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The Revenge of Geography

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People and ideas influence events, but geography largely determines them, now more than ever. To understand the coming struggles, it's time to dust off the Victorian thinkers who knew the physical world best. A journalist who has covered the ends of the Earth offers a guide to the relief map—and a primer on the next phase of conflict.

When rapturous Germans tore down the Berlin Wall 20 years ago it symbolized far more than the overcoming of an arbitrary boundary. It began an intellectual cycle that saw all divisions, geographic and otherwise, as surmountable; that referred to “realism” and “pragmatism” only as pejoratives; and that invoked the humanism of Isaiah Berlin or the appeasement of Hitler at Munich to launch one international intervention after the next. In this way, the armed liberalism and the democracy-promoting neoconservatism of the 1990s shared the same universalist aspirations. But alas, when a fear of Munich leads to overreach the result is Vietnam—or in the current case, Iraq.

And thus began the rehabilitation of realism, and with it another intellectual cycle. “Realist” is now a mark of respect, “neocon” a term of derision. The Vietnam analogy has vanquished that of Munich. Thomas Hobbes, who extolled the moral benefits of fear and saw anarchy as the chief threat to society, has elbowed out Isaiah Berlin as the philosopher of the present cycle. The focus now is less on universal ideals than particular distinctions, from ethnicity to culture to religion. Those who pointed this out a decade ago were sneered at for being “fatalists” or “determinists.” Now they are applauded as “pragmatists.” And this is the key insight of the past two decades—that there are worse things in the world than extreme tyranny, and in Iraq we brought them about ourselves. I say this having supported the war.



Illustration by Aaron Goodman for *FP*



So now, chastened, we have all become realists. Or so we believe. But realism is about more than merely opposing a war in Iraq that we know from hindsight turned out badly. Realism means recognizing that international relations are ruled by a sadder, more limited reality than the one governing domestic affairs. It means valuing order above freedom, for the latter becomes important only after the former has been established. It means focusing on what divides humanity rather than on what unites it, as the high priests of globalization would have it. In short, realism is about recognizing and embracing those forces beyond our control that constrain human action—culture, tradition, history, the bleaker tides of passion that lie just beneath the veneer of civilization. This poses what, for realists, is the central question in foreign affairs: Who can do what to whom? And of all the unsavory truths in which realism is rooted, the bluntest, most uncomfortable, and most deterministic of all is geography.

Indeed, what is at work in the recent return of realism is the revenge of geography in the most old-fashioned sense. In the 18th and 19th centuries, before the arrival of political science as an academic specialty, geography was an honored, if not always formalized, discipline in which politics, culture, and economics were often conceived of in reference to the relief map. Thus, in the Victorian and Edwardian eras, mountains and the men who grow out of them were the first order of reality; ideas, however uplifting, were only the second.

And yet, to embrace geography is not to accept it as an implacable force against which humankind is powerless. Rather, it serves to qualify human freedom and choice with a modest acceptance of fate. This is all the more important today, because rather than eliminating the relevance of geography, globalization is reinforcing it. Mass communications and economic integration are weakening many states, exposing a Hobbesian world of small, fractious regions. Within them, local, ethnic, and religious sources of identity are reasserting themselves, and because they are anchored to specific terrains, they are best explained by reference to geography. Like the faults that determine earthquakes, the political future will be defined by conflict and instability with a similar geographic logic. The upheaval spawned by the ongoing economic crisis is increasing the relevance of geography even further, by weakening social orders and other creations of humankind, leaving the natural frontiers of the globe as the only restraint.

So we, too, need to return to the map, and particularly to what I call the “shatter zones” of Eurasia. We need to reclaim those thinkers who knew the landscape best. And we need to update their theories for the revenge of geography in our time.

If you want to understand the insights of geography, you need to seek out those thinkers who make liberal humanists profoundly uneasy—those authors who thought the map determined nearly everything, leaving little room for human agency.

One such person is the French historian Fernand Braudel, who in 1949 published *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*. By bringing demography and nature itself into history, Braudel helped restore geography to its proper place. In his narrative, permanent environmental forces lead to enduring historical trends that preordain political events and regional wars. To Braudel, for example, the poor, precarious soils along the Mediterranean, combined with an uncertain, drought-afflicted climate, spurred ancient Greek and Roman conquest. In other words, we delude ourselves by thinking that we control our own destinies. To understand the present challenges of climate change, warming Arctic seas, and the scarcity of resources such as oil and water, we must reclaim Braudel’s environmental interpretation of events.

So, too, must we reexamine the blue-water strategizing of Alfred Thayer Mahan, a U.S. naval captain and author of *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660-1783*. Viewing the sea as the great “commons” of civilization, Mahan thought that naval power had always been the decisive factor in global political struggles. It was Mahan who, in 1902, coined the term “Middle East” to denote the area between Arabia and India that held particular importance for naval strategy. Indeed, Mahan saw the Indian and Pacific oceans as the hinges of geopolitical destiny, for they would allow a maritime nation to project power all around the Eurasian rim and thereby affect political developments deep into Central Asia. Mahan’s thinking helps to explain why the Indian Ocean will be the

heart of geopolitical competition in the 21st century—and why his books are now all the rage among Chinese and Indian strategists.

Similarly, the Dutch-American strategist Nicholas Spykman saw the seaboard of the Indian and Pacific oceans as the keys to dominance in Eurasia and the natural means to check the land power of Russia. Before he died in 1943, while the United States was fighting Japan, Spykman predicted the rise of China and the consequent need for the United States to defend Japan. And even as the United States was fighting to liberate Europe, Spykman warned that the postwar emergence of an integrated European power would eventually become inconvenient for the United States. Such is the foresight of geographical determinism.

But perhaps the most significant guide to the revenge of geography is the father of modern geopolitics himself—Sir Halford J. Mackinder—who is famous not for a book but a single article, “The Geographical Pivot of History,” which began as a 1904 lecture to the Royal Geographical Society in London. Mackinder’s work is the archetype of the geographical discipline, and he summarizes its theme nicely: “Man and not nature initiates, but nature in large measure controls.”

His thesis is that Russia, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia are the “pivot” around which the fate of world empire revolves. He would refer to this area of Eurasia as the “heartland” in a later book. Surrounding it are four “marginal” regions of the Eurasian landmass that correspond, not coincidentally, to the four great religions, because faith, too, is merely a function of geography for Mackinder. There are two “monsoon lands”: one in the east generally facing the Pacific Ocean, the home of Buddhism; the other in the south facing the Indian Ocean, the home of Hinduism. The third marginal region is Europe, watered by the Atlantic to the west and the home of Christianity. But the most fragile of the four marginal regions is the Middle East, home of Islam, “deprived of moisture by the proximity of Africa” and for the most part “thinly peopled” (in 1904, that is).

This Eurasian relief map, and the events playing out on it at the dawn of the 20th century, are Mackinder’s subject, and the opening sentence presages its grand sweep:

When historians in the remote future come to look back on the group of centuries through which we are now passing, and see them fore-shortened, as we to-day see the Egyptian dynasties, it may well be that they will describe the last 400 years as the Columbian epoch, and will say that it ended soon after the year 1900.

Mackinder explains that, while medieval Christendom was “pent into a narrow region and threatened by external barbarism,” the Columbian age—the Age of Discovery—saw Europe expand across the oceans to new lands. Thus at the turn of the 20th century, “we shall again have to deal with a closed political system,” and this time one of “world-wide scope.”

Every explosion of social forces, instead of being dissipated in a surrounding circuit of unknown space and barbaric chaos, will [henceforth] be sharply re-echoed from the far side of the globe, and weak elements in the political and economic organism of the world will be shattered in consequence.

By perceiving that European empires had no more room to expand, thereby making their conflicts global, Mackinder foresaw, however vaguely, the scope of both world wars.

Mackinder looked at European history as “subordinate” to that of Asia, for he saw European civilization as merely the outcome of the struggle against Asiatic invasion. Europe, he writes, became the cultural phenomenon it is only because of its geography: an intricate array of mountains, valleys, and peninsulas; bounded by northern ice and a western ocean; blocked by seas and the Sahara to the south; and set against the immense, threatening flatland of Russia to the east. Into this confined landscape poured a succession of nomadic, Asian invaders from the naked steppe. The union of Franks, Goths, and Roman provincials against these invaders produced the basis for modern France. Likewise, other European powers originated, or at least matured, through their encounters with Asian nomads. Indeed, it was the Seljuk Turks’ supposed ill treatment of Christian pilgrims in Jerusalem that ostensibly led to the Crusades, which Mackinder considers the beginning of Europe’s collective modern history.

Russia, meanwhile, though protected by forest glades against many a rampaging host, nevertheless fell prey in the 13th century to the Golden Horde of the Mongols. These invaders decimated and subsequently changed Russia. But because most of Europe knew no such level of destruction, it was able to emerge as the world’s political cockpit, while Russia was largely denied access to the European Renaissance. The ultimate land-based empire, with few natural barriers against invasion, Russia would know forevermore what it was like to be brutally conquered. As a result, it would become perennially obsessed with expanding and holding territory.

Key discoveries of the Columbian epoch, Mackinder writes, only reinforced the cruel facts of geography. In the Middle Ages, the peoples of Europe were largely confined to the land. But when the sea route to India was found around the Cape of Good Hope, Europeans suddenly had access to the entire rimland of southern Asia, to say nothing of strategic discoveries in the New World. While Western Europeans “covered the ocean with their fleets,” Mackinder tells us, Russia was expanding equally impressively on land, “emerging from her northern forests” to police the steppe with her Cossacks, sweeping into Siberia, and sending peasants to sow the southwestern steppe with wheat. It was an old story: Europe versus Russia, a liberal sea power (like Athens and Venice) against a reactionary land power (like Sparta and Prussia). For the sea, beyond the cosmopolitan influences it bestows by virtue of access to distant harbors, provides the inviolate border security that democracy needs to take root.

In the 19th century, Mackinder notes, the advent of steam engines and the creation of the Suez Canal increased the mobility of European sea power around the southern rim of Eurasia, just as railways were beginning to do the same for land power in the Eurasian heartland. So the struggle was set for the mastery of Eurasia, bringing Mackinder to his thesis:

As we consider this rapid review of the broader currents of history, does not a certain persistence of geographical relationship become evident? Is not the pivot region of the world’s politics that vast area of Euro-Asia which is inaccessible to ships, but in antiquity lay open to the horse-riding nomads, and is to-day about to be covered with a network of railways?

Just as the Mongols banged at, and often broke down, the gates to the marginal regions surrounding Eurasia, Russia would now play the same conquering role, for as Mackinder writes, “the geographical quantities in the calculation are more measurable and more nearly constant than the human.” Forget the czars and the commissars-yet-to-be in 1904; they are but trivia compared with the deeper tectonic forces of geography.

Mackinder’s determinism prepared us for the rise of the Soviet Union and its vast zone of influence in the second half of the 20th century, as well as for the two world wars preceding it. After all, as historian Paul Kennedy notes, these conflicts were struggles over Mackinder’s “marginal” regions, running from Eastern Europe to the Himalayas and beyond. Cold War containment strategy, moreover, depended heavily on rimland bases across the greater Middle East and the Indian Ocean. Indeed, the U.S. projection of power into Afghanistan and Iraq, and today’s tensions with Russia over the political fate of Central Asia and the Caucasus have only bolstered Mackinder’s thesis. In his article’s last paragraph, Mackinder even raises the specter of Chinese conquests of the “pivot” area, which would make China the dominant geopolitical power. Look at how Chinese migrants are now demographically claiming parts of Siberia as Russia’s political control of its eastern reaches is being strained. One can envision Mackinder’s being right yet again.

The wisdom of geographical determinism endures across the chasm of a century because it recognizes that the most profound struggles of humanity are not about ideas but about control over territory, specifically the heartland and rimlands of Eurasia. Of course, ideas matter, and they span geography. And yet there is a certain geographic logic to where certain ideas take hold. Communist Eastern Europe, Mongolia, China, and North Korea were all contiguous to the great land power of the Soviet Union. Classic fascism was a predominantly European affair. And liberalism nurtured its deepest roots in the United States and Great Britain, essentially island nations and sea powers both. Such determinism is easy to hate but hard to dismiss.

To discern where the battle of ideas will lead, we must revise Mackinder for our time. After all, Mackinder could not foresee how a century’s worth of change would redefine—and enhance—the importance of geography in today’s world. One author who did is Yale University professor Paul Bracken, who in 1999 published *Fire in the East*. Bracken draws a conceptual map of Eurasia defined by the collapse of time and distance and the filling of empty spaces. This idea leads him to declare a “crisis of room.” In the past, sparsely populated geography acted as a safety mechanism. Yet this is no longer the case, Bracken argues, for as empty space increasingly disappears, the very “finite size of the earth” becomes a force for instability. And as I learned at the U.S. Army’s Command and General Staff College, “attrition of the same adds up to big change.”

One force that is shrinking the map of Eurasia is technology, particularly the military applications of it and the rising power it confers on states. In the early Cold War, Asian militaries were mostly lumbering, heavy forces whose primary purpose was national consolidation. They focused inward. But as national wealth accumulated and the computer revolution took hold, Asian militaries from the oil-rich Middle East to the tiger economies of the Pacific developed full-fledged, military-civilian postindustrial complexes, with missiles and fiber optics and satellite phones. These states also became bureaucratically more cohesive, allowing their militaries to focus outward,

toward other states. Geography in Eurasia, rather than a cushion, was becoming a prison from which there was no escape.

Now there is an "unbroken belt of countries," in Bracken's words, from Israel to North Korea, which are developing ballistic missiles and destructive arsenals. A map of these countries' missile ranges shows a series of overlapping circles: Not only is no one safe, but a 1914-style chain reaction leading to wider war is easily conceivable. "The spread of missiles and weapons of mass destruction in Asia is like the spread of the six-shooter in the American Old West," Bracken writes—a cheap, deadly equalizer of states.

The other force driving the revenge of geography is population growth, which makes the map of Eurasia more claustrophobic still. In the 1990s, many intellectuals viewed the 18th-century English philosopher Thomas Malthus as an overly deterministic thinker because he treated humankind as a species reacting to its physical environment, not a body of autonomous individuals. But as the years pass, and world food and energy prices fluctuate, Malthus is getting more respect. If you wander through the slums of Karachi or Gaza, which wall off multitudes of angry lumpen faithful—young men mostly—one can easily see the conflicts over scarce resources that Malthus predicted coming to pass. In three decades covering the Middle East, I have watched it evolve from a largely rural society to a realm of teeming megacities. In the next 20 years, the Arab world's population will nearly double while supplies of groundwater will diminish.

A Eurasia of vast urban areas, overlapping missile ranges, and sensational media will be one of constantly enraged crowds, fed by rumors transported at the speed of light from one Third World megalopolis to another. So in addition to Malthus, we will also hear much about Elias Canetti, the 20th-century philosopher of crowd psychology: the phenomenon of a mass of people abandoning their individuality for an intoxicating collective symbol. It is in the cities of Eurasia principally where crowd psychology will have its greatest geopolitical impact. Alas, ideas do matter. And it is the very compression of geography that will provide optimum breeding grounds for dangerous ideologies and channels for them to spread.

All of this requires major revisions to Mackinder's theories of geopolitics. For as the map of Eurasia shrinks and fills up with people, it not only obliterates the artificial regions of area studies; it also erases Mackinder's division of Eurasia into a specific "pivot" and adjacent "marginal" zones. Military assistance from China and North Korea to Iran can cause Israel to take military actions. The U.S. Air Force can attack landlocked Afghanistan from Diego Garcia, an island in the middle of the Indian Ocean. The Chinese and Indian navies can project power from the Gulf of Aden to the South China Sea—out of their own regions and along the whole rimland. In short, contra Mackinder, Eurasia has been reconfigured into an organic whole.

The map's new seamlessness can be seen in the Pakistani outpost of Gwadar. There, on the Indian Ocean, near the Iranian border, the Chinese have constructed a spanking new deep-water port. Land prices are booming, and people talk of this still sleepy fishing village as the next Dubai, which may one day link towns in Central Asia to the burgeoning middle-class fleshpots of India and China through pipelines, supertankers, and the Strait of Malacca. The Chinese also have plans for developing other Indian Ocean ports in order to transport oil by pipelines directly into western and central China, even as a canal and land bridge are possibly built across Thailand's Isthmus of Kra. Afraid of being outflanked by the Chinese, the Indians are expanding their own naval ports and strengthening ties with both Iran and Burma, where the Indian-Chinese rivalry will be fiercest.

These deepening connections are transforming the Middle East, Central Asia, and the Indian and Pacific oceans into a vast continuum, in which the narrow and vulnerable Strait of Malacca will be the Fulda Gap of the 21st century. The fates of the Islamic Middle East and Islamic Indonesia are therefore becoming inextricable. But it is the geographic connections, not religious ones, that matter most.

This new map of Eurasia—tighter, more integrated, and more crowded—will be even less stable than Mackinder thought. Rather than heartlands and marginal zones that imply separateness, we will have a series of inner and outer cores that are fused together through mass politics and shared paranoia. In fact, much of Eurasia will eventually be as claustrophobic as Israel and the Palestinian territories, with geography controlling everything and no room to maneuver. Although Zionism shows the power of ideas, the battle over land between Israelis and Palestinians is a case of utter geographical determinism. This is Eurasia's future as well.

The ability of states to control events will be diluted, in some cases destroyed. Artificial borders will crumble and become more fissiparous, leaving only rivers, deserts, mountains, and other enduring facts of geography. Indeed, the physical features of the landscape may be the only reliable guides left to understanding the shape of future conflict. Like rifts in the Earth's crust that produce physical instability, there are areas in Eurasia that are more

prone to conflict than others. These “shatter zones” threaten to implode, explode, or maintain a fragile equilibrium. And not surprisingly, they fall within that unstable inner core of Eurasia: the greater Middle East, the vast way station between the Mediterranean world and the Indian subcontinent that registers all the primary shifts in global power politics.

This inner core, for Mackinder, was the ultimate unstable region. And yet, writing in an age before oil pipelines and ballistic missiles, he saw this region as inherently volatile, geographically speaking, but also somewhat of a secondary concern. A century’s worth of technological advancement and population explosion has rendered the greater Middle East no less volatile but dramatically more relevant, and where Eurasia is most prone to fall apart now is in the greater Middle East’s several shatter zones.

The Indian subcontinent is one such shatter zone. It is defined on its landward sides by the hard geographic borders of the Himalayas to the north, the Burmese jungle to the east, and the somewhat softer border of the Indus River to the west. Indeed, the border going westward comes in three stages: the Indus; the unruly crags and canyons that push upward to the shaved wastes of Central Asia, home to the Pashtun tribes; and, finally, the granite, snow-mantled massifs of the Hindu Kush, transecting Afghanistan itself. Because these geographic impediments are not contiguous with legal borders, and because barely any of India’s neighbors are functional states, the current political organization of the subcontinent should not be taken for granted. You see this acutely as you walk up to and around any of these land borders, the weakest of which, in my experience, are the official ones—a mere collection of tables where cranky bureaucrats inspect your luggage. Especially in the west, the only border that lives up to the name is the Hindu Kush, making me think that in our own lifetimes the whole semblance of order in Pakistan and southeastern Afghanistan could unravel, and return, in effect, to vague elements of greater India.

In Nepal, the government barely controls the countryside where 85 percent of its people live. Despite the aura bequeathed by the Himalayas, nearly half of Nepal’s population lives in the dank and humid lowlands along the barely policed border with India. Driving throughout this region, it appears in many ways indistinguishable from the Ganges plain. If the Maoists now ruling Nepal cannot increase state capacity, the state itself could dissolve.

The same holds true for Bangladesh. Even more so than Nepal, it has no geographic defense to marshal as a state. The view from my window during a recent bus journey was of the same ruler-flat, aquatic landscape of paddy fields and scrub on both sides of the line with India. The border posts are disorganized, ramshackle affairs. This artificial blotch of territory on the Indian subcontinent could metamorphose yet again, amid the gale forces of regional politics, Muslim extremism, and nature itself.

Like Pakistan, no Bangladeshi government, military or civilian, has ever functioned even remotely well. Millions of Bangladeshi refugees have already crossed the border into India illegally. With 150 million people—a population larger than Russia—cramped together at sea level, Bangladesh is vulnerable to the slightest climatic variation, never mind the changes caused by global warming. Simply because of its geography, tens of millions of people in Bangladesh could be inundated with salt water, necessitating the mother of all humanitarian relief efforts. In the process, the state itself could collapse.

Of course, the worst nightmare on the subcontinent is Pakistan, whose dysfunction is directly the result of its utter lack of geographic logic. The Indus should be a border of sorts, but Pakistan sits astride both its banks, just as the fertile and teeming Punjab plain is bisected by the India-Pakistan border. Only the Thar Desert and the swamps to its south act as natural frontiers between Pakistan and India. And though these are formidable barriers, they are insufficient to frame a state composed of disparate, geographically based, ethnic groups—Punjabis, Sindhis, Baluchis, and Pashtuns—for whom Islam has provided insufficient glue to hold them together. All the other groups in Pakistan hate the Punjabis and the army they control, just as the groups in the former Yugoslavia hated the Serbs and the army they controlled. Pakistan’s *raison d’être* is that it supposedly provides a homeland for subcontinental Muslims, but 154 million of them, almost the same number as the entire population of Pakistan, live over the border in India.

To the west, the crags and canyons of Pakistan’s North-West Frontier Province, bordering Afghanistan, are utterly porous. Of all the times I crossed the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, I never did so legally. In reality, the two countries are inseparable. On both sides live the Pashtuns. The wide belt of territory between the Hindu Kush mountains and the Indus River is really Pashtunistan, an entity that threatens to emerge were Pakistan to fall apart. That would, in turn, lead to the dissolution of Afghanistan.

The Taliban constitute merely the latest incarnation of Pashtun nationalism. Indeed, much of the fighting in

Afghanistan today occurs in Pashtunistan: southern and eastern Afghanistan and the tribal areas of Pakistan. The north of Afghanistan, beyond the Hindu Kush, has seen less fighting and is in the midst of reconstruction and the forging of closer links to the former Soviet republics in Central Asia, inhabited by the same ethnic groups that populate northern Afghanistan. Here is the ultimate world of Mackinder, of mountains and men, where the facts of geography are asserted daily, to the chagrin of U.S.-led forces—and of India, whose own destiny and borders are hostage to what plays out in the vicinity of the 20,000-foot wall of the Hindu Kush.

Another shatter zone is the Arabian Peninsula. The vast tract of land controlled by the Saudi royal family is synonymous with Arabia in the way that India is synonymous with the subcontinent. But while India is heavily populated throughout, Saudi Arabia constitutes a geographically nebulous network of oases separated by massive waterless tracts. Highways and domestic air links are crucial to Saudi Arabia's cohesion. Though India is built on an idea of democracy and religious pluralism, Saudi Arabia is built on loyalty to an extended family. But while India is virtually surrounded by troubling geography and dysfunctional states, Saudi Arabia's borders disappear into harmless desert to the north and are shielded by sturdy, well-governed, self-contained sheikhdoms to the east and southeast.

Where Saudi Arabia is truly vulnerable, and where the shatter zone of Arabia is most acute, is in highly populous Yemen to the south. Although it has only a quarter of Saudi Arabia's land area, Yemen's population is almost as large, so the all-important demographic core of the Arabian Peninsula is crammed into its mountainous southwest corner, where sweeping basalt plateaus, rearing up into sand-castle formations and volcanic plugs, embrace a network of oases densely inhabited since antiquity. Because the Turks and the British never really controlled Yemen, they did not leave behind the strong bureaucratic institutions that other former colonies inherited.

When I traveled the Saudi-Yemen border some years back, it was crowded with pickup trucks filled with armed young men, loyal to this sheikh or that, while the presence of the Yemeni government was negligible. Mud-brick battlements hid the encampments of these rebellious sheikhs, some with their own artillery. Estimates of the number of firearms in Yemen vary, but any Yemeni who wants a weapon can get one easily. Meanwhile, groundwater supplies will last no more than a generation or two.

I'll never forget what a U.S. military expert told me in the capital, Sanaa: "Terrorism is an entrepreneurial activity, and in Yemen you've got over 20 million aggressive, commercial-minded, and well-armed people, all extremely hard-working compared with the Saudis next door. It's the future, and it terrifies the hell out of the government in Riyadh." The future of teeming, tribal Yemen will go a long way to determining the future of Saudi Arabia. And geography, not ideas, has everything to do with it.

The Fertile Crescent, wedged between the Mediterranean Sea and the Iranian plateau, constitutes another shatter zone. The countries of this region—Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq—are vague geographic expressions that had little meaning before the 20th century. When the official lines on the map are removed, we find a crude finger-painting of Sunni and Shiite clusters that contradict national borders. Inside these borders, the governing authorities of Lebanon and Iraq barely exist. The one in Syria is tyrannical and fundamentally unstable; the one in Jordan is rational but under quiet siege. (Jordan's main reason for being at all is to act as a buffer for other Arab regimes that fear having a land border with Israel.) Indeed, the Levant is characterized by tired authoritarian regimes and ineffective democracies.

Of all the geographically illogical states in the Fertile Crescent, none is more so than Iraq. Saddam Hussein's tyranny, by far the worst in the Arab world, was itself geographically determined: Every Iraqi dictator going back to the first military coup in 1958 had to be more repressive than the previous one just to hold together a country with no natural borders that seethes with ethnic and sectarian consciousness. The mountains that separate Kurdistan from the rest of Iraq, and the division of the Mesopotamian plain between Sunnis in the center and Shiites in the south, may prove more pivotal to Iraq's stability than the yearning after the ideal of democracy. If democracy doesn't in fairly short order establish sturdy institutional roots, Iraq's geography will likely lead it back to tyranny or anarchy again.

But for all the recent focus on Iraq, geography and history tell us that Syria might be at the real heart of future turbulence in the Arab world. Aleppo in northern Syria is a bazaar city with greater historical links to Mosul, Baghdad, and Anatolia than to Damascus. Whenever Damascus's fortunes declined with the rise of Baghdad to the east, Aleppo recovered its greatness. Wandering through the souks of Aleppo, it is striking how distant and irrelevant Damascus seems: The bazaars are dominated by Kurds, Turks, Circassians, Arab Christians, Armenians, and others, unlike the Damascus souk, which is more a world of Sunni Arabs. As in Pakistan and the former Yugoslavia, each sect and religion in Syria has a specific location. Between Aleppo and Damascus is the

increasingly Islamist Sunni heartland. Between Damascus and the Jordanian border are the Druse, and in the mountain stronghold contiguous with Lebanon are the Alawites—both remnants of a wave of Shiism from Persia and Mesopotamia that swept over Syria a thousand years ago.

Elections in Syria in 1947, 1949, and 1954 exacerbated these divisions by polarizing the vote along sectarian lines. The late Hafez al-Assad came to power in 1970 after 21 changes of government in 24 years. For three decades, he was the Leonid Brezhnev of the Arab world, staving off the future by failing to build a civil society at home. His son Bashar will have to open the political system eventually, if only to keep pace with a dynamically changing society armed with satellite dishes and the Internet. But no one knows how stable a post-authoritarian Syria would be. Policymakers must fear the worst. Yet a post-Assad Syria may well do better than post-Saddam Iraq, precisely because its tyranny has been much less severe. Indeed, traveling from Saddam's Iraq to Assad's Syria was like coming up for air.

In addition to its inability to solve the problem of political legitimacy, the Arab world is unable to secure its own environment. The plateau peoples of Turkey will dominate the Arabs in the 21st century because the Turks have water and the Arabs don't. Indeed, to develop its own desperately poor southeast and thereby suppress Kurdish separatism, Turkey will need to divert increasingly large amounts of the Euphrates River from Syria and Iraq. As the Middle East becomes a realm of parched urban areas, water will grow in value relative to oil. The countries with it will retain the ability—and thus the power—to blackmail those without it. Water will be like nuclear energy, thereby making desalinization and dual-use power facilities primary targets of missile strikes in future wars. Not just in the West Bank, but everywhere there is less room to maneuver.

A final shatter zone is the Persian core, stretching from the Caspian Sea to Iran's north to the Persian Gulf to its south. Virtually all of the greater Middle East's oil and natural gas lies in this region. Just as shipping lanes radiate from the Persian Gulf, pipelines are increasingly radiating from the Caspian region to the Mediterranean, the Black Sea, China, and the Indian Ocean. The only country that straddles both energy-producing areas is Iran, as Geoffrey Kemp and Robert E. Harkavy note in *Strategic Geography and the Changing Middle East*. The Persian Gulf possesses 55 percent of the world's crude-oil reserves, and Iran dominates the whole gulf, from the Shatt al-Arab on the Iraqi border to the Strait of Hormuz in the southeast—a coastline of 1,317 nautical miles, thanks to its many bays, inlets, coves, and islands that offer plenty of excellent places for hiding tanker-ramming speedboats.

It is not an accident that Iran was the ancient world's first superpower. There was a certain geographic logic to it. Iran is the greater Middle East's universal joint, tightly fused to all of the outer cores. Its border roughly traces and conforms to the natural contours of the landscape—plateaus to the west, mountains and seas to the north and south, and desert expanse in the east toward Afghanistan. For this reason, Iran has a far more venerable record as a nation-state and urbane civilization than most places in the Arab world and all the places in the Fertile Crescent. Unlike the geographically illogical countries of that adjacent region, there is nothing artificial about Iran. Not surprisingly, Iran is now being wooed by both India and China, whose navies will come to dominate the Eurasian sea lanes in the 21st century.

Of all the shatter zones in the greater Middle East, the Iranian core is unique: The instability Iran will cause will not come from its implosion, but from a strong, internally coherent Iranian nation that explodes outward from a natural geographic platform to shatter the region around it. The security provided to Iran by its own natural boundaries has historically been a potent force for power projection. The present is no different. Through its uncompromising ideology and nimble intelligence services, Iran runs an unconventional, postmodern empire of substate entities in the greater Middle East: Hamas in Palestine, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the Sadrist movement in southern Iraq. If the geographic logic of Iranian expansion sounds eerily similar to that of Russian expansion in Mackinder's original telling, it is.

The geography of Iran today, like that of Russia before, determines the most realistic strategy to securing this shatter zone: containment. As with Russia, the goal of containing Iran must be to impose pressure on the contradictions of the unpopular, theocratic regime in Tehran, such that it eventually changes from within. The battle for Eurasia has many, increasingly interlocking fronts. But the primary one is for Iranian hearts and minds, just as it was for those of Eastern Europeans during the Cold War. Iran is home to one of the Muslim world's most sophisticated populations, and traveling there, one encounters less anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism than in Egypt. This is where the battle of ideas meets the dictates of geography.

In this century's fight for Eurasia, like that of the last century, Mackinder's axiom holds true: Man will initiate, but nature will control. Liberal universalism and the individualism of Isaiah Berlin aren't going away, but it is becoming clear that the success of these ideas is in large measure bound and determined by geography. This was always the case, and it is harder to deny now, as the ongoing recession will likely cause the global economy to contract for the first time in six decades. Not only wealth, but political and social order, will erode in many places, leaving only nature's frontiers and men's passions as the main arbiters of that age-old question: Who can coerce whom? We thought globalization had gotten rid of this antiquarian world of musty maps, but now it is returning with a vengeance.

We all must learn to think like Victorians. That is what must guide and inform our newly rediscovered realism. Geographical determinists must be seated at the same honored table as liberal humanists, thereby merging the analogies of Vietnam and Munich. Embracing the dictates and limitations of geography will be especially hard for Americans, who like to think that no constraint, natural or otherwise, applies to them. But denying the facts of geography only invites disasters that, in turn, make us victims of geography.

Better, instead, to look hard at the map for ingenious ways to stretch the limits it imposes, which will make any support for liberal principles in the world far more effective. Amid the revenge of geography, that is the essence of realism and the crux of wise policymaking—working near the edge of what is possible, without slipping into the precipice.

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