The Traps of Geopolitical Discourse and the Mandate for New Thinking
By Kent E. Calder

The growing concern about the resurgence of geopolitics is driven largely by Russia’s expansionist moves in Ukraine and China’s assertiveness in pushing its maritime claims. As real as these and other issues are, they do not herald a return to a Cold War era of great power confrontation.

Growing numbers of non-state actors, regional bodies and even influential cities are also crucial factors in international relations, writes Kent E. Calder. It is time to rethink traditional discussions of the global order.

IN THE WAKE of Russia’s Crimea annexation and covert intervention in eastern Ukraine, fears of a return to Cold War geopolitics are rising worldwide. For many, these apprehensions are further magnified by developments in Asia — the rivalries of Japan and China in the East China Sea; China’s off-shore confrontations with Vietnam and the Philippines 2,000 kilometers to the southwest; and Indian tensions with both Pakistan and China another 3,000 kilometers further west. It goes without saying that continuing concerns worldwide about the maneuverings of great powers around the periphery of the Korean Peninsula are also part of the mix. No one can deny that there are important geopolitical pressures in the post-Cold War world, with many of them intensifying even since the end of 2012. Russia under President Vladimir Putin has become more intent than ever on reversing the painful collapse of the Soviet Union, especially since the sudden overthrow of the Yanukovich government in the Ukraine early in 2014. A rising China has become more assertive around its maritime frontiers since Xi Jinping became President in early 2013. And Japan has arguably grown more assertive and nationalistic since the advent of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s administration in December 2012.

Yet foreign policies have much more complex origins than geopolitics, the impact of which can in any case be counterweighted and neutralized. The world does indeed face persistent geopolitical rivalries and tensions, to be sure, but they can be managed and are hardly the most serious long-range threats to peace. Indeed, as I will argue, geopolitical discourse can blind us to multiple long-run dangers, and to all-too-often neglected tools of conflict resolution, even as they lead to tragic misallocations of scarce financial resources. There is a desperate need today for new thinking about the multiple chessboards of international relations beyond the nation state, and how they can neutralize and redirect geopolitical tendencies among nations, including those emanating from Russia and China.

We do not need to look far to see the perils of excessive reliance on geopolitical thinking. In the late summer of 2001, for example, the George W. Bush administration was obsessed with the nuclear balance amid a vigorous national debate on whether the United States should withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. What followed, weeks later on September 11, was a dramatic, damaging and totally unrelated terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon itself. Similarly, for four decades after the onset of the Korean War, the geopolitically tinged configuration of Soviet land forces around Berlin and the Fulda Gap in central Germany were seen as overwhelmingly important matters of national security. Following the sudden breach of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, followed by the reunification of Germany and the collapse of the Soviet Union soon after, strategists worldwide came to see security threats in a radically new light. In recent days, we have been painfully reminded by the rise of ISIS and a surge of beheadings and other terrorist outrages that geopolitical jostling in the Ukraine is far from the only security challenge that civilized nations confront.

There are at least four major chessboards in international affairs:

1) The sub-national, where local NGOs as well as municipal actors such as the governments of New York, London and Seoul reside;

2) The trans-national, populated by multinational corporations, the C-40 (an association of big-city leaders worldwide, founded by former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg), the Catholic Church, al-Qaeda and ISIS;

3) The supra-national, where the European Union, the IMF, the World Bank and the United Nations abide; and finally

4) The national, which is the realm of Vladimir Putin, Barack Obama and most of the global actors with which international relations analysis is typically preoccupied. Despite our preoccupation with national policies and the actions of nation states, however, the determinants of international conflicts — and the ingredients of their resolution — increasingly lie elsewhere. To accurately predict the future and to address global problems effectively, the world needs a much broader analytical net than simply geopolitical analysis.

Apart from the actors on the four global chessboard mentioned above, there are also powerful market forces at work in the configuring of international relations. Markets can inhibit nations from acting against broadly accepted norms and punish those that contravene them. Not surprisingly, capital outflows from Russia in the first three quarters of 2014, amid the Ukraine crisis, totaled around $100 billion. The Russian ruble depreciated more than 6 percent against the US dollar, and a standard Moscow-based exchange-traded fund (RSX) declined by over 15 percent. Similarly, Japanese foreign investment in China, which had previously been a central element of Chinese capital inflow, fell sharply following the 2012 escalation of bilateral tensions in the East China Sea.

In both the 2014 Ukrainian and the 2012 Sino-Japanese case, pressures from financial markets appear to have exerted a moderating influence on geopolitically driven behavior. They did so also in
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Northwest Asia following the Taiwan Strait crisis of early 1996. Significantly, despite all the headlines about geopolitical tension, the world has not experienced major inter-state armed conflict, apart from the depredations of Saddam Hussein and the occasional saber-rattling of North Korea, since the brief Sino-Vietnamese war of 1979. And neither the aggressiveness of Saddam nor North Korean propensities toward violent action can be clearly traced to geopolitics.

Apart from market pressures, forces at the sub-national, trans-national, and supra-national levels all have a profound impact on global patterns of conflict and conflict resolution, often more important than the effect of nation-states themselves, that are not accounted for in geopolitical analysis. It is true, for example, that the Libyan government, led by Muammar Qadaffi, did order the destruction of a Pan Am passenger jet over Lockerbie, Scotland in the mid-1980s, just as North Korean government agents destroyed a Korean Airlines jet over the Andaman Sea during the same era. Yet the vast bulk of terrorist incidents, including the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, or the 2014 beheadings of American and British hostages by ISIS, have been undertaken by trans-national, non-government actors with little if any relation to geopolitics.

To put geopolitical forces in a broader perspective is not, of course, to suggest that it is realistic to aspire to a “world of liberty under law,” as Ann-Marie Slaughter, State Department Director of Policy Planning in the Obama Administration, optimistically suggested several years ago. Revisionist opposition to an open, liberal international order — protectionist interests at the sub-national level; supra-national bodies such as the Shanghai Co-operation Organization; and trans-national bodies ranging from ISIS to Gazprom and Rosneft remain strong. Regional groupings such as Putin’s Eurasian Economic Union, established by treaty in May 2014, or informal, issue-specific ententes such as that between China and Russia on natural-gas development, signed the same month, also complicate prospects for realizing the liberal idealist vision. Eurasian continentalism driven by rising Chinese and Indian energy demand, Russian energy-supply capacity and Western efforts to sanction Russia in the Ukraine are also frustrating the prospects of a more integrated globe.

In the end, the world seems to be moving toward a hybrid pattern of international affairs in which latent and embedded geopolitical pressures resulting from the collapse of the Soviet Union nearly a quarter century ago, and the revisionism of China, Japan and Iran regarding their previous international standing, continue to persist. Yet these pressures are met by countervailing forces such as markets and new, non-geopolitical forces at sub-national and trans-national levels of the international system, as we have seen. It is time for new thinking about the conduct of future international affairs.

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A POST-POST-COLD WAR TRANSITION

Future-oriented architecture in international relations will need to recognize four emerging realities that geopolitical analysis unfortunately does not typically consider:

1) The multiple, inter-related chessboards of international relations on which sub-national, trans-national and supra-national forces also play, often in competition with nation states, as in the case of ISIS in terrorism, or hedge funds in international finance;

2) The powerful role that markets can play in shaping geopolitical competition, usually by inhibiting it;

3) The changing capabilities and constraints of central state actors, including the decline of American hegemony; and

4) The post-Putin, post-Iran, post-China era in which Russia and Iran are weaker, China is stronger, and the United States is less influential in the world.
4) The emergence of sub-global configurations such as Eurasian continentalism or the BRICs group of newly industrializing powers that inhibit liberal internationalism without necessarily intensifying the geopolitical cast of international affairs. Taken together, the emergence of these new forces mandates new priorities and approaches, for both leading powers and smaller nations, not to mention non-state actors, who will grow increasingly important both in setting and implementing global agendas.

The “post-post-Cold War” transition in international affairs that we have seen unfolding over the past two years, in which geopolitical pressures are rising even as non-state actors grow more assertive, creates the following series of new policy imperatives:

1) For the United States, policy restructuring is absolutely imperative, both to limit off-shore land-based military commitments and to restrain ballooning welfare costs at home;

2) The role of cities and civic groupings such as the C-40 coalition of global cities needs to be further appreciated. Given deepening gridlock and policy sclerosis at the nation-state level, cities may be far more effective than nations in addressing global problems ranging from energy efficiency and transportation to crime and the environment; and

3) Multinational democratic coalitions can play important new roles in arresting geopolitical conflict and promoting market-oriented economic progress in world affairs. One particularly promising new configuration could be the MIKTA (Mexico, Indonesia, Korea, Turkey and Australia) Initiative of middle powers, founded at the Los Cabos G-20 summit in 2012 and chaired by South Korea since Sept. 1, 2014. These five emerging, high-growth democratic nations have substantial economic scale, ranking between 12th and 17th in the world in national GDP. They are also, like their BRICs competitors, located in diverse parts of the world, drawing enhanced influence from regional ties as well as G-20 involvement. All five also have constructive and co-operative relations with the major Western industrialized nations, enhancing their ability to arrest geopolitical conflict in broader international relationships.

With China and India rising, Iran and Japan intent on broader influence and Russia apparently striving to re-create the Soviet Union, geopolitical tensions in world affairs will not disappear anytime soon. Yet they need to be kept in perspective — geopolitics can be, and almost invariably is, countervailed by market and domestic pressures. The world has not experienced really serious inter-state warfare in a generation, and it has been nearly 70 years since we have seen a global conflict.

Many of the more immediate threats to human security clearly lie in such areas as terrorism, energy and the environment where the role of cities and new coalitions of middle powers are increasingly important. Analysts and policymakers need to look beyond the shadow of geopolitics in making both predictions and constructive designs for a better world.

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