience of the damage that could be inflicted through surprise attack, in short the prospect of another Pearl Harbor. Indeed, NSC-68, the basic document of containment, was a prime instance of fear driving policy or, at least, of fear as a selling point, within government and towards the population. The Communist bloc had greatly expanded from 1939 to 1949 taking over much of Eurasia, and this posed issues of containment, deterrence and defence.

The weakness of air power had been demonstrated in the Chinese Civil War (1946-49) when the Communists, the side that was weaker in air power, prevailed. In part, this was a reflection of specific Nationalist weaknesses, notably a lack of fuel and spare parts, and poor coordination with troops; but there was also the ability of the Communists to develop the relevant anti-tactics. The latter was a precursor of the situation in the Vietnam War and one to which the Americans devoted insufficient attention. Indeed, at the geo-strategic level, the operational inability to isolate the battlefield by means of air power, one variously seen in Normandy in 1944, in Korea in 1950-53, in Cuba in 1957-58, and in Algeria in 1958-62, undercut the value of strategies proposed in terms of the mass, range and payload of aircraft.

The issues of containment, deterrence and defense were accentuated and brought to the fore in 1950 when, through a Soviet proxy, an attack was launched on South Korea, a state supported by America. In response, in a classic instance of shoring up a system, one that had a political logic, rather than a military one, the NATO Council agreed on December 18, 1950 to a strategy of forward defence which meant holding West Germany against Soviet attack. In turn, this commitment affected planning, deployment, and force requirements, each of which created a dynamic that helped frame a geopolitical context. In America, policymaking, although not always public rhetoric, there was an understanding of the European and East Asia spheres as linked. The need for bases was a key point, but these were now increasingly air force rather than naval, although the latter remained important, as with the continued

significance of Hong Kong and Singapore to British strategy in the Far East: this was geopolitics in a traditional form ([Seah 2019](#)).

In contrast, the rail links that had interested Mackinder were not to the fore. Thus, in plans for strategic nuclear bombing, there was reliance on bases in eastern England for attacking St Petersburg and Moscow, and in Cyprus and northern Iraq for attacking Ukraine and southern Russia. Moreover, American policy toward Spain rested heavily on a defence partnership that included air bases, under a 1953 agreement. Similarly, the role of the bases in the Azores helped to explain why, although also not a democracy, Portugal was a founding member of NATO in 1949. The 1951 defence agreement with Iceland, a democratic NATO member, ensured that America could use the base at Keflavik which it, in turn, paid to develop. These and British air bases were crucial both to the resupply of American forces in NATO, and in providing strategic depth in the event of a Soviet advance into Western Europe that overran extensive territory.

For any such Soviet advance, and such advances were presented in fiction, notably in John Hackett's *The Third World War* (1978), the key target was the massive Rhein-Main Air Base, just south of Frankfurt. The base was America's leading air transport terminal in Europe and of key significance for the American presence in West Germany. As a result, the roads focusing on Frankfurt were rapidly repaired and improved after World War Two by the American occupation forces, which was an instance of the important local impact of infrastructure of air power geopolitics. The American network of bases was not restricted to NATO but also seen in Japan, the Philippines, and with the development of large aircraft carriers.

Politics was very important to this process, with reliable allies, such as Britain and Japan, providing the continuity that vindicated the geopolitics of air bases. Elsewhere, there could be difficulties. Thus, for the Western European empires, the retreat of imperial power and the provision of aircraft to independent air forces were linked to continual influence, notably in basing rights, training, and the provision of spares and maintenance. Thus, the Anglo-Ceylonese 1947 Defense Agreement that was part of the independence process allowed Britain to use the island's naval and air facilities in future emergencies, notably the major harbour at Trincomalee. This agreement lasted until the 1956 Suez Crisis led Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) to abrogate the agreement in a protest against British action.

In turn, concerned about the availability of harbour-bases, British planners planned a new emphasis on carrier-based air power deployed in the Indian Ocean, which encouraged navalists to press for a new generation of large carriers. This was another instance of the strengthened maritime component to geopolitics presented by the air age, one that prefigured submarine-launched ballistic missiles. British interest in power projection was shown by the unrealised proposal for a naval base in Western Australia as well as an integrated Commonwealth Far East fleet ([Gjessing 2018](#)). In

order to provide a nuclear strike capability, American carriers had their flight decks strengthened in the early 1950s, while steam catapults for launching were used from 1951. Aircraft carrying nuclear bombs required more fuel for their greater range and were therefore heavier.

In domestic geopolitical terms, the political, economic and cultural rise of California were all important to air power. Convair, Lockheed, Douglas, and North American aircraft manufacturers were all concentrated in Los Angeles County. The large-scale components industry expanded this geo-economic and geopolitical weight.

Yet, geopolitics is precisely that, not a geographical determination of politics, but a politics that reflects on geography. Thus, the response to the North Korean invasion of South Korea, and later to Chinese intervention, was far from inevitable. There had been indications in the winter of 1949-50 that America did not see South Korea as within its defence line, but in 1950 there was an American response which Kim Il-Sung of North Korea had not anticipated. In turn, the Korean War strengthened the Western alliance and led to American support of Taiwan. Far from being a controlled limited war, this was a conflict that escalated in unexpected ways and where deterrence did not work. Chinese intervention in late 1950 was a key instance of both.

Politics, moreover, should be understood in the widest sense, as including policy formation and differences within government (Path 2020). Thus, in the early 1950s, there was debate in America not so much, as in the late 1940s, about whether it should commit against Communism, but, rather, how far interventionism should extend. There had been talk of the "roll-back" of the Soviets in Eastern Europe. Indeed, during the 1952 elections, the Republicans, some of whom accused the Truman administrations (1945-53) of having "lost" China, had rejected "containment" as too passive, called for roll-back, and spoke of "captive nations" in Eastern Europe. This was a way to present the government as having squandered the legacy of World War Two.

In reality, American policy in Europe was to be much muted. American Cold War policy as a while was defined in 1953 as a result of Project Solarium, named after the Solarium room in the White House where Eisenhower found his Cabinet and government split on the response to Soviet expansionism and NSC 68 inadequate as a guide. As a result, alternative policy evaluations were considered including a more nuclear posture, and containment was reaffirmed. American nuclear strength was to be built up, but measures short of war followed (Pickett 1985); (Mitrovich 2000). The document itself lacked attention to geographical detail, but, nevertheless, alongside the broader emphases on nuclear strength and alliances, made reference to particular geographical areas. There was reference to holding "vital areas and lines of communication" (5) and the protection of "a mobilization base … adequate to insure victory in the event of general war" (6).

Allies were seen as crucial:

"The effective use of U.S. strategic air power against the USSR will require overseas bases on foreign territory for some years to come. Such basis will continue indefinitely to be an important additional element of U.S. strategic air capability and to be essential to the conduct of the military operations on the Eurasian continent in case of general war. (8) … …. Certain other countries, such as IndoChina or Formosa [Taiwan], are of such strategic importance to the United States that an attack on them probably would compel the United States to react with military force either locally at the point of attack or generally against the military power of the aggressor. (9)."

During the Hungarian Crisis of 1956 there was no military response to the Soviet deployment of forces to crush Hungarian independence. Nevertheless, the discussion of options then and earlier was instructive about how the geopolitics of containment, if such a phrase can be used, did not necessarily mean any particular policy. It also encompassed a number of national traditions such as the Christian imperialism of right-wing Portuguese geopolitics. It was also necessary to bring in change through time. Thus, the need for military cuts in the face of financial difficulties, as for the British navy after the two World Wars and in the 1960s does not really correspond to geopolitical arguments. Nor do the related reconceptualization of the goals and means.

The co-existence of specific strategic geopolitics with options, both over the choice between these as well as their implementation, was also the case with emphases on particular fronts of containment. The key instance was the balance in American commitments between Europe and Asia, in so far as each could be reified. This was not a fixed ratio, nor indeed necessarily a matter of "holding the line" in one area such that the situation was stabilised elsewhere: as with the argument today that Taiwan is being protected in Ukraine.

Another key element of choice was provided by the atomic strategy pursued and the relevant force structure (Braithwaite 2018). In particular, there was the question whether it would be appropriate as well as possible to use tactical nuclear weapons while preventing the cataclysm of a strategic-level, all-out nuclear war. As with other aspects of geopolitics, clarity was less obvious than assertion in this case.

The American sense of a "bomber gap" in the mid-1950s followed the identification of Soviet long-range heavy bombers from 1953. This led to a new geopolitics that focused more closely on the polar routes to vulnerability and attack. In America, there was a stepping up of the bomber program, secret aerial reconnaissance of the Soviet Union, and the construction of extensive early-warning radar systems in Canada designed to warn of Soviet attacks over the Arctic: the Pinetree Network in 1954, and the Distant Early Warning (DEW) and Mid-Canada Lines, both in 1957. The North American Air Defense Command, established in 1958, was important to the development of joint air-defense systems involving America and Canada.

In order to attack over the North Pole, America had constructed a base at Thule in northwest Greenland in 1951-52, a base able to stage and refuel American bombers.

The new geopolitics rested not only on weapons technology, notably the deployment from 1955 of the B-52 Stratofortress with its eight Pratt and Whitney J57-P-IW turbojets, its unrefuelled combat range of 3,600 miles, and its payload of thirty tons of bombs. The capabilities were to be enhanced from the late 1950s by aerial refuelling. Constant airborne B-52 alert flights began in 1958 (Yenne 2012). As a reminder of the multiple military technologies involved in geopolitics, the B-52s were complemented by the four American supercarriers built in 1954-58, as some of their aircraft could carry nuclear bombs, albeit over much shorter ranges.

There was also an intellectual mastering of territory, with the possibilities that offered for a differing intensity for geopolitical knowledge. This took place at a number of levels. The SAGE (Semi-Automatic Ground Environment) Air Defense system established in 1958 reflected American investment in new technology and involved the largest computers ever built. SAGE enabled prediction of the trajectory of aircraft and missiles. The Internet was to be developed and funded by the Defense Department's Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) in order to help scientists using large computers to communicate with each other (Abbate 1999). At a different scale, in Western Europe, new all-weather aircraft were embedded in a NATO Air Defense Ground Environment, an early-warning system that layered fighters, long-range nuclear missiles, and short-range tactical surface-to-air missiles.

In theoretical terms, there was a confidence that air power had transformed the situation. Air Marshal Sir John Slessor wrote in 1954:
> "Do not let us be distracted by geopolitical talk about heartlands, which was all very well in Mackinder's day but ceased to be relevant with the advent of the long-range bomber." (Slessor 1954, 34; Slessor 1957, 127)

Specific geopolitical factors were mentioned frequently by American commentators during the Cold War. Two obvious ones were the Domino theory and the argument that the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in 1979 was a threat to the Western position in the Gulf.

The Domino Effect or Theory argued that the fall of one country in Asia to Communism would lead to that of others. President Dwight Eisenhower enunciated the Domino Theory in a press conference on April 7, 1954. Eisenhower was questioned on the strategic importance of Indochina:
> "First of you, you have the specific value of a locality in its production of materials that the world needs.
> Then you have the possibility that many human beings pass under a dictatorship that is inimical to the free world.
> Finally, you have broader considerations that might follow what you would call the 'falling domino' principle. You have a row of dominoes set up, you knock

over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly. So you could have a beginning of a disintegration that would have the most profound influences… the loss of Indochina, of Burma, of Thailand, of the Peninsula [Malaya], and Indonesia following… the geographical position achieved thereby does many things. It turns the so-called island defensive chain of Japan, Formosa [Taiwan], of the Philippines to the southward; it moves in to threaten Australia and New Zealand.

It takes away, in its economic aspects, that region that Japan must have as a trading area or Japan, in turn, will have only one place in the world to go – that is, toward the Communist areas in order to live.

So, the possible consequences of the loss are just incalculable to the free world."
(Office of the Historian 1982; GovInfo 1954)

The image of the Domino theory, one readily taken from a game, an image which was easy to communicate to politicians and public, encouraged the American government to take a greater interest in the course and consequence of the Western retreat from empire. The Communist takeover in China was followed by effective Chinese support for the anti-French insurrection in IndoChina. This led to American financial support for the French. In turn, once the Communists had taken over in North Vietnam in 1954, the Americans were concerned that a failure to support South Vietnam and to neutralise Laos would lead to the further spread of Communism in South-East Asia.

The Domino Theory also lay behind American-backed intervention in Cuba in 1961 in the Bay of Pigs episode, as it was feared that the island would be the basis for the spread of Soviet influence in Latin America. This intervention, and its total defeat at the Bay of Pigs, was also an instance of "roll back" and a warning about its vulnerability; although, looked at differently, there was a failure to provide sufficient force, notably air cover, to this end. Yet again, this discussion underlined the essentially politicised nature of the discussion of geopolitics and the difficulty of applying the concepts without such politicisation.

The Domino Effect was also offered in support of Western commitments in the Mediterranean and Middle East. Thus, American troops were sent to Lebanon in 1958 in response to the Eisenhower Doctrine announced in 1957 in which America promised aid against the spread of Communism. Already, in 1957, assistance had accordingly been provided to Jordan, although the Doctrine was not formally advanced in this case. The American deployment in 1958 was instrumental to the end of the crisis (Hahn 2006). The British deployment of forces to Jordan the same year was part of the same anti-Egyptian stance (Tal 1995), and was followed by military support for Kuwait against Iraqi expansionist claims in 1961. These interventions were both responses to crises in particular countries, and designed to prevent a sequential collapse of pro-Western governments. Thus, Kuwait was seen as the forward-place for the Gulf.

In practice, geopolitical linkages were complex. Thus, as a prime instance of the complex nature of outcomes, the Vietnam War indeed led to the Communist takeover of South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia; but not of Thailand nor Malaysia. At a different level, that of priorities, in 1965-6, during the Vietnam War, America had supported the military overthrow of the left-leaning nationalist government of Indonesia, the setting for the non-aligned 1955 Asia-Africa Conference at Bandung, and its replacement by a pro-Western government. This provided the West with a strategic depth for South-East Asia, and the geopolitical consequences thus of defeat in the Vietnam War were lessened greatly. The extent to which this transition could be readily conceptualised in terms of a movement or thickening of the "Rimland" is more instructive about the difficulties of applying geopolitical ideas.

At the same time, the relative ease with which Indonesia, a large state, the fourth most populous in the world, and one with significant natural resources, notably oil, transformed its affiliations posed a question-mark about the idea of two coherent blocks and also an obvious interplay of "Heartland" and "Rimland." Moreover, as another instance of the same, the Vietnam War was soon followed by Vietnam at war with China and its protégés in Cambodia. This war began with rivalry with the protégés which, in turn, led to a full-scale Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in 1978 to which China replied in 1979 by attacking Vietnam. As in the case of so many geopolitical analyses, it is possible to present this crisis in two lights. One involved China trying to prevent encirclement by the Soviet Union and its Vietnamese protégé. The other was of China also trying to anchor American support by presenting itself as a clear opponent of the Soviet Union (O'Dowd 2007; Zhang 2015).

Indeed, the plasticity of geopolitics was fully demonstrated by the Sino-Soviet split and its consequences. This took precedence over geopolitics focused on the containment of Communism. In part, the Vietnam War provided China and the Soviet Union with the opportunity to pursue and test their rivalry, alongside weakening America or at least committing its forces to what was a diversion as far as China and, even more, the Soviet Union was concerned.

Such diversionary consequences proved difficult to translate to geopolitical models as the latter, notably those of containment, offered little in the form of prioritisation between tasks and opportunities. Indeed, the prioritisation became central to the debate that surrounded the application of the models. The debate sounds more coherent than debates, for, in practice, the habit of contesting priorities and ideas was far from formalised. Again, debate pushed politics to the fore. Moreover, such models said little about the psychological elements that played such a significant role in deciding where to make commitments, and to what extent. An instance in the case of the Kennedy administration (1961-63) was the Catholic anti-Communism that influenced the President, notably in the cases of Cuba and Vietnam. This Catholic anti-Communism was a potent but multi-faceted ideological continuum that operated in many contexts from interwar Europe to Poland in the 1980s.

As such, geopolitics was a part of the total history of the age, and lacked a single trajectory. The latter was sought by the Soviet Union, which saw itself as at the revolutionary forefront, but found itself unable to control the course of developments. This was latent from the outset in the tension between a uni-directional party philosophy and practice, and the frictions offered by a variety of circumstances and by the moves of others.

There was a geostrategic mismatch over Vietnam. The Soviet Union provided aid to the North Vietnamese, notably surface-to-air missiles which increased the risk and cost of using American airpower, but both were modest compared to the American commitment. Convenience played a role. The Americans could intervene in Vietnam as they could not in inland Laos, which had been central to an international crisis in 1962 when America opposed Communist advance. Inland states could attract American intervention as did Afghanistan from 2001, but could also enjoy a measure of protection, as with the Serbian position in Kosovo in 1999. In South Vietnam, the Americans benefited from the major cities being on or near the coast. Ports provided a transoceanic lift that air power could not. At the same time, carriers could offer air power that was closer than land bases in for example Guam and Thailand. This meant that it was easier to replace fuel and weapons load more rapidly. More generally, carriers offered a different geopolitics, one free of concerns about adequate airbases, overflight rights, and maintenance. Aerial refuelling also extended range in a way that changed geopolitical considerations based on simple measures of range.

For political reasons, America could not attack the effective industrial capacity of North Vietnam which was located in China and the Soviet Union. But, the commitment to Vietnam was pushed to the fore in order to show that America could, would and therefore must act, and would not be dissuaded by the difficulties of the task, the use of the conflict as a proxy war and diversionary powers, by the Communist great powers, domestic or international criticism, or the search for a possible political settlement. This was a geopolitics of attitude, which indeed in a prime form of geopolitics.

One significant aspect of the situation was the American refusal to accept the degree to which they shared the space and the initiative with their opponents, and did so in a fashion that varied across Vietnam, with physical and human geographies both playing a role, as they had also done in previous conflicts (Lentz 2019; Jensen and Stith 2019). Indeed, this was a classic instance of conflict as geopolitics, with the latter understood as operating at a different scale to the conventional one. On a model used elsewhere, as in China, there was a determination by the Communists to use violence in order to win social control, weakening opponents by the assassination of their leaders, and other measures of intimidation that ensured that the government forces operated in what in effect was a vacuum. This was a geopolitics of the localities, one, common to insurgencies, in which there was a determination to force the government troops back to their bases and thus create a secure basis for the operation of the insurgents.

This sharing came to the fore with the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Tet offensive of early 1968, a surprise assault that caused major difficulties but was defeated. Again, the latter demonstrated the significance of attitudes. However misleadingly, the offensive contributed greatly, within America, in its alliance system, and more widely, to a sense of crisis in the American world order, a crisis that suggested that America was losing the Cold War and certainly the initiative. Given the significance of impressions to willpower, in this case to a degree geopolitics meant a field of battle, notably the contested city of Hué, that had clear political consequences.

So also, at least in design, with the American air attack on North Vietnam. Again there was a fusion of place and policy, creating a geopolitics that was turned into a strategy. American policymakers, seeking to contain the struggle, were reluctant to pursue the open targeting of an all-out, sub-nuclear, assault. Instead, there was a belief that the measures taken from 1965 could help determine North Vietnamese choices and resolve. That was not in the event the case.

The large-scale American use of aircraft represented a stand-off application of violence which contrasted with the standard aspect of insurrectionary warfare, namely a determination to close any such gaps. This was more generally the contrast between geostrategies involved in asymmetrical warfare.

At the same time, global geopolitics was being totally reshaped by Sino-Soviet struggles. Focusing on the "Third World", Mao Zedong, the Chinese leader, claimed that the real division was between North and South, not West and East, and argued that the Soviet project was like that of the Western powers, that they both pursued imperialism. Border conflict in 1969 made the rift readily apparent and thereby altered global geopolitics for all powers. This greatly complicated the theme of civilisational, or at least essential, struggle between Communist and non-Communist blocs. In turn, the range of Communist strategies now on offer encouraged a sense of flux, one that that accentuated the possibilities for a range of non-Communist strategies, as with West German *Ostpolitik*, a reaching-out for better relations with East Germany, Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union that was intended to bring stability. Thus, the inner-German border between East and West Germany became, in West German eyes, a would-be zone for conciliation as well as confrontation. There were other elements at play including a decreased reliance on America that possibly prefigures current tendencies, and notably if Donald Trump becomes President anew.

In addition, the factor of politics was present at the time with the SPD (Social Democratic Party) under Willy Brandt (r. 1969-74), the first SPD Chancellor of West Germany, seeking better relations with Eastern Europe, a process continued under his SPD successor Helmut Schmidt (r. 1974-82). This was not so much a reaction against the Atlanticism of the previous Christian Democrat Chancellors as a bringing to the fore as well of another tendency in German geopolitics, but in a particular political context. The Russian question has been one for German leaders since the early eighteenth century when the buffers of the Swedish empire and a strong Poland

collapsed in the face of repeated Russian successes. *Ostpolitik* could appear as another iteration of the compromise of Russia, if not, to critics, propitiation, following (very differently) Bismarck, Weimar in the 1920s and (briefly) Hitler; but that was not how it appeared to the SPD leaders.

This situation highlighted the degree to which the period of an apparent clear-cut and clearly formed geopolitical antagonism of the 1950s was exceptional, rather than the norm. This was a theme that was to be exploited by Henry Kissinger, National Security Advisor in 1969-75 and Secretary of State in 1973-77, who sought to exploit the clashing geopolitical interests of China and Soviet Union. As such, Kissinger underplayed the extent of ideological, political and cultural tension within the Communist bloc: his *realpolitik* was another form of misleading rationalism.

The development of the range of weaponry in the age of aircraft and missiles altered the varied factors of geography. This was demonstrated in the Cuban missile crisis. Whereas in 1898, when America and Spain had fought over Cuba, the time constraints for intelligence gathering and transmission, and for force deployment and movement, were set by the technologies of the steam age, in 1962 the air age provided much more rapid moves, as in the U-2 flights over Cuba, the processing of the resulting information, and the preparations for attack. This did not, however, necessarily increase the ability to understand and, separately, control events. Indeed, effective crisis management in a speeded-up environment is both difficult and makes it harder to decide what is entailed by the geopolitical context and even conjuncture.

Contrasting national legacies, priorities, and opportunities added to the complexity. Thus, in military terms, America and Britain continued to place an emphasis in the 1950s on strategic bombing, one greatly enhanced by the availability of nuclear weapons. In contrast, although the Soviet Union had effective long-range bombers and an expanding navy, as it had not done during World War Two, the stress there was on the army and on ground support for it from the aircraft. For all these powers, the planned application of nuclear weaponry moved from aircraft to missiles.

In China, the stress was also on land forces. There, the legacy of World War Two, when air operations in China against Japan had been handled by the Americans, was compounded by the revolutionary character of Maoist military thought which also emphasised such forces and had an anti-technological dimension, even though there was also a commitment to new weaponry, certainly in the forms of jet aircraft and missiles.

Assumptions about the military context, notably in the form of specific national strategic cultures, were expressed by the spatial organisations of forces, not only their deployment but also the structural allocation of units in terms of land, sea and air commands. These were tied to strategic tasks and clarified geopolitical areas of concern and commitment. This was seen for example in the command structures of NATO, the Warsaw Pact, and individual states, notably America, as with the

establishment of United States Atlantic Command and Indo-Pacific Command, both in 1947, and (differently) of Central Command in 1983. Moreover, zones of concern, such as NATO's Sea Lines of Communication defence zone, and the comparable Soviet Bastion-defence zone to protect the submarine concentration on the Kola peninsula, helped shape planning and thus created a relevant geopolitics, however misleading this might be in terms of intentions in the event of conflict. Thus, the Soviets were less interested in challenging North Atlantic sea lanes than NATO believed (Dismukes 2020).

In addition, the spatial organisations of joint commands reflected a strong awareness of the value of joint operations, notably of air-sea co-operation, but also of its counterparts. In part, geopolitics in this form was therefore an aspect of force structure, and a way to foster a designed outcome. This was an instance of geopolitics as organisational context and, to a degree, content.

The *realpolitik* of détente in the early and mid-1970s was replaced in the late 1970s by a growing American return under President Jimmy Carter (1977-81) to confrontation. The Persian and Afghan crises provided a geopolitical context to this shift. However, there was also a rejection by Carter of the Soviet system, one based on his opposition to the Soviet stance on human rights (Nichols 2002).

The Cold War came to a renewed apex of tension in the early 1980s, with nuclear war apparently a prospect in 1983. There were more specific conflicts in Afghanistan, Central America, Angola, and the Middle East. In each case, the major power had only limited control over its protégés, but there was a sense that for America or the Soviet Union to permit failure on the part of its protégés would be to endanger credibility and therefore the entire system. In this respect, there was not so much the geopolitics of specific zones and particular concerns, but rather a geopolitics in which everything was involved, and, once made, commitments were difficult to reverse.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 was a classic instance of the difficulties with simplistic geopolitical modelling of the "geography is destiny" type. It also provided an example of the limited value in moving in commentary from the conjunctural to the historical, for the latter was frequently deployed as a context, with extensive reference to the "Great Game" of Anglo-Russian competition in the nineteenth century and on into the twentieth. In practice, a number of factors played a role in an intervention that had really begun not as a consequence of a Soviet masterplan, but as a result of short-term tensions in Afghan politics coming to a bloody inconstancy. In 1973, Zahir Shah, the monarch, was overthrown by his cousin and brother-in-law Mohammed Daoud Khan, a former Prime Minister. Backed by a group of Soviet-trained officers, this was a coup for modernisation, as also with the overthrow of monarchy in Egypt (1952) and Iraq (1958). Khan was willing to accommodate the Soviet Union, and the coup was seen as an extension of Soviet influence. It increased, but he was a nationalist, not a Communist.

In turn, in the Saur Revolution in 1978, Daoud was overthrown and killed in a coup mounted by the Soviet-backed People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan. The misnomer-nature of the Party was rapidly displayed in the rebellions provoked by its unpopular forcible modernisation. These rebellions were met with brutality by the divided government, which itself had a coup from within in September 1979. This was unwelcome to the Soviet government.

How that situation accorded with geopolitical modelling was unclear, and indeed Afghanistan received scant attention from the international commentariat. It was an unstable client state, but one of limited consequence compared to Iran where the pro-Western Shah had been overthrow in January 1979. Indeed, it was the latter that focused American regional concern, not least with greater anxiety about the Persian Gulf.

Indeed, this anxiety captured the extent to which Cold War geopolitics were far less focused and consistent than might be suggested by a phrase of that type. The Americans devoted much of their attention not to the Soviet Union but to a string of lesser powers. Some, notably China, North Korea, North Vietnam and Cuba, could be fitted into the model by reference to Soviet influence. However, this model and Communist ideology were of no value with understanding Iran and were of scant use with Iraq, a Soviet ally but very much driven by its dictator, including in an opposition to Iran that led to a major war in 1980-88, an opposition that suited American interests. Concern about the Iranian Revolution helped provide America with a motive that drew also on economic interest in the shape of oil supplies, but the establishment of U.S. Central Command as an organising body for the American military commitment in the region, in turn, encouraged a hostile American response to a range of developments that would probably have better been approached indirectly (Bacevich 2016).

Meanwhile, encouraging concern with Middle Eastern developments, the oil crisis of 1979 contributed to a global economic downturn that helped America into recession in 1980. More specifically as a mood-setter, the humiliation of the failure to rescue the American hostages held captive by Iranian radicals in the American Embassy in Tehran, especially the unsuccessful rescue mission of April 1980, produced a sense of failure, with geopolitics shrinking to the significance of an inherently minor episode, prefiguring the later response to American losses (18 killed) in the Black Hawk Down incident in Mogadishu, Somalia in 1993. The deadly Islamic terrorist attack son New York and Washington in 2001 were far more major incidents, but again captured a shrinking of geopolitics in that the far-ranging response of the "War on Terror" was triggered by a highly specific incident.

The more general international situation had changed as a result of the responses to the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan in December 1979 in which the government was violently overthrown and a protégé installed. This provided the direct Cold War action conspicuously lacking in Iran where the theocratic revolutionaries kept the Soviet Union at a distance. Indeed, the Ayatollah Khomeini,

the leader of the Islamic Revolution and the Guardian of the Islamic Republic, described the Soviet Union as "the other Great Satan." Furthermore, when, two days after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Soviet envoy in Iran promised Khomeini assistance in any conflict with America, he was told that there could be no mutual understanding between a Muslim nation and a non-Muslim government. This was a very different, religious, geopolitics to that which was conventionally understood; but such a geopolitics was of great longevity.

As an instance of the number of factors involved, the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan arose from a number of factors. A key one was that of an unstable borderland, the factor that had also led to the invasions of Hungary (1956) and Czechoslovakia (1968). There was an unwillingness to see a client state collapse and a fear that problems could spill over into Soviet Tajikistan. More generally, Central Asia had a religious and cultural identity that Russian rule and Sovietisation had lessened but not ended. There was also anxiety that the Afghan government might turn to China, thus extending the threat to Soviet borderlands.
In terms of a Soviet "advance", there was the military dimension of closer air proximity to the Gulf, but also the ability to put pressure on neighboring Pakistan, an ally of China and an enemy of India, a key Soviet ally.

As so often with geopolitics, it was not so much the action, both intention and implementation, that was the key element, but, instead, the response, again both attitude and action. Western alarmism was accompanied by pressure for action, both there and elsewhere. In his State of the Union Address to Congress in January 1980, President Jimmy Carter warned that the Afghan invasion "could pose the most serious threat to peace since the Second World War," which was an exaggeration that testified to the alarmism of the period and that looked toward the exaggeration of the country's significance by American policymakers in the early twenty-first century. The Soviet invasion was treated not as a frontier policing operation designed to ensure a pliant government, but as an act of aggression that had to be countered for containment to work. This view drew on a tendency, seen throughout the Cold War, to exaggerate Soviet political ambitions and military capability. In part, this reflected the degree to which there is very little politically that can be gained from arguing that threats are being exaggerated. Instead, it is the opposite that is the case.

There is no simple divide here between "military" and "politicians." Instead, both can be reified in a misleading fashion and one, moreover, that ignores the degree to which military leaders are also politicians. As such, the extent to which they were able to present their views was significant and varied, both by state and also with time. Institutional and political changes, for example in Britain the loss of the separate service ministries in 1964, were highly relevant in this process (Wells 2017). In part, geopolitical arguments were an aspect of the process of lobbying or politicking by defence politicians.

However, pushing geopolitical conceptions to the fore and comparably encouraging the idea of strategic culture, it was difficult for the Americans to acquire accurate information about the Soviet Union, whether over Afghanistan or more generally. The Soviet Union was a closed society with a determination to keep policy differences as well as its capabilities secret. So also with China.

This acute tension was to be reversed as relations improved between America and the Soviet Union in the late 1980s, with Soviet forces withdrawing from Afghanistan and, as part of the end of the Cold War, a marked reduction in differences over Angola and Central America. These became both preludes and accompaniments to an unravelling that extended, in an unintended fashion, to the end of the Communist position in Eastern Europe in 1989 and, then, in 1991, to the fall of the Soviet Union. To Vladimir Putin, in his state of the nation address in 2005, this "was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century", had left many millions of Russians living in foreign countries (an argument employed by German revanchists in the 1920s and 1930s), and had fostered separatist movements within Russia. As with many statements employing geopolitics, there was no real suggestion of any precise usage, but, rather, the application, for, although geopolitical thinkers saw themselves as influential, geopolitics as practical is rather about assumptions and actions than the application of theory. The idea of geopolitical defeat, however, was an important one, and it helped explain the link for Russia from the Cold War to a humiliating and dangerous postwar situation that had to be remedied. Thus, geopolitics became a term meaning "should-be," as is more generally the case. The difference is provided by the degree to which commentators accept this point, one shared with the related concept of strategic culture.

The geopolitics of the 1980s had a strong geofinancial character. The marked expansion of capital availability in the world made it possible to cover the ever-widening federal deficit in America, one that owed much to a failure to increase taxation in order to fund expenditure. This had been the case with the Vietnam War and was also so with the Reaganite arms buildup in the 1980s. The reinvestment of oil revenues in America ensured that petrodollars became a measure of American influence and, in turn, meant that it was necessary for America to maintain its position in the Middle East.

Similarly, the beneficiaries of East Asia economic growth, particularly Japan which had become the world's second largest economy, invested in America, thus helping the Americans to finance imports from East Asia and, in particular, to draw on both the economic growth of Japan and the strategic asset of Chinese co-operation. Moreover, under the American umbrella, there were no serious issues in dispute between China and Japan. The Soviet refusal to make any concession over returning to Japan the Kurile Islands, seized in 1945, ensured that the Soviets passed up the possibility of massive Japanese investment in the Soviet Far East, which therefore remained undeveloped and unable to threaten China or to offset the American-Chinese *rapprochement*.

The geopolitical alignment with capital-rich East Asia and the Middle East was encouraged by the ending in 1984 by the Reagan government of the witholding tax on interest on income paid to non-residents. This encouraged the large-scale foreign purchase of Treasury bonds which helped contain inflation and finance rising military expenditure. Moreover, attractive American interest rates in the 1980s kept the demand strong and ensured that global capital flows focused on America, which put heavy pressures on the states that had borrowed heavily in the 1970s, notably in Eastern Europe, but also in South America. In a sense, the 1980s helped bring further to fruition American hopes in the mid-1940s that economic liberalism would spread American influence.

Indeed, America's vulnerability to domestic discontent or division over the geopolitical confrontations of the Cold War were assuaged by the ability to fund its commitments. This ability had hit a crisis in the early 1970s with the heavy burden of Vietnam added to other Cold War commitments, notably in Europe, South Korea and the Mediterranean, and these impacting on an economy affected by declining effectiveness vis-à-vis the rising competitiveness of West Germany and Japan in a context of fixed exchange rates, and then the shock of the oil price hike. There had been a slow post-crisis economic and financial restrengthening, before the fresh public finance pressures of Reaganomics, but the potential flaws of the latter in geoeconomic terms were lessened by the widespread stakes, domestic and international, in the system. The collapse of the Soviet bloc in 1989-91 helped ensure that the much-discussed American policy drawbacks of the 1980s did not culminate in failure.

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