

CHAPTER 5

REGIONAL STUDIES IN A GLOBAL AGE

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The New Regionalism

Twentieth century strategy was dominated by global conflict. The First and Second World Wars were implacable struggles waged on the world stage, and they were followed by the Cold War, a militarized contest between superpower rivals described by Colin Gray as “a virtual World War III.”¹ Not surprisingly, interstate rivalry propelled by Fritz Fischer’s *Griff nach der Weltmacht (Strike for World Power)* gave rise to theoretical propositions concerning the dynamic of international relations dominated by globalist perspectives.² From the founding of the first university department devoted to the formal study of International Relations at the University of Aberystwyth (Wales) in 1919 to the present, globalist and universalizing theoretical models have been at the core of the profession.

Such models have also defined the practice of American foreign and security policy. The venerable traditions of American isolationism and exceptionalism, integral to the founding of the republic and through most of the nineteenth century the inspiration for a cautious and discrete U.S. world role, were gradually pushed aside against the background of the Great War by the liberal tradition of benign engagement under the aegis of international law, international organization, and collective security. Though Woodrow Wilson’s project for a U.S.-led League of Nations was frustrated by congressional opposition, in the larger picture there would be no return from “over there.” America was a dominant world power from at least 1916 (when the United States became a creditor for the major European powers), and the range of its interests no longer permitted the luxury of an exclusively national or even hemispheric policy focus.

Already on the eve of the Second World War, in his seminal work *The Twenty Years’ Crisis*, E. H. Carr argued that a relative neglect of the role of power and coercion in international affairs had paved the way for the rise of fascism.³ Carr’s “realist” perspective, lent theoretical substance in the United States by transplanted Europeans such as Hans Morgenthau, Arnold Wolfers, and Stanley Hoffman who viewed themselves as tutors for powerful but naive American elites, became the dominant conceptual framework for postwar U.S. policy.⁴ The classical realism of postwar theorists was never a vulgar philosophy of might makes right, though it is sometimes interpreted in that way. Its most prominent promulgators, often European Jews like Morgenthau who had fled the holocaust and were lucidly aware of what unchecked power set to evil ends could affect, were preoccupied with ethical concerns and the need to constrain the inherent violence of anarchic interstate competition.⁵ But the realist tradition made no bones about the need to place power, the global balance of power, and strategic rivalry between competing sovereignties at the center of a globalist worldview. During the Second World War, State Department planners carefully prepared for a policy of engagement based on the purposeful use of U.S. power to shape a congenial international environment.⁶ George Kennan’s containment doctrine, the backbone of U.S. security policy through most of the Cold War decades, was little more than an astute application of realist premises to the management of U.S.-Soviet relations.⁷

Regional conflict was a significant part of Cold War competition, but it too was usually interpreted in a global perspective, as a projection of superpower rivalry into peripheral regions. Architects of U.S. Cold

War strategy like Henry Kissinger could publicly opine about the marginality of third world regions, and assert a great power orientation that perceived the essence of foreign policy as an elegant game of balance between power centers in Washington, London, Paris, Bonn, Moscow, and Beijing.⁸ Nuclear competition between the superpowers, and the theory of strategic deterrence that was crafted to direct it, encouraged ever more abstract modeling of interstate rivalry. These trends culminated in the 1980s with the emergence of “neo” versions of traditional theoretical paradigms that consciously sought to void international theory of its historicist and humanistic foundations. Kenneth Waltz’s neo-realist argument used austere logic in interpreting interstate competition as an abstract calculus of power.⁹ The related schools of game and rational choice theory sought to use mathematical modeling to reproduce the dynamics of foreign policy decisionmaking. Neo-liberal institutionalist models built alternatives to realism on the universalizing trends of interdependence and globalization, sometimes based on a simplistic Benthamite utilitarianism.¹⁰ By the end of the Cold War, much of the rationale for U.S. foreign and security policy rested on assumptions integral to these approaches—the centrality of great power rivalry, the balance of power as the axis of interstate competition, the changing nature of power in an age of globalization where economic strength and various soft power options have accrued in importance, and the need for a competitive strategy to maintain and extend U.S. advantage.

Part of the reigning confusion surrounding the nature of post-Cold War world order derives from the fact that it is no longer defined by an all-consuming rivalry between peer competitors. With a Gross Domestic Product far outdistancing the nearest competitor, levels of defense spending superior to any imaginable combination of rivals, a clear-cut technological advantage, and a strong and stable domestic order, the United States stands head and shoulders above any real or potential rival. The current distribution of world power is objectively hegemonic, and American leadership is less a goal than a fact. In the absence, now and for the foreseeable future, of an authentic peer competitor capable of posing a serious challenge to U.S. dominance, balancing strategies such as that promulgated by Russia’s former Prime Minister Evgenii Primakov, seeking to regenerate a “multipolar” world order in which America would be limited to the status of first among equals, must remain essentially rhetorical.¹¹ Maintaining U.S. status and using the advantages of preeminence to good ends have become primary responsibilities for U.S. security planners.¹² These are tasks that demand different kinds of perceptions and priorities than those motivating policy during the Cold War.

Analyses of new directions in global security policy tend to similar conclusions concerning the kinds of threats to which the United States will be required to respond. In contrast with the focused strategic environment of the Cold War years, these threats will be dispersed rather than concentrated, unpredictable and often unexpected, and significantly derived from regional and state-centered contingencies. The threat of global terrorism, in particular, driven forward by widely dispersed terror networks, is rooted in failed states and marginalized regions denied the benefits of balanced modernization and development. These conclusions rest on shared assumptions about the emerging twenty-first century world order, the changing contours of global security, and the evolving U.S. world role. The new configuration of global power, which combines U.S. preeminence with considerable regional fragmentation and turbulence, ensures that major world regions will be an ever more important target for U.S. engagement—as sources of critical strategic resources, as platforms for geostrategic leverage, as breeding grounds for terrorism, as integral parts of an increasingly interdependent global economy, and as testing grounds for great power will and determination to impose rules of the game. Preeminence does not imply total control. Influence in key world regions will be a significant apple of discord between the hegemonic leader, great power rivals, and influential local powers. Regions and sub-regions will remain the primary forums for armed conflict and instability, with a variety of small wars and protracted stabilization operations posing the greatest demands on a U.S. military committed to engagement and shaping strategies. Aspiring regional hegemons, sometimes tempted by hopes

of gaining access to weapons of mass destruction, will continue to promote disorder and pose direct threats to important U.S. interests. To navigate effectively under these circumstances, U.S. strategists will have to base international engagement on a sophisticated understanding of major world regions, viewed not only in regard to their place within an overarching structure of world power, but as entities in their own right, including the underlying social, political, and cultural processes that make the national and regional context unique.

For all of these reasons, regional studies will remain a necessary foundation for an integrated curriculum in national security policy and planning. If the twentieth century has been the century of global conflagration, the twenty-first century seems poised to become the century of regional disaggregation. New directions in international relations theory, cast around concepts such as turbulence and chaos theory, have been honed to highlight these trends.¹³ For U.S. policymakers, the challenge will be to integrate regional perspectives, and sensitivities to national and regional dynamics, into a realistic and balanced approach to the pursuit of global security; not to question the relevance of regional perspectives (which should be self-evident), but to better understand the ways in which they need to be joined to a comprehensive strategy for the pursuit of national interest.

What Is a Region?

Regions may be defined and distinguished according to an approximate combination of geographic, social, cultural, and political variables. Unambiguous distinctions, however, will always be elusive. As an analytical category in international relations, the “region” is fated to remain contingent and contentious. Geographic contiguity is clearly a prerequisite for regional identity, but drawing uncontested boundaries is usually an impossible task.¹⁴ The concept of “eastern Europe” once had a fairly high degree of integrity, but since 1989 it has virtually disappeared from the political lexicon. The phrase “Middle East,” which was originally the product of colonialist and Eurocentric world views, continues to be used (often rendered as a “Greater Middle East”) to describe an extremely diverse area stretching from the Maghreb into distant Central Asia. Meanwhile, the designation of an eastern Mediterranean Levant has fallen out of fashion. The Balkans has been regarded as a distinctive European sub-region for well over a century, but almost any Balkan state with elsewhere to turn rejects the designation unambiguously.¹⁵ “All regions,” writes Andrew Hurrell with some justification, “are socially constructed and hence politically contested.”¹⁶

One of the more influential recent attempts to delineate regions according to cultural criteria has been Samuel Huntington’s clash of civilizations thesis. Huntington identifies nine world civilizational zones based significantly, though not entirely, on confessional affiliation.¹⁷ The argument that geostrategy will be increasingly dominated by civilizational conflict waged along the “faultlines” dividing these zones has been widely used to explain the apparent upsurge in ethnic conflict of the recent past. Huntington’s argument, however, is neither entirely novel nor altogether convincing. Geopolitical analysis has long used the idea of the “shatterbelt,” defined as a politically fragmented and ethnically divided zone that serves as a field of competition between continental and maritime powers.¹⁸ Great civilizations cannot be precisely bounded spatially, and they are rarely either entirely homogenous or mutually exclusive. Huntington’s attempt to designate geographically bounded civilizational zones and to use these zones as the foundation for a theory of geostrategy rests on suspect premises.

Barry Buzan has developed the concept of the “regional security complex” in an effort “to offset the tendency of power theorists to underplay the importance of the regional level in international security affairs.”¹⁹ He makes the assertion that in security terms, “‘region’ means that a distinct and significant subsystem of security relations exists among a set of states whose fate is that they have been locked into

geographical proximity with each other.”²⁰ The existence of a “subsystem” of security relations presumes high levels of interdependence, multiple interactions, and shared sensitivities and vulnerabilities. Any attempt to identify such complexes empirically, however, poses obvious problems.²¹ Regional security complexes are rarely, if ever, defined exclusively by geographic proximity, they are often dominated by external powers, and they are sometimes held hostage by national-cultural variables or systemic dynamics. The United States is the focus of functioning security complexes in both Europe and Asia. Turkey and Israel lie within different security complexes according to most of Buzan’s criteria, but they have developed a close bilateral relationship that impacts significantly on their relations with contiguous states. Transnational threats such as terrorism, international crime, drug trafficking, illegal migration, or environmental disintegration also overlap regions and create dynamics of association that prevent security complexes from becoming significantly self-contained.

The United States makes an approximate distinction between geographic regions in the Unified Command Plan that lies at the basis of its warfighting strategy by fixing the contours of unified command areas assigned to combatant commanders. This approach originally evolved from the division of responsibilities adapted by the United States to fight the Second World War, and was formalized by the National Security Act of 1947. Over the years the geographic division of responsibility has been adapted repeatedly on the basis of changes in the international security structure, technological advances, and strategic calculation, but also bureaucratic infighting over areas of responsibility and access to resources. Combatant commanders have recently been required to draw up an annual Theater Engagement Plan defining regional shaping priorities, but they are primarily warfighters, and the division of responsibility that the current unified command plan structure embodies is geared to position the United States to prevail in armed confrontations. Contemporary U.S. national security strategy, mandating readiness to fight two nearly simultaneous major theater wars, has concentrated the attention of the combatant commanders on the areas where such conflicts are presumed to be most likely—in the Middle East/Southwest Asian and Western Pacific/Northeast Asian theaters. The regional distinctions built into the Unified Command Plan are arbitrary, but they are geared to the performance of the functional tasks of warriors and do not always rest on careful conceptual distinctions.

David Lake and Patrick Morgan define region minimally as “a set of countries linked by geography and one or more common trends such as level of development, culture, or political institutions.”²² Their definition has the advantages of simplicity, but it is potentially too broad to be really useful and is also possibly misleading. The nation-state is sometimes an inadequate building bloc for regional complexes. Any viable definition of the post-Soviet Central Asian region would have to include China’s Xinjiang province, whose population is composed of 60 percent Turkic Muslims. Russia’s far eastern provinces are an integral part of the Asia-Pacific region, while the core of historic Russia is an extension, both geographically and culturally, of a greater Europe. Ukraine’s population is divided politically along the line of the Dnipro River, with the western provinces affiliating with an enlarged central Europe and the eastern provinces oriented toward the Russian Federation and Eurasia. Northern Mexico and southern California have become intimately associated as a result of high levels of economic interaction and cross-border movement of peoples.²³ The European Union (EU) has even sought to institutionalize transnational communities by creating multistate districts designated as “Euro-regions.”²⁴ The commonalities used to distinguish regions cannot be terminated artificially at national boundaries, and “one or more common trends” is too weak a foundation for association to give regional designations analytical substance.

In its regional studies curriculum, the U.S. Army War College designates six major world regions on the basis of broad geographic criteria—Europe, the Middle East, Africa, Russia and Eurasia, the Asia-Pacific region, and the Americas. These are designations of convenience intended primarily for pedagogical

purposes. Our working definition of what constitutes a region is, of necessity, broad and multidimensional. Geographic propinquity; a sense of identity and self-awareness based on shared experience, ascribed traits, or language; a degree of autonomy within the international state system; relatively high levels of transactions; economic interdependencies; and political and cultural affinity may all be cited as relevant criteria. It is presumed that there will be gray areas and significant overlap between regions however they are defined. The Turkish Republic, for example, is simultaneously part of a wider Europe, a greater Middle East, and post-Soviet Eurasia. No single set of associations is essential, and, in the best of cases, fixing the contours of major world regions and sub-regions will remain a problematic exercise.

World Regions and World Order

However regions are defined and differentiated, the impact of local, national, and regional dynamics on world politics is substantial and destined to grow larger. For the foreseeable future, effective strategy will require sensitivity to the various ways in which regional affairs condition the global security agenda, channel and constrain U.S. priorities, and affect a changing world order.

Regional Instability, Regional Conflict, and Embedded Terrorism

Regional instability poses diverse kinds of challenges to U.S. interests. Iraq's occupation of Kuwait in 1990 placed a critical mass of Middle Eastern oil reserves in the hands of an ambitious and hostile regional power, thus posing a clear threat to vital interests. Such dramatic scenarios will not occur very often, but the potential consequences are so great as to demand high degrees of readiness. "Rogue states," which aspire to regional hegemony and whose leaders are often defiant of international norms, are now acknowledged as a distinct threat in their own right. The most persistent challenges of recent years have been the chronic instability born of flawed regional orders marked by severe impoverishment, unequal development, frustrated nationalism, ethnic rivalry, and the "failed state" phenomenon where weak polities lose the capacity to carry out the basic tasks of governance. Embedded terrorism, exploiting failed regional systems as sanctuaries for the pursuit of global agendas, has been a dramatic consequence.

In the post-Cold War period, the U.S. armed forces have been called upon to participate in an unprecedented number of complex contingency operations ranging from simple non-combatant evacuations to extensive, protracted, and dangerous peace enforcement and peacekeeping duties. The logic of U.S. engagement is usually impeccable. Unchecked regional or civil conflicts risk escalation with broadening consequences; threaten the credibility of the United States, its allies, and major international instances as guarantors of world order; and confront decisionmakers with horrendous and morally intolerable humanitarian abuses. But the United States should not feel obligated, nor can it afford, to take on the role of global policeman. Protracted and open-ended peacekeeping deployments risk undermining combat readiness by disrupting training routines, eroding the morale of the volunteer force, and posing the constant possibility of deeper and higher-risk engagement. *Shaping* regional complexes to head off resorts to coercive conflict behavior, and *responding* to regional challenges, if possible, preemptively and under the aegis of international organizations or multinational coalitions, have, as a result, become pillars of U.S. security policy.

The challenges of civil war and low-intensity regional conflict will not go away or diminish. In a larger historical perspective, it seems clear that the total wars of the twentieth century have been exceptional events rather than typical ones. Prior to our century, technological limitations made the concept of "world" war unthinkable—warfare, of necessity, was waged within physically constrained theaters on the regional level. Ironically, the technological possibilities unveiled with the creation of massive nuclear arsenals during the Cold War have once again made the outbreak of hegemonic warfare between great power rivals highly

unlikely, as well as eminently undesirable. The increasing lethality (and expense) of modern conventional armaments only further raises the threshold of total war. While the Kantian thesis that great power warfare has become obsolete may or may not be credible, it rests on substantial foundations.²⁵ If for no other reasons than those imposed by the evolving technology of violence, wars and armed confrontations are today once again being contested almost exclusively as low and medium intensity conflicts on the local and regional level. “In the foreseeable future,” write Lake and Morgan, “violent conflict will mostly arise out of regional concerns and will be viewed by political actors through a regional, rather than global, lens.”²⁶

In some ways, Cold War bipolarity worked to constrain regional conflict. Neither superpower could afford to tolerate an uncontrolled escalation of regional rivalry that risked drawing it into a direct confrontation, and regional allies were consistently pressured to limit their aspirations and bend to the will of their great power sponsors.²⁷ It is difficult to imagine that the anarchic disintegration of the Yugoslav Federation would have been allowed to proceed unchecked in 1991 had the fragile European balance of terror of the Cold War system still been at risk. The extent of such constraint nonetheless may be exaggerated. Many of the regional conflicts of the Cold War era—in southern Africa, the Horn of Africa, Afghanistan, the Middle East, or southern Asia—have perpetuated themselves into the post-Cold War period. Cumulatively, post-World War II regional conflicts have occasioned the deaths of over 25 million individuals, and the incidence and intensity of such conflicts continues to increase.

A composite portrait of post-Cold War regional conflict calls attention to the difficulties involved in programming effective responses. The large majority of contemporary “limited” wars are civil wars or wars of secession, waged with the ferocity that is typical of such contests. Combat operations often include the significant engagement of poorly controlled and disciplined irregular forces. The bulk of casualties are innocent civilians, sometimes including genocidal massacre and forced population transfers (ethnic cleansing). While often obscure in terms of their origins, such conflicts are usually highly visible. The modern mass media, commercially driven and chronically in search of sensation, brings regional chaos “into the living room” and generates popular pressure to respond that political leaders often find difficult to ignore. Limited and often frustrated or only partly successful intervention by the international community in the role of would-be peacemaker is another shared trait that gives many contemporary regional conflicts a fairly uniform contour. Wayne Burt notes correctly that, in comparison with the structured context of Cold War bipolarity, the “post-Cold War world is a much ‘messier’ world where limited conflict will be fought for limited and often shifting objectives, and with strategies that are difficult to formulate, costs that are uncertain, and entrance and exit points that are not obvious.”²⁸

As undisputed world leader, and the only major power with significant global power projection capacity, the United States is often compelled to react to such conflicts whether or not it has truly vital interests at stake. America’s ability to manage and shape the conflict process is nonetheless severely limited. A decade of struggling with regional conflict in post-communist Yugoslavia, including intensive diplomatic efforts, punitive air strikes, large and open-ended peacekeeping deployments, and a full-scale war over Kosovo, has led to what may at best be described as a mixed result.²⁹ Peace enforcement and peacekeeping responsibilities have been carried out with impressive efficiency, but the much more problematic and politically charged task of post-conflict peace building has proven to be something close to a mission impossible.³⁰

Since the terrorist attacks against New York and Washington on 11 September 2001, the phenomenon of embedded terrorism has become another manifestation of how regional instability may provoke intense political violence. U.S. military actions in Afghanistan and Iraq have been designed to strike at terror nests, but it has quickly become apparent that defeating designated enemies is only part of the challenge. Post-conflict reconstruction efforts have demanded an increasingly sophisticated awareness of local norms and

values, and heightened sensitivities to the cultural context within which stability operations are being pursued. Army Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan have striven to develop closer working relations with local populations and build a foundation of trust based on mutual understanding that will make it more difficult for terrorist cells to relocate in the areas in the future.

The United States has made the maintenance of regional stability a pillar of its security strategy, but the forces of disintegration at work in many world regions are daunting. Effective responses will, first of all, require some selectivity in choosing targets for intervention. When we do elect to become involved, our efforts should be based on a much greater awareness of regional realities than has been manifested in the recent past. We will also need to make better use of friends and allies. Regional instability is often best addressed by local actors, who usually have the largest vested interest in blocking escalation, and in some cases regionally based conflict management initiatives can become a significant stimulus to broader patterns of regional cooperation. Engaging allies and relevant multilateral forums in managing regional conflict, as the United States has sought to do with the African Crisis Response Initiative, should be a high national priority.

Geopolitics

Many currently fashionable approaches to international relations assume the decline of territoriality as a motive for state behavior. The dominant trend in world politics is persistently, albeit vaguely, described as globalization, implying a rapid increase in interactions fueled by revolutions in communications and information management, the emergence of a truly global market and world economy, the primacy of economic competition as a mode of interstate rivalry, and an unprecedented space-time compression that places unique demands on decisionmakers.³¹ The globalization scenario is built on overarching generalizations about world order, and it rests on universalizing premises that leave little space for sticky concern with the intricacies of regional affairs. There are alternatives to theoretical perspectives cast on so high a level of abstraction, however, and they bring regional issues to the forefront of international discourse. Most important among them is the tradition of geopolitics.

The core challenge of geopolitical analysis is to link the systematic study of spatial and geographical relations with the dynamic of interstate politics. As a formal discipline, geopolitics dates from the late nineteenth century work of the Leipzig professor Friedrich Ratzel. His 1897 study *Politische Geographie* (*Political Geography*) presents states as organisms with a quasi-biological character, rooted in their native soil, embedded in a distinctive spatial context or *Lebensraum* (living space), and condemned to either grow and expand or wither away.³² In the works of various contemporaries and successors, including Alfred Thayer Mahan, Rudolf Kjellén, Halford Mackinder, Alfred de Severing, Klaus Haushofer, and Nicholas John Spykman, these insights have been pushed in a number of directions. The strong influence of geopolitic categories, especially as transmitted through the work of Haushofer, on Adolf Hitler's strategic program during the 1930s has brought enduring discredit on the discipline, widely but unfairly regarded as a vulgar amalgam of social Darwinism and military expansionism. In fact, in its manifold and not always consistent manifestations, geopolitical analysis presents a range of alternative strategic perceptions whose common ground is a sense of the permanent and enduring relevance of spatial, cultural, and environmental factors in world politics.³³ These are also the factors that stand at the foundation of regional studies.

Geopolitics is rooted in the study of geography, broadly but relevantly defined by Saul Cohen as "spatial patterns and relations that reflect dynamic physical and human processes."³⁴ Geography is a rich and complex construct that provides a context for weighing the impact of a number of significant but often neglected variables. These include ethnicity, nationalism, and the politics of identity; access to natural and strategic resources; geostrategy and the role of lines of communication and strategic choke points; relations

between human communities and their natural environment; and the strategic implications of increasing environmental stress. It encompasses demographic issues such as population growth, cycles of migration and changing patterns of population distribution, and “decisionmaking milieu” including Huntingtonian civilizational zones, political systems and political cultures, as well as the spatial distribution of power in the world system.

Geopolitical analysis is best known in the West as refracted by Halford Mackinder’s heartland concept, which defines control of the Eurasian landmass as the key to world power. Mackinder distinguished between a *World-Island* encompassing the joined continents of Europe, Asia, and Africa, the Eurasian *Heartland* approximately equivalent to Russia and Central Asia, and the *Rimlands* (including east-central Europe) along the Eurasian periphery. “Who rules East Europe,” he wrote in a famous passage, “controls the Heartland. Who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island. Who rules the World-Island commands the World.”³⁵ Mackinder was not a fascist militarist, but a moderate professor and civil servant, whose thinking lay at the foundation of British strategy through much of the twentieth century. By calling attention to the spatial dimensions of grand strategy, his work points out the extent to which geostrategic concepts have been and continue to be at the heart of modern statecraft.

A striking contemporary illustration of the continuing impact of geopolitical perspectives is provided by the heartland power *par excellence*, the Russian Federation, where disillusionment with the gilded promises of globalization and integration with the U.S.-led world economy have led to a rapid and broadly influential revival of geopolitical theory.³⁶ The new Russian geopolitics has been dismissed in the West as a manifestation of radical extremism, a sort of Russian fascism born of the post-communist malaise.³⁷ In fact, core geopolitical perceptions (the need to maintain the integrity of the Russian Federation, the call to reassert a strong sphere of influence in the territories of the former Soviet Union, the cultural distinctiveness of the Russian Idea and its historical role as a force for integration in the expanses of Eurasia, the need for alliances to balance and contest American hegemony) have moved into the mainstream of Russian strategic thought and enjoy strong support.

Haushofer has written that “geopolitics is the science of the conditioning of political processes by the earth,” and that “the essence of regions as comprehended from the geopolitical point of view provides the framework for geopolitics.”³⁸ This is a *plaidoyer* for the concrete and substantial, for a theory of world politics built from the ground up. Effective geopolitical reasoning leads us back to the earth, to the distinctive political communities nested on it, to the patterns of association that develop between them, and to the conflicts that emerge from their interactions. It is not the only school of thought that prioritizes the relevance of geography and regional studies, but it provides a particularly good example of the relevance of the textured study of peoples and places as a foundation for effective strategy.

The Cultural Dimension of Warfare

The maxim “know thy enemy” is often counted as the acme of strategic wisdom. It is unfortunately a maxim that has not always been highly respected in the U.S. military and security communities. War has organizational and technological dimensions that make it a rigorous, practical, and precise enterprise, but wars are also waged between calculating rivals in a domain of uncertainty, and by distinctive political communities in ways that reflect deeply rooted, culturally conditioned preferences.

During the Cold War, the United States made an intense effort to understand the societal and cultural dynamics shaping the perceptions of its Soviet rival, arguably to good effect. In general, however, in-depth knowledge of national and regional cultural dynamics has not been a strong point for U.S. strategy, which has tended to rest on the sturdy pillars of relative invulnerability and the capacity to mobilize overwhelming force.³⁹ In the volatile and uncertain security environment of the years to come, however, the assumption of

technological and material advantage may not be a safe one, nor will these advantages always suffice to ensure superiority in every possible contingency. The People's Republic of China represents a potential long-term rival with considerable assets and great self-confidence, derived in part from a highly distinctive and ancient culture.⁴⁰ Russia's current Time of Troubles has temporarily brought her low, but eventually the inherent strengths that made the USSR so formidable a rival during the Cold War decades will reassert themselves. We confront a long-term struggle to manage the dilemmas of modernization in the Arab and Muslim worlds, and the associated dynamic of terrorism, that will demand sophisticated cultural awareness. The United States will need to know "what makes them tick" if it wants to successfully manage its relations with potential peer competitors and troubled world regions. Effective intervention in complex contingencies will likewise demand in-depth knowledge of real or potential rivals. Strategy is not uniquely the product of culture, and culture itself is not a lucid or unambiguous construct. But all strategy unfolds in a cultural context, and cannot be fully or properly understood outside it.

Colin Gray defines strategic culture as "the socially constructed and transmitted assumptions, habits of mind, traditions, and preferred methods of operation . . . that are more or less specific to a particular geographically based security community."⁴¹ The foundations of strategic culture are the fundamentals of culture itself; shared experience, language, common governance, and values. The cultural orientation that derives from these commonalities, it can be argued, affects the ways in which polities conduct diplomacy, define and pursue interests, and wage war. In his controversial *History of Warfare*, John Keegan suggests that throughout history war has always been an essentially cultural phenomenon, an atavism derived from patterns of group identification and interaction rather than the purposeful activity implied in Clausewitz's famous dictum that "war is the continuation of politics by other means."⁴² Victor Hanson argues that the ancient Greek preference for physical confrontation and quick decision has created a "Western way of war" dominated by a search for decisive battle and strategies of annihilation, a tradition that remains alive to this day.⁴³ Such conclusions are extreme, but they are useful in underlining the fact that wars are conceived, plotted, and waged by socially conditioned human agents.

As a dominant global power the United States will be called upon to wage war in a variety of contexts in the years to come. A better understanding of the strategic cultures of real or potential adversaries will place another weapon in its arsenal and strengthen prospects for success. In Bernard Brodie's classic formulation, "good strategy presumes good anthropology and sociology. Some of the greatest military blunders of all time have resulted from juvenile evaluations in this department."⁴⁴ Knowing the enemy goes well beyond order of battle, to the sources of strategic preference and military operational codes that are grounded in the social and cultural context of distinctive nations and regions.⁴⁵

Espaces de Sens: Regional Alliance and Association

The Cold War was a phase of intense global competition manifested in ideological polarization, arms racing, and militarized regional rivalry. It nonetheless offered a structure of purposeful endeavor for its leading protagonists, as well as for critics who sought alternatives to what they perceived as the dead-end of belligerent bipolarity. The USSR justified its international policy on the basis of a distinctively Soviet variant of Marxism-Leninism. The United States consciously developed its Cold War strategy as a defense of the values of freedom and democracy. Various non-aligned alternatives called for a plague upon both houses, and sought to develop a third way independent of either power bloc. Regardless of where one stood, world politics took on the contours of a moral tale infused with meaning.

The end of the Cold War was accompanied by a certain euphoria captured by Francis Fukuyama's "End of History" thesis, according to which the demise of the communist challenge meant "the end of history as such: that is, the end point in mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal

democracy as the final form of human government.”⁴⁶ Fukuyama’s sweepingly optimistic argument promised an era of global harmony in which interstate strategic rivalry would give way to cooperation under the impetus of democratization, development, and consumerism, promoted by a benign American hegemony. In place of a contest of values, Fukuyama’s Hegelian vision looked forward to the unchallenged primacy of the culture of the West.

Needless to say, nothing of the kind has transpired. The post-Cold War period has been marked by regional turbulence, torturous and sometimes unsuccessful post-communist transitions, violent ethnic conflict, the rise of global terrorism as a major challenge to the premises of world order, and continued, if sometimes muted, great power rivalry. Western values are contested rather than embraced, and the absence of a compelling sense of overall direction, of a larger domestic or international project, of a source of signification and meaning, has arguably become a problem in its own right. Uncertainty about direction has also contributed to strategic confusion. The suspicion or rejection of large civilizational projects that has become so prominent a part of contemporary post-structuralist and social constructivist approaches to international theory, often accompanied by quasi-indifference to any kind of strategic analysis whatsoever, reflects the state of affairs with great clarity.⁴⁷

The United Nations, symbol of an earlier generation’s aspirations for a more peaceful world order, has languished during the post-Cold War decade. In contrast, projects for regional association have flourished. Realist theory portrays the formation of alliances and regional blocs as an “outside-in” phenomenon, occurring as a response to real or perceived external challenges, whether via “balancing” efforts to correct a maldistribution of power, or “bandwagoning” whereby weak polities seek to dilute threats through association with a hegemonic leader.⁴⁸ Neo-mercantilist approaches follow an identical pattern in explaining regional association as a logical response to enhanced international economic competition. But regional association may also be understood as a function of “inside-out” dynamics driven by social and cultural trends. Zaki Laïdi has argued that, in the face of the universalizing tendencies of globalization, meaningful civilizational projects can only be constructed on a regional basis, as *espaces de sens* (spaces of meaning) bound together by a complex of historical, social, cultural, political, and economic associations.⁴⁹ These are contrasting arguments, but they are not mutually exclusive. Both “outside-in” and “inside-out” approaches to regional association need to be combined in an effort to come to terms with a phenomenon that has the potential to transform world politics root and branch.⁵⁰

The “new regionalism” is manifested both by the revitalization of traditional regional organizations and the creation of new forms of regional association. Large regional or sub-regional blocs with a history of institutionalization, such as the EU, the African Union, the Organization of American States (OAS), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), often have a strong security orientation, though today their focus is more often placed on internal conflict management than external threats.⁵¹ The proliferation of regional projects for economic integration, including some of the organizations listed above as well as others such as the North American Free Trade Association (NAFTA), the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum (APEC), the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the Arab Magreb Union (AMU), the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR), the Andean Pact, the Central America Common Market (CACM), the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), has an obvious economic logic, but also a strong cultural foundation; within these broadly drawn and sometimes overlapping zones of association one may observe a powerful revival of regional and sub-regional awareness and identity. In other cases, functionalist logic prevails. Regional associations are sometimes appropriate forums for approaching large global problems such as environmental disintegration, occasioned on the systemic level but not always effectively addressed on that level.

Regional alliances and associations play a critical role in U.S. strategy. The most important by far is the Atlantic Alliance, uniquely successful as a formal security association over many decades, but an organization whose *raison d'être* has been called into question in the new circumstances of the post-Cold War. NATO was originally built up and maintained as an organization for collective defense against a clear and present external threat. The collapse of the USSR and the disappearance of the Warsaw Pact have made this aspect of its identity considerably less important, if not altogether irrelevant, but the Alliance has adapted by restructuring itself as a “new NATO” including commitments to enlargement, out of area peace operations, and gradual movement toward a broader collective security orientation. Former Secretary General Javier Solana describes the process extravagantly, as a “root and branch transformation” aimed to create “a new Alliance, far removed in purpose and structure from its Cold War ancestor,” inspired by the premise of “cooperative security.”⁵² This “new” NATO is arguably more important than ever in the broader context of U.S. security policy, as a platform for power projection, as a forum for managing relations with key allies, as an instrument for reaching out to the emerging democracies of eastern Europe, as the foundation for a new European security order, and as a context for engaging the Russian Federation in a cooperative security effort.

The Atlantic Alliance is also a regional pact, whose stability has always been presumed to rest in part on close historical and cultural associations between the United States and its European partners. Unfortunately, the new NATO will not have the luxury of assuming that a close cultural affinity will continue to link both sides of the Atlantic indefinitely. Changing demographic balances in the United States are reducing the proportion of citizens with European roots and heritage. Enlargement has made NATO itself a politically and culturally more diverse organization, where decision by consensus will be harder to achieve. Most of all, the project for European unification is moving slowly but steadily toward the goal of a more autonomous European subject possessed of the capacity to pursue an independent foreign and security policy. Managing regional conflict in the Balkans placed strains on alliance mechanisms. The Kosovo conflict generated considerable tension between the United States and its European allies, key allies were disappointed by the U.S. decision not to leverage the Alliance in a more significant way during its initial campaign in Afghanistan, and differences over the choice of a military option against Saddam Hussein's Iraq in 2003 brought alliance partners to the brink of an overt break. NATO continues to rest on secure foundations, but friction in trans-Atlantic relations persists and it likely to grow stronger as the European project continues to unfold and efforts to bolster a European defense identity progress. Alliance management, based on a careful appreciation of changing European realities and awareness of the cultural specificities of key European partners, will be an ever more important strategic task.

Other forms of regional association represent potential dangers. At least since the Iranian revolution of 1979, concern for an emerging “Islamic threat” has been prominent in U.S. policy circles. These concerns, to some extent understandably, have become considerably more prominent since the attacks of 11 September 2001. Somewhat less prominent, unfortunately, has been an informed understanding of what Islam is and is not, as a religion, as a philosophy of governance, and as a way of life.⁵³ The possible solidification of a Russian-Chinese strategic axis, which would rest in large measure on mutual alienation from the West, has the potential to effect global power balances significantly, and the European Union clearly aspires to challenge the United States economically. Contesting, co-opting, and counteracting these kinds of patterns will remain an important priority for U.S. planners.

There is an unmistakable momentum pushing in the direction of stronger local and regional identities and more robust regional association. For some analysts, the trend is part and parcel of a “retreat from the state” occasioned by changes in the locus of power in the global political economy, whose logical endpoint will be a “new medievalism” in which alternative forms of political association, with a more pronounced

regional character, will eventually come to prevail.⁵⁴ Whether or not such forecasts are correct, shifting patterns of association and the heightened visibility of a variety of regional forums are clear manifestations of the increased relevance of regional perspectives in global security affairs.

Conclusions

The foundations of regional studies have changed remarkably little over time. Substantive understanding of major world regions demands a thorough mastery of the relevant specialized literature, careful and persistent monitoring of events and trends, appropriate language skills, and a period of sustained residence allowing for immersion in regional realities accompanied by periodic visits to keep perceptions up-to-date. Regionalists need refined skills that demand a considerable investment of time and resources to create and maintain. If the argument presented in this chapter is correct, however, and regional dynamics will, in fact, become an increasingly important part of the international security agenda in the years to come, the investment will be well worth making.

Although the confines of major world regions and sub-regions are difficult to fix with a great deal of consistency and rigor, the relevance of local, national, and regional perspectives in international political analysis is more or less uncontested. For U.S. strategists in the post-Cold War period, the importance of such perspectives is particularly great. In the absence of a peer competitor, significant challenges to U.S. interests are most likely to emerge from various kinds of regional instability, including threatened access to critical strategic resources, the emergence of “rogue” states with revisionist agendas, embedded terrorism, and persistent low and medium intensity conflict. In an increasingly integrated world system, geographic, cultural, and environmental factors that are importantly or uniquely manifested in the regional context will play an increasingly important role in shaping national priorities and international realities. Strategic culture is a vital context for warfighting, as relevant to contests with peer competitors as it is to clashes with less imposing adversaries in regional contingencies. Shifting patterns of regional association, often motivated by a heightened sense of regional identity and a search for meaning and relative security in the face of the impersonal and sometimes dehumanizing forces of globalization, is an important worldwide trend. None of these dynamics can be properly incorporated into U.S. security strategy without a solid understanding of regional decisionmaking milieus and cultural proclivities.

To assert the importance of regional approaches in a balanced strategic studies curriculum is not to deny the relevance of alternative perspectives. Universalizing theory is essential and unavoidable. The formal and technical specializations necessary to make sense of political and military affairs are ineluctable. And there is the ever-present danger of regionalists falling into a narrow preoccupation with local problems and personalities, while missing the larger structural forces at work in the background. In context, however, and approached with appropriate modesty, regional perspectives have an essential place in strategy formulation.

The U.S. Army War College builds a regional studies component into its core curriculum, structured around the six major world regions mentioned above and focused on the effort to define and understand U.S. interests at stake on the regional level. Students are exposed to an in-depth study of a particular region and to an overview of all six world regions as a foundation for the school’s capstone exercise, which tests their ability to manage a series of overlapping regional crises in an integrated political-military framework. Students are expected to become familiar with the general historical, cultural, political, military, and economic characteristics of the six major world regions; to evaluate U.S. national and security interests in these regions and to identify the kinds of challenges that are most likely to emerge; and to develop a regional strategic assessment that identifies alternative courses of action that can lead toward the achievement of U.S. national security objectives. The skills and expertise garnered during this bloc of

instruction should make a vital contribution to the cultivation of future strategic leaders.

Regional strategic analysis is also of particular relevance to Army leaders. Though we live in the age of jointness, the Army remains the service branch primarily charged with placing boots on the ground in regional contingencies. Its operational environment is the land where people live and societies are rooted, and it must at a minimum come to terms with the geographical realities of the places where it is constrained to operate and the cultural characteristics of the peoples it is charged to fight or to protect. The emphasis on regional studies in the U.S. Army War College strategy curriculum stands out among our senior service schools. Experience, as well as common sense, shows that it is an emphasis well-placed.

Notes - Chapter 5

1 Colin S. Gray, *Modern Strategy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 9.

2 *Griff nach der Weltmacht* is the original title of Fischer's influential book asserting German responsibility for the outbreak of the First World War, translated into English as Fritz Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War*, New York: W. W. Norton, 1967.

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4 The key text is Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 5th ed., New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978.

5 Michael Smith, *Realist Thought from Weber to Kissinger*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986.

6 Patrick J. Hearden, *Architects of Globalism: Building a New World Order During World War II*, Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 2002.

7 George F. Kennan, *Memoirs: 1925-1950*, Boston: Little, Brown, 1967, pp. 39-40, and the original conception published incognito under the designation "X," "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," *Foreign Affairs*, No. 4, July 1947, pp. 566-582.

8 Note the analysis in Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994, pp. 703-732.

9 Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979.

10 See, for example, Robert O. Keohane, *International Institutions and State Power*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1989; and David A. Baldwin, ed., *Neorealism and Neoliberalism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.

11 Evgenii Primakov, "Na gorizonte—mnogopolisnyi mir," *Mezhdunarodnaia zhizn'*, No. 10, 1996, pp. 3-13.

12 Richard N. Haas, "What to do With American Primacy," *Foreign Affairs*, September-October 1999, pp. 37-49.

13 James N. Rosenau, *Turbulence in World Politics: A Theory of Change and Continuity*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990.

14 See Bruce Russett, *International Regions and the International System*, Chicago: Rand McNally, 1967.

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16 Andrew Hurrell, "Explaining the Resurgence of Regionalism in World Politics," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 4, October 1995, p. 334.

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18 Philip Kelly, "Escalation of Regional Conflict: Testing the Shatterbelt Concept," *Political Geography Quarterly*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 1986, pp. 161-180.

19 Barry Buzan, *People, States & Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era*, 2nd ed., New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991, p. 186.

20 Ibid., p. 188, and the entire discussion on pp. 186-229.

21 For an example of regional analysis inspired by Buzan's premises, see Svante E. Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers: A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus*, Richmond: Curzon Caucasus World, 2002.

22 David A. Lake and Patrick M. Morgan, "The New Regionalism in Security Affairs," in David A. Lake and Patrick M. Morgan, eds., *Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World*, University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997, p. 11.

23 See Abraham F. Lowenthal and Katrina Burgess, eds., *The California-Mexico Connection*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993.

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31 Kenichi Ohmae, *The Borderless World*, London: Fontana, 1991.

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35 Cited from Glassner, *Political Geography*, pp. 226-227.

36 See Aleksandr Dugin, *Misterii Evrazii*, Moscow: Arktogeia, 1996; and *Osnovy geopolitiki: Geopoliticheskoe budushchee Rossii*, Moscow: Arktogeia, 1997. The prestigious Russian military journal *Voennaia mysl'* (*Military Thought*) publishes a regular series of articles devoted to geopolitics.

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38 K. Haushofer, E. Obst, H. Lautenbach, and O. Maull, *Bausteine zur Geopolitik*, Berlin: Kurt Vowinkel Verlag, 1928, p. 27.

39 See Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Strategy and Policy*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973. These preferences, of course, are an integral part of an American strategic culture.

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42 John Keegan, *A History of Warfare*, New York: Vintage Books, 1993.

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