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Is there a new geopolitics?

A new form of geopolitics is threatening to dethrone the old paradigm of a hard power, West-centric world

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During the Cold War, the main geopolitical optic relied upon by policymakers and diplomats was associated with a bipolar structure of hard power. There were supposedly two superpowers with overwhelming military capabilities compared to all other sovereign states, and each managed an alliance of subordinate states that staked their survival on the global crisis and territorial containment skills of the respective superpowers.

This framework was an exaggerated version of the balance of power system that had sustained global order in the West during prior centuries. It was a framework that was partly based on the juridical idea of the equality of sovereign states while being fully responsive to the geopolitical facts of life stressing their inequality, which produced a hierarchy among sovereign states along with a series of empires. The UN from its outset was a constitutional reflection of the Old Geopolitics, with the General Assembly exhibiting the idea of equality while the Security Council incorporates inequality via the veto power given the five permanent members, who incidentally achieved this status only because they were regarded as the main winners in World War II and confirmed this status by being the first five countries to possess nuclear weapons. The Old Geopolitics was built around the institutions of war: victory on the battlefield, superior weaponry and military capabilities relative to others.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union a few years later, the bipolar construction of world order was no longer descriptive of world order. Still, the idea of the Old Geopolitics persisted, but was now identified as unipolar with the organising authority of global security concentrated in the government of "the sole surviving superpower".

When Iraq invaded and annexed Kuwait in 1990, there was a collective response successfully instigated by the United States at the UN that reflected this post-Cold War situation of unipolarity. At the time it was inappropriately called the "New World Order" by the American president, claiming a new ability of the UN to act collectively on behalf of peace and security situation, and no longer gridlocked by the Cold War standoff. But it was really just a new phase of the Old Geopolitics that interpreted world order almost exclusively by reference to the distribution of hard power capabilities among states. The Old Geopolitics, although dominated by the United States and operationally administered from Washington, remained West-centric when it comes to the shaping of global security policy despite the intervening collapse of the colonial order that irreversibly weakened the relative position of the West.

The emergent new geopolitics

A number of developments on the global stage are suggesting that a New Geopolitics is indeed struggling to be born, although hardly yet able to displace the Old Geopolitics. The New Geopolitics is premised on the primacy of soft power criteria of influence and status, and is more universalistic and less statist in the composition of actors providing global leadership. The prominence accorded to the BRIC countries of Brazil, Russia, India, and China is one expression of this shift in the understanding of the structure of world order. The claims of these states to such an acknowledgement of high stature is not based primarily on their military capabilities or their alliance affiliations, but is associated with their economic endowments, and their astonishing record of growing importance in trade, investment, and financial settings. Such a trend is also being formalised in relation to economic globalisation, with the shifts from a Cold War Group of Seven, to an enlarged Group of Eight, and finally to the present Group of Twenty.

A striking example of New Geopolitics was the experimental realignment at the top exhibited at the 2009 Copenhagen UN Conference on Climate Change, when the United States sought to circumvent unwieldy statist procedures by shaping a coalition consisting of itself, China, India, Brazil, and South Africa to put before the conference an agreed approach to deal with the agreed challenge of global warming. There was resistance to this approach at Copenhagen, essentially from the perspective of that part of the Old Geopolitics associated with the idea of the equality of states. The wider community of states, essentially the membership of the UN General Assembly, were unwilling to allow a geopolitical coalition, even if not West-centric, to dictate global climate change policy.

Graffiti on the walls of the Old Geopolitics signalled its loss of historical control. The successful challenge of the colonial order by various movements of liberation throughout Asia and Africa strongly established a trend in conflict resolution in which the militarily superior side was being compelled to accept political defeat. This amounts to a radical reversal of the experience during the colonial era in which hard power realities shaped, usually with ease, the outcomes of political conflict. This enhancement of soft power stature was reinforced up to the present time by a series of failed wars undertaken by the United States in particular. From the outcome of the Vietnam War in the mid-1970s to the recent winless withdrawals of the United States from Iraq and Afghanistan, it is evident that hard power dominance is no longer able to reach desired political outcomes at acceptable costs. In other words, the staple currency of the Old Geopolitics -

military power - seems recently to erode and discredit rather than extend the historical role and agency of political actors.

Parallel to these developments was the impact of nuclear war on the conduct of international relations. Nuclear weaponry, the Omega point in the Old Geopolitics, actually had the paradoxical effect of excluding hard power solutions to political struggles between geopolitical rivals, actually changing the emphasis of grand strategy in the direction of war avoidance and deterrence so as to avoid the mutual disaster of nuclear warfare. Even in military conflicts waged in non-Western settings, the proxy wars between East and West during the Cold War, the fear that the conflict might escalate if it was allowed to approach the nuclear threshold interfered with the belligerent habits of the Old Geopolitics that were preoccupied with winning wars rather than settling for stalemates and ceasefires.

As a telling sign of the emergence of the New Geopolitics as now defining contemporary strategic goals, Brazil is far more interested in acquiring a permanent seat in the Security Council than in becoming a member of the nuclear weapons club. Such a shift in great power aspirations has long characterised the global ambitions of the main losers in World War II - Germany and Japan - that learned the lessons of a transformed world setting better than did the winners. At present, even such rising political actors as Turkey and Indonesia seem more concerned with gaining recognition by gaining prestige in the United Nations than they do in acquiring the latest weapons systems.

Soft power and the new geopolitics

Two crucial tendencies are evident: soft power achieves the most important gains for a society seeking to accelerate its development and raise its status on the global stage of diplomacy; hard power is increasingly frustrated when tested by determined nationalist forces, even those with seemingly modest military capabilities. These factors are given greater historical weight by several other considerations. The greater complexity associated with globalisation has created new political spaces that are being filled in various ways by both civil society representatives and private sector actors.

Such patterns of participation exert strong pressure to move the New Geopolitics toward a more peaceful and less war oriented standard operating procedures. The civil society vision of the New Geopolitics inclines strongly in the transformative direction of Global Democracy, making all institutions of governance subject to the imperatives of transparency, accountability, stakeholder participation, rule of law, and attention to the human interest/global justice/climate change diplomacy.

In effect, we have two models of the New Geopolitics:

1. Minimal Model envisions a state-centric world order that is deWesternised and calculates status by reference to soft power criteria of status and influence, but remains dominated by a few state actors and remains responsive to the prescriptions and values of neoliberal globalisation;

2. Maximal Model is dedicated to institutions and practices that embody Global Democracy, and reorient Economic Globalisation in relation to sustainable development that puts peoples and earth first, and gives priority to those most vulnerable and deprived.

At this point, global politics is in a transitional phase. The Old Geopolitics has certainly not disappeared as is evident from the war dangers that remain in the world's main conflict zones, but it is also rarely capable of translating its preferences into desired outcomes. At the same time, perhaps the menacing last hurrah of global militarism, its practices and technological innovations are turning the world into a borderless and terrorised war zone. The Old Geopolitics fashioned a dysfunctional set of responses to the 9/11 attacks on the United States. These devastating attacks posed a problem that could not be effectively addressed in the customary manner of the Old Geopolitics, that is, by a reliance on hard power - waging wars against distant countries as if the adversary was a series of territorial sovereign states rather than a non-territorial network of political extremists.

In this regard, the threats posed by such anti-system forces of resistance can only be successfully addressed effectively by exhausting soft power methods of response, including the identification of legitimate grievances that induced recourse to such desperate violent political behaviour in the first place. To harden territorial boundaries while engaging in a series of failing and bankrupting wars is almost certain to result in authoritarian rule at home while intensifying overseas insecurities.

The old geopolitics persist

In this regard, we live at a perilous historical moment. The Old Geopolitics is relying on hard power regardless of cost or risk, and refusing to heed experience, while the New Geopolitics is struggling with torments of infancy. The minimal model of the New Geopolitics is itself not yet sufficiently clear about how to reconcile national interests with human interests, and so does little to arrest the drift toward ecological catastrophe, systemic shock by systemic shock. The maximal model of the New Geopolitics has not established deep enough political roots to enact its agenda of Global Democracy, and thus cannot challenge the Old Geopolitics or shape the New Geopolitics.

The aftermath of the Arab Spring illustrates this clash between the old and the new. The rise of the people in country after country in the region reflected an attachment to the ideals and practices of substantive democracy. The unexpected regionalisation of this challenge gave a glimpse of a new transformative politics, including distrust of military and police methods of sustaining public order and opposition to Western manipulations. The backlash of regimes, as in Syria, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, and to some extent, Egypt, manifested the resilience of hard power tactics of governance, and their selective reinforcement by the Old Geopolitics. Whether the Libyan intervention should be seen primarily as a Western reversion to Old Geopolitics or some kind of amalgam of Old and New, with the Gulf countries and the UN enlisted as partners in liberating a people from cruel tyranny, will remain a matter of controversy for years to come. Similarly, with Syria, are the external moves for and against the Assad regime in Damascus expressions of the New Geopolitics or some toxic blend of new and old is difficult to discern given the complexities and unknowns of the bloody struggle.

Popular support for the idea of protecting a vulnerable people against the crimes against humanity of a vicious governmental regime can be understood from the perspective of human solidarity, an aspect of the maximal model of the New Geopolitics, but reliance on a military intervention by actors with a variety of suspect strategic motives and the use of interventionary weaponry that is likely to spread the violence, is clearly in the spirit of the Old Geopolitics.

There are no signs at present that the New Geopolitics in either of its main variants will soon replace the Old Geopolitics, but there is plenty of evidence of a sharpening tension between the two modes of sustaining security and development in the early 21st century. We can expect a gradual discrediting from within of the main centres of Old Geopolitics, but as such a process gains leverage, it is almost certain to produce the opposite effect - a tightening of control at home, and an intensification of military operations abroad, exactly the pattern being enacted in the United States by successive presidents from opposite political parties in response to the 9/11 attacks. And within the domain of the New Geopolitics, it is likely that there will be a parallel intensification of tension as the minimalists seek realignment without attending to social and economic inequities, while the maximalists insist on the long march to Global Democracy.

The Chinese proverb is right to remind us that "it is a curse to live in interesting times", but given the changing historical experiences with warfare, the growing sense of great ecological hazard, and the strengthening attachment to the agenda of global justice, maybe just this once, it will turn out to be a blessing.