



# FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

## E-NOTES

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### THE END OF STRATEGIC HAPPY TALK?

#### Thoughts on Robert Kaplan's "[Revenge of Geography](#)"

By Mackubin T. Owens



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<http://www.fpri.org/byauthor.html#owens>

During the decades after the fall of the Soviet Union and the American victory against Iraq in 1991, far too many U.S. policymakers came to accept a vision of the world that can only be described as "strategic happy talk." First, there was the "end of history" narrative, which argued that liberal democracy had triumphed as the universal ideology. While conflict might continue on the peripheries of the liberal world order, the trend was toward a more peaceful and prosperous world. The economic component of the end of history narrative was "globalization," the triumph of liberal capitalism.

The end of history narrative was complemented by that of the "technological optimists" who contended that the United States could maintain its dominant position in the international order by exploiting the "revolution in military affairs" (RMA). The eminent British strategist Colin Gray described the technological optimists as pursuing a technological El Dorado, a "golden city of guaranteed strategic riches."

The rapid coalition victory over Saddam Hussein that drove Iraqi forces out of Kuwait led some influential defense experts to argue that emerging technologies and the RMA had the potential to transform the very nature of war. One of the most prominent advocates of this position was the former Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral William Owens, who contended that these emerging technologies and "information dominance" would eliminate "friction" and the "fog of war," providing the commander and his subordinates nearly perfect "situational awareness," thereby promising "the capacity to use military force without the same risks as before."

Some combination of the end of history and technological optimist story lines exerted a great deal of influence over the administrations of Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama. Unfortunately, as illustrated by the course of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the failure of the Russian "reset," the travails of Europe, China's seemingly relentless military rise, and the failure of many Islamic states to embrace liberalism, strategic happy talk continues to run up against geopolitical reality. One element of this recalcitrant reality is geography.

Under the influence of the strategic happy talk narrative, it was not unusual for foreign policy analysts in the 1990s

to dismiss geopolitics and geography as reactionary concepts not worthy of consideration. But geography persists and policymakers who ignore geographical reality are likely to make mistakes. This is the theme of a new book by Bob Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography*, a work he dedicates to the memory of Harvey Sicherman. As is fitting for the journal of an organization founded by the great geopolitical thinker, Robert Strausz-Hupé, we will have this book reviewed in a future issue of *Orbis*. At this point it is sufficient to note that Kaplan provides an antidote to the strategic happy talk that has dominated American foreign policy over the past two decades.

Kaplan argues that makers of foreign policy and strategy must recover the sensibility about time and space that has been lost because of the view that technology trumps all other considerations, that economic liberalism and globalization are unstoppable forces driving the world toward the end of history, and that in the words of the New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman, the world is flat. Kaplan shows that the world is not flat and that to believe so is to entertain a conceit we can no longer afford.

The fact is that geography—the physical setting of human activity, whether political, economic, or strategic—exerts a great deal of influence on the formulation of strategy. As the Dutch-American strategic thinker Nicholas Spykman observed 70 years ago, “geography is the most fundamental factor in foreign policy because it is the most permanent.” The geographic setting imposes distinctive constraints on a nation’s foreign policy and strategy while at the same time providing distinctive opportunities. Those like Kaplan who stress the importance of geography understand that the physical setting of human action, at a minimum, defines the players in international relations, the stakes for which the players contend, and the terms by which they measure their security relative to others.

Geopolitics—“the relation of international political power to the geographical setting”—is concerned with the study of the political and strategic relevance of geography in the pursuit of international power. As such, it is most closely related to strategic geography, which is concerned with the control of, or access to, spatial areas that have an impact on the security and prosperity of nations.

Adherents of geopolitics contend that the study of the international scene from a spatial viewpoint, by which one better understands the whole, has strategic implications. The main directions of proper strategy may be deduced from an understanding of the overarching spatial relationships among political actors: by discerning broad geographical patterns, it is possible to develop better strategic options for ensuring states their place in the world.

Geopolitical thinking about strategy atrophied during the era of strategic happy thought. Let us hope that U.S. policymakers take Kaplan’s advice and return geography and geopolitics to their rightful place in the making of foreign policy and strategy making.

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