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Geopolitics – a critical assessment of the new “Great Game” in and around the Caspian Sea*

The politics of a State lies on its geography

Napoleon Bonaparte¹

Introduction

The present paper is intended to be a brief discussion and outline of the concept of Geopolitics, its meaning and relationship with the study field of International Relations (hereafter IR). It should be noted that Geopolitics is nowadays used extensively throughout the world, on international media covers, academic research or official foreign policy discourses, a condition that does not explain its real meaning and definition, always notoriously difficult to unravel; moreover the term is used widely not only among geographers, but also by political scientists, diplomats, military strategists and journalists.² Thus, the statement made by Napoleon is a clear-cut reference to the propagandistic aim and character of the discipline, serving also as a strong analytical tool for the Statesman, when confronted with having to take decisions, choices and its consequent implementations.³

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¹ Cf. Gérard Chaliand and Jean-Pierre Rageau, *Atlas Stratégique, Géopolitique des rapports de forces dans le monde*, Editions Complexe, Paris, 1994.

² See V. D. Mamadouh, “Geopolitics in the nineties: one flag many meanings”, *GeoJournal*, vol. 46, no. 4, 1998, pp. 237-253.

³ Besides the account of Chaliand and Rageau, *op. cit.*, see also the valuable German assessment of geography and its connection to politics (hence, Geopolitics, but on a clear classical form) of in Gottfried Eisermann, “Staat, Geographie und Politik”, *Der Staat*, vol. 35, no. 1, 1996, pp. 124-138, esp.

In this paper I want to focus on the definitions of the subject, giving a short summary of its development since the late nineteenth century. The aim of this paper is also to present some notions of the current fields of inquiry/study, and the contemporary themes attached to the research conducted in the past decade. Here, a plethora of issues are to be found, namely the study and acceptance of alternative forms of Geopolitics, the critical geopolitical approach, which focuses on new constructionist discourses, providing a framework of different, let alone non-universal, myriads of meanings in the study of IR in particular and social science generally.⁴ In so doing, this paper is delineated in and is at odds with an interdisciplinary engagement, as the main objective is to show that Geopolitics is by far a study filled with controversy and nonconformity. Finally I apply the critical geopolitical approach to a sensitive zone, the Caspian Sea and Central Asia, where there seems to be forming an economic contest for the supremacy of its important energy resources, oil and natural gas, giving a strategic sign to this geographic area of the world, constituted by republics of the former Soviet Union,⁵ independent since 1991, a rivalry that is concomitant to the Anglo Russian one that lasted for several decades, from the eighteenth century till the 1930s. In the paper I delineate the volatility of these states, which retain weak institutions and are under constant pressure and tension, related to regional equilibrium, boundaries claims, radical Islamism or geo-economic advantages/disadvantages. Some of these topics are present issues that reveal to be complex in handling by the states' political elites, and dangerous both for them and the competing countries, particularly the US, Russia, China, Turkey, Iran and some European Union members.⁶

p. 128, where the French dictate can be interpreted in this way: "Geography determines the foundations of History" (own translation).

⁴ Cf. Paul Reuber, "Conflict studies and critical geopolitics – theoretical concepts and recent research in political geography", *GeoJournal*, vol. 50, no 1, 2000, here p. 38 (pp. 37-43). See also Gerard Toal, Paul Retledge and Simon Dalby (eds.), *The Geopolitics Reader*, London, Routledge, 1998.

⁵ To the purpose of this paper, Central Asia is composed of five republics: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The Caspian Sea basin states are Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan (which together with Armenia and Georgia forms the south Caucasus), Russia and Iran.

⁶ About the Caspian Sea and Central Asia, there is extensive bibliography since the mid 1990s, as the region started to be a focus of attention by western countries and multinational corporations, who compete for raw materials after the demise of the Soviet Union. Cf. for example Mohammed Reza Djalili and Thierry Kellner, *Géopolitique de la nouvelle Asie Centrale – de la fin de l'URSS à l'après 11 de septembre*, Paris, PUF, 3rd edition, 2003; Ahmed Rashid, *Jihad – the rise of militant Islam in Central Asia*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2nd edition, 2003; Gennady Chufirin (ed.), *The security of the Caspian Sea Region*, Oxford (UK) and Stockholm, Oxford University Press and SIPRI, 2001; Kenneth Weisbrode, *Central Eurasia: prize or quicksand? Contending views of instability in Karabakh, Fergana and Afghanistan*, London and Oxford (UK), IISS and Oxford University Press, 2001. Scientific journals also cover this region with regard to geopolitical issues,

The origins and developments of Geopolitics

The Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellén, who used the neologism Geopolitics to describe the State as a living organism, thus conferring a scientific articulation to political forms of governments, originally coined it in 1899. The State was observed by Kjellén as a unity, a force and will that incorporated simultaneously the notions of Geo-Politics, Ethno-Politics, Economy-Politics, Social-Politics and Regimental-Politics.⁷ Moreover, the Swede defended the premise of the State as an organicist subject and reached the conclusion, which foresaw that all States tried arduously to defend its territory and afterward embark on expansion. Thus, the nature of Geopolitics as a political process of States' territorial expansion. It is clear that geographical determinism and the defence of German values and intentions were main tenets that Kjellén used on his writings during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Using and defending the propositions of the German author Friedrich Ratzel, Kjellén developed the notions of living space and location, *Lebensraum* and *Lage*, respectively, to describe the situation and importance of space in the territories of States and their (inter) relationships. Although Kjellén's belief rested in the assumption that in order for a State to be strong and mighty, its government had to put in practice five complementary types of policies: *Ekonompolitik*, *Demopolitik*, *Sociopolitik*, *Kratopolitik*, and finally, in order to conduct with success its natural expansion, *Geopolitik* – here meaning the study of the State considered as a geographic organism, a spatial phenomena, that is, a land, a territory, a space, or a country.⁸ The first four categories did not strike root, whereas *Geopolitik* did, therefore implying the confused notion that *Geopolitik* actually signified two

security policy, radical Islam and geoeconomic supremacy over natural resources. Cf. *Central Asian Survey* (UK), *Central Asia and the Caucasus* (Sweden) and *SAIS Review* (USA), to name a few. To the specific purposes of this paper, a valuable account of geopolitics and its connection to Central Asia is to be found on Matthew Edwards, "The new great game and the new great gamers: disciples of Kipling and Mackinder", *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 22, no. 1, March 2003, pp. 83-102.

⁷ Quoted by Ola Tunander, "Swedish-German geopolitics for a new century – Rudolf Kjellén's 'The state as a living organism'", *Review of International Studies*, vol. 27, 2001, p. 453. Kjellén described the State, as having a soul and a brain, embodied in the government, whereas empire formed the body, and the people were the members. Cf. Idem, pp. 453-455. About the coining of the word Geopolitics by Kjellén, see also Eiserman, *op. cit.*, p. 124.

⁸ On these five complementary forms of policies see the account of Pierre Gallois, *Géopolitique – les voies de la puissance*, Paris, Plon, 1990, pp. 25-26. For a concise overview see also Saul B. Cohen, *Geopolitics of the World System*, Rowman & Littlefield, Boulder (US) and Oxford (UK), 2003, p. 20.

characteristics, namely the one that in itself described the State and on the other hand the proper study of these characteristics.⁹

When trying to come to terms with an adequate definition of this field of study, one always finds a great deal of intricacy. One straightforward definition could rest on the study of the relationship of States' foreign policy with regard to geographical factors, such as area, location, scale, terrain, size, population/demography, resource allocation. For instance, John Agnew draws especial attention on the term conferring it the identification of primary elements in world politics in direct connection with the changing global context, whereupon States look for power accumulation outside their frontiers and boundaries, regain control over less "modern" regions and overlap other States in a constant fight/competitions at the global scale for global world primacy;¹⁰ It should also be stated that it constitutes the study of the geographical dimensions of world politics, here meaning the struggles for power by states whose desires stem from worldwide reach and whose capabilities are overwhelming, when assuming their power projection, troop deployment and exercise of influence in a worldwide basis.¹¹ The concept can be defined as the relations between States on their geographical context; it represents the study of the geographical distribution of power and the rivalries that occur between major powers.¹² The geopolitical analysis thus has the objective of revealing the fundamental truths about global geographical constraints in States' behaviour.¹³

During the first half of the twentieth century, Geopolitics was developed by Anglo-Saxon authors (Halford Mackinder, Isaiah Bowman and Nicholas Spykman, among others) and notoriously by the Germans, (particularly the German strategist General Karl Haushofer) who used and abused the term with racial and expansionist

⁹ Cf. Mamadouh, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

¹⁰ Cf. John Agnew, *Geopolitics – re-visioning world politics*, London, Routledge, 1998, p. 1.

¹¹ See Gearoid O' Tuathail, "Post cold war Geopolitics: contrasting superpowers in a world of global dangers", in R. J. Johnston et al., *Geographies of Global Change – remapping the world*, Oxford (UK), Blackwell Publishers, 2nd edition, 2002, pp. 174-189, here p. 176.

¹² Cf. Peter J. Taylor and Colin Flint, *Political Geography: world economy, nation state and locality*, London, Prentice Hall, 4th edition, 2000, p. 371. In this paper the concept of Political Geography will not be discussed as a part of the study of Geopolitics (and its critical approach) applied to the Caspian Sea region. It should be noted that the concept is a different, broader tool and discipline from which Geopolitics unequivocally derives. Yet, in Political Geography the existing relations between spatial facts and political processes arise and are studied, thus constituting the spatial analysis of political phenomena; it cast light at the relations between spatial facts that fall into the realm of political processes.

¹³ See Peter J. Taylor, "Geopolitical World Orders", in Peter J. Taylor (ed.), *Political Geography of the twentieth century – a global analysis*, London, Belhaven Press, 1993, p. 33.

intentions between the 1920s and the end of World War Two, in what contributed to throw the discipline into limbo after the atrocities and destruction caused between 1939 and 1945. Geopolitics was practically forgotten and strongly criticized by lacking a clear scientific purpose and framework of study, only relying on geographic determinism¹⁴ as its sole *raison d'être*: German *Geopolitik* soon began to be banned in academia, not being a subject of serious interest among the research community.

The major change occurred starting in the early 1970s, when attention among scholars revived the contents and issues of study of the discipline, which experienced resurgence after more than three decade of hibernation. Moreover, this exclusion proved to be negated by a catharsis in world politics, rendering Geopolitics with a new research agenda, namely geopolitical representations and imaginations that have nothing in common with the classical and practical geopolitical study of the past, used in the chancelleries, military institutions and think tanks institutes of the like. The new flag rose in the late 1980s and is denominated *Critical Geopolitics*, pointing directly at foreign policy discourses and languages¹⁵ by decision makers, political elites and military strategists. This stream draws on critical theory by exposing visions and perspectives on civil society and culture with a commitment not linked to any official discourse or to dogmas of well-established paradigms. In so acting and being guided by these coordinates, critical geopolitics tries to uncover the hidden geographical assumptions in foreign policy decisions and actions. It pretends to offer alternative perspectives and refute the discursive mechanisms of established power. Moreover, it constitutes a constellation, to borrow the words of Toal and Dalby, inside the vast area of geopolitical research, where a fictional name is granted to the

¹⁴ On geographical determinism, Agnew, *op. cit.*, p. 104, points to the emphasis given to such factors as geographical localization and environmental determinants when characterizing formal Geopolitics of the first half of the twentieth century.

¹⁵ Here I use the terms discourse and language with an interchangeable meaning, as both constitute a consistent system of beliefs, therefore being extremely difficult to think outside the ambit of discourse, because language and discourse are all inclusive. For a discussion on these topics see Andrew Jones, "Dialectics and difference: against Harvey's dialectical post Marxism", *Progress in Human Geography*, vol 23, no. 4, 1999, pp. 529-555, here p. 535. See also Michel Foucault on post-modern (human) geographies: *Power/Knowledge – selected interviews and other writings 1972-1977*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1980: "A whole history remains to be written of spaces, which would at the same time be a history of powers, from the great strategies of the geopolitics to the little tactics of the habitats", p. 149. Here the relationship power – knowledge can be criticized for being a hyphen, that is, the geo-politics that constitutes the binomial of material geography and power.

Geopolitics that serves as a fusion of geography and politics and that seeks in this very constellation various geopolitical problematics and topics.¹⁶

I argue for the necessity of delineating, defining and framing a clear knowledge of Geopolitics in order to be possible to apply it to a specific case study or a zone in a regional set-up. Although the critical branch of Geopolitics has only showed up on the academic and research scene for the past decade or so, its issues and themes of concern have brought about a revival of traditional geopolitical analysis in consonance with texts, narrations and discourses through which an engagement that having more or less of subjectivity, ends up diffusing a Geopolitics that one *cannot not want nor avoid*.¹⁷ Geopolitics is imbued with a powerful language; one that does have remnants of the past classical or orthodox discipline put into practice and developed from the late nineteenth and throughout the first half of the twentieth century. During this period, geopolitical transition or world order, as Peter Taylor¹⁸ puts it, Geopolitics was observed as a competitive pursuit of territory, resources and geographical advantage. Moreover, the term had characteristics of great power contention and aspiring great power rivalries for control over territory, besides having the purpose already described above of securing resources and vital geographical landmarks, a broad definition that places Geopolitics as the driving force when it comes to define much of the world conflicts in the past centuries.¹⁹ Whereas the actual subject of critical Geopolitics implies a sense of dismantling the old codes and structures, rejecting state-centric and holistic reasoning's, as to the extent that it

¹⁶ Cf. Simon Dalby and Gerard Toal, "The critical geopolitics constellation: problematizing fusions of geographical knowledge and power", *Political Geography*, vol. 15, no. 6/7, pp. 451-456.

¹⁷ Emphasis is mine. Cf. Gerard Toal, "Dis/placing the geo-politics which one cannot not want", *Political Geography*, vol. 19, no. 3, March 2000, pp. 385-396. Toal: "'critical geopolitics' should be making truth claims about the world and proactively pushing certain political programs rather than reacting to those on the right who do so — thus giving them the initiative — and being stuck on texts not practice", p. 392.

¹⁸ See Taylor and Flint, *op. cit.*, for a discussion on geopolitical cycles and transitions, pp. 72-77. There are clear distinctions between these concepts, geopolitical transition and the geopolitical world order, insofar as the former reveals a short period of time where rapid change occurs, e.g., the period comprising 1989/1991. The latter bases itself on a stable pattern of world politics dominated by an agenda "dictated" by the major powers, that is, the cold war and the bilateral world order that lasted for 45 years. See also p. 371.

¹⁹ Cf. Paul Diehl (ed.), *A road map to war – territorial dimensions of international conflict*, Vanderbilt University Press, Nashville, 1999. See introduction by Paul Diehl, pp. viii-ix. See also Michael Klare, "The New Geopolitics", *Monthly Review*, vol. 55, no. 3, July/August 2003, p. 51-56.

refutes and constantly questions the monopoly of the powerful and the “wise men” over the notions of national interest and security.²⁰

The revival of classical, traditional Geopolitics is these days being applied to the analysis of the present rivalry taking place in and around the Caspian Sea and its adjacent regions, herein described as Eurasia, a vast landmass that stretches west from western Turkey and the Black sea to the eastern borders of the autonomous Chinese province of Xinjiang (Chinese Turkestan), and north, from the southern Siberian plains of Russia to the Indian Ocean, in the south.²¹

Nearly a century ago, the British geopolitician, Halford Mackinder stressed vital importance for controlling what he called the “Heartland”, this same geographical area that is here discussed, as he predicted that who would control the area would achieve essential gains for national security and global domination, hence his famous equation:

*“Who rules East Europe controls the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the World Island; Who rules the world Island commands the World”*²²

The Central Asian and Caspian conundrum

When every one is dead the Great Game is finished. Not before.

Rudyard Kipling²³

Since the first half of the 1990s, nowhere else has there been a major competition for the domination of natural, energy resources than in the Caspian Sea basin and its surrounding areas, especially Central Asia, because of their vital

²⁰ Cf. Gearoid O’ Tuathail, *Critical Geopolitics*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1996. The author stresses the need to focus on the dichotomy between geographical knowledge/wisdom and power. See Idem, p. 67. Cf. also Michel Foucault, *op. cit.*

²¹ For a description of this new area see Weisbrode, *op. cit.*, pp. 11-13.

²² Cf. Halford Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, Constable Publishers, London, 1942, p. xviii [Original edition, 1919].

²³ Rudyard Kipling, *Kim*, Penguin books, London, 1994 [originally published in 1901]. The term was coined around the mid eighteenth century, and served to describe the fierce competition between imperial Russia and Victorian Britain for the control of Afghanistan, the protection of India and the access to the warm sea, that is, the Indian Ocean. For an examination of this rivalry see Peter Hopkirk, *The Great Game: the struggle for empire in Central Asia*, Kodansha, New York, 1994.

meaning for the preservation of the complex economic networks; these vertebrate the contemporary world. The major (and medium) powers aspire for the control of raw energy products, oil and natural gas, found abundantly in the Caspian Sea basin. Of course, this zone is by far not the only one that is of major concern. The Middle East and Persian Gulf area and its countries still provide the majority of energy reserves available on the planet, most of them net exporters and suppliers to the US market. Washington needs to diversify its provisions and supplies, and has already manifested it clearly, by means of establishing alliances with the Caspian and Central Asian States in the form of military assistance, weapons sales and transfers and military training/advising,²⁴ and quickly corroborated with the authoritarian and despotic regimes of the area, by acquiescing their commitments in the fight against global terrorism; the attitude of Washington is at best alarming, for it is dealing with authentic grotesque leaders,²⁵ all proceeding from the old Soviet *apparatchik*, some of them that exert a sinister cult of personality.²⁶

The twofold scale of promoting democracy in Central Asia is at best a hoax that Washington is trying to impose to the West. The mainstream media is used to demonise regimes like Syria and Iran (while mildly condemning US allies like Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia) for its human rights abuses and violations, and the Presidents of the Central Asian Republics are not even mentioned. In the case of Uzbekistan, but also neutral Turkmenistan, two of the most sinister dictatorships of the Islamic world (the latter being a hermetic country with few or no links to the outside world), a certain sense of ignorance prevails, somehow to show that the US only predicates democratisation when it is on its own interests, and so does not endanger or embarrass the real intentions of the lonely superpower.²⁷

²⁴ Cf. Allison Bailes *et al.*, *Armament and Disarmament in the Caucasus and Central Asia*, SIPRI, Stockholm, July 2003. For this examination cf. Idem, Björn Hagelin “Arms transfers to the South Caucasus and Central Asia compared, 1999-2002” pp. 21-31. See also Anna Matveeva, “Russia and USA increase their influence in Georgia”, *Jane’s Intelligence Review*, vol. 15, no. 5, May 2003, pp. 42-45.

²⁵ Interesting is the account on the daily newspaper NZZ (Zurich) about the despotic, authoritarian Uzbek regime, cf. “Bush fordert Demokratisierung des Orients”, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 7 November 2003, p. 1.

²⁶ Jackson Diehl, “US again support unsavoury dictators”, *The Washington Post*, March 20, 2002. The brightest example here is Turkmenistan’s President, Nyazov, responsible for running one of the world’s most closed countries, where virtually no opposition is allowed and where repression is a day-to-day routine. On this issue, cf. the report by Christian Neef, “Ein gestrauchelter Gott”, *Der Spiegel* (Hamburg), no.24, 7 June 2003, pp. 117-119.

²⁷ See note 25, “Bush fordert Demokratisierung des Orients”, *ibid.*

Furthermore, the build-up of major air and especial operations bases in the region quickly followed after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (most notably in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan),²⁸ demonstrate to which extent the US is willing to maintain its military and intelligence forces in the region at least in the foreseeable future, stating that this objective is closely tied to its global war against terrorism.²⁹ In the meantime, Russians also reasserted its position in terms of exerting influence, by means of geographical assumptions: Moscow moved towards the year 2002 with the clear hint of maintaining and even expanding its presence and influence. The inauguration of logistical material, tracking facilities and airbases in both Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan is a clear sign of the Russian foreign and security policies intentions in the area.³⁰

Nevertheless, and bearing in mind that the fundamental geographical core for North American movements and endeavours does not only reside on the Persian Gulf area, the Caspian Sea basin has been witnessing a strategic significance since the independence of the former Central Asian and Caucasian Republics of the defunct Soviet Union. The first area is clearly the one that offers the biggest petroleum reserves and wells, but the Caspian zone still has to be explored,³¹ as drilling rights and authorizations haven't yet progressed or permitted, as to give a precise assessment of its real potential.³² The same applies for the Central Asian Republics and their links to the Peoples Republic of China in regard to pipeline and transportation routes (and corridors) of raw materials,³³ which constitutes a main

²⁸ Robert Kaiser, "US plants footprint in shaky Central Asia", *The Washington Post*, August 27, 2002, p. A1. See also Tamara Makarenko, "Foreign bases complicate terror assessments in Central Asia", *Jane's Intelligence Review*, vol. 15, no. 6, June 2003, pp. 32-35.

²⁹ Makarenko, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

³⁰ Cf. Ian Anthony et al. "The Euro-Atlantic system and global security", in *SIPRI Yearbook 2003*, SIPRI and Oxford University Press, Stockholm and Oxford (UK), 2003, p. 77.

³¹ The estimates of oil and gas reserves vary significantly. One pointed to the possibility of the recoverable reserves in the Caspian Sea basin could amount up to 160 – 200 billion barrels of oil. See the account of Gennady Chufurin, "The Caspian Sea Basin: the security dimensions", in *SIPRI Yearbook 1999*, SIPRI and Oxford University Press, Stockholm and Oxford (UK), 1999, pp. 213-234.

³² See the account of Michael Klare, *Resource Wars – the new landscape of global conflict*, Metropolitan Books, New York, 2001, esp. pp. 81-108. It should be noted that the Caspian Sea basin States, former soviet republics, are not members of the OPEC (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries), all of them possessing huge oil and gas reserves, a particular fact that implies some external and rising forum pressures. Cf. Idem, p. 86. See also Igor Effimoff, "The oil and gas resource base of the Caspian region", *Journal of Petroleum Science and Engineering*, vol. 28, December 2000, pp. 157-159 (p. 158 for an overview of oil and natural gas reserves).

³³ Cf. the valuable exposition of James P. Doran et al., "Energy in Central Asia and Northwest China: major trends and opportunities of cooperation for regional cooperation", *Energy Policy*, vol. 27, 1999, pp. 281-297 (esp. pp. 282-285 for production statistics, principal markets, trading partners, and maps of major locations of oil and gas in the region).

pursuit for Beijing; furthermore, its desires reside on the construction of oil and gas pipelines via the Central Asian Republics (most notably Kazakhstan) throughout western China, in Xinjiang, till the Chinese pacific coast. That is another serious concern that the present US administration faces, as this Chinese project, should it be erected with Japanese assistance and funding, would surely become a scenario that would create disquiet in Washington, or, to say the least, suspicion. The same applies to Beijing, as its elites and military have signalled apprehension about the establishment of US military bases in Central Asia, particularly in Kyrgyzstan, where some few thousand north American troops have been deployed; the proximity and geographical role plays again a role. For China it's the first time that US military forces are stationed less than 200 miles from its western borders, giving the perception to Beijing of encirclement or a containing tactic by the US.³⁴

After these remarks, I propose to state some brief comments on the present geopolitical confrontation in the Caspian and Central Asian regions. A new space or arc of insecurity has been opened, one that encompasses different actors, Countries, multinational corporations, International Organizations, as well as non-state actors, such as terrorist networks and radical movements. This does not necessarily augur a coherent and stable regional framework for cooperation, thus widening the possibility of conflict and war over territory and resources, transit routes and energy pipelines. The proximity of rival actors in this contending new "Great Game" can disrupt the outburst of wars, as, to borrow the argument of Russett and O'Neal, both distance and topography can be determined as the likely for starting a major or low intensity conflict. And bearing in mind the absence of regional coordination and real cooperation, the neighbouring states in question, and also the external Countries (especially the US) possibly fight each other.³⁵ One should note that the Great Game in and around Central Asia started more than one and a half centuries ago, and has been revived, although with other characteristics: the number of players have increased dramatically, hence the rules and factors have significantly progressed and the inherent risks have increased.

The mightiest player, the US, can actually act on a unilateral basis like it has been doing for the past years, but still confusion and unwise steps are being

³⁴ *Central Asian Report*, 12 September 2003, vol. 3, no. 31, available at www.rferl.org/centralasia/09/31/31-120903.asp (accessed October 20, 2003).

³⁵ Cf. Bruce Russett and John O'Neal, *Triangulating Peace – democracy, interdependence and international organizations*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 2001. p. 86.

undertaken by Washington on this zone, one that it does not have a firm knowledge of its people, politics and cultural heritages. US policy-makers should learn more about Geography when it comes to focusing on adequate priorities to ensure that this new “Great Game” doesn’t become a quagmire or a threat to world economic security and political stability.³⁶ These dangers might include a power and military vacuum, filled by the ever-longing threat of radical Islam in the region. Cohen even argues that if the contending powers do not find an accommodation, the Eurasian, read the Caspian and Central Asian regions, could become (and evolve into) a shatterbelt,³⁷ thus rendering the region more intractable. In this sense Washington should recognize Russian preponderance there, after all it has been its backyard for the past one and half centuries, and should include Russian oil and gas companies in the undergoing geo-economic competition, as to be possible to cast a cooperative development framework of the region’s energy reserves and pipelines.³⁸ The presence of US troops on countries such as Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, an area of traditional Russian influence, has definitely changed the geopolitical set-up. This gives some hope to regime opponents of these countries, as North-American presence there might pressure the autocratic and despotic Presidents of these Republics to endorse or at least start a process of more open and free societies with opposition forces and parties. But as time went on since the autumn of 2001, the hopes of change still didn’t materialize.

The message that Washington subtly applies is that it needs this geographical region to get (geopolitical) advantage, bases for special operations and logistic purposes in the global war against terrorism,³⁹ namely in the southern flank, that is, Afghanistan. It should also be noted that the real intentions of Washington are not solely to control Afghanistan, a country marginal in terms of natural resources, but at the same time one of the world’s biggest producers and exporters of drugs, e.g. opium and heroin. Moreover, Washington as well other countries have expressed

³⁶ Cf. Amy Myers and Robert A. Manning, “The myth of the Caspian ‘Great Game’: the real Geopolitics of energy”, *Survival*, vol. 40, no. 4, winter 1998-1999, p. 126. See also Weisbrode, *op. cit.*, who argues that US involvement and the establishment of alliances with countries such as Azerbaijan, Georgia and Uzbekistan might disrupt a Russian response of combating these moves by Washington, p. 82.

³⁷ Cf. Saul B. Cohen, “Geopolitical realities and United States foreign policy”, *Political Geography*, vol. 22, no. 1, January 2003, p.14.

³⁸ *Idem*, p. 20.

³⁹ Cf. “Trügerische Stabilität in Zentralasien”, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 31 August/1 September 2002, p. 1.

serious concerns about the issue of drug smuggling from Afghanistan towards Russia and the other CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) republics, and finally to Western Europe. Bearing in mind this reality, it rather seems that the US strategy is to focus on a long-term presence in the area to bolster alliances with the surrounding countries and establish commercial and trade links with them, using an approach of “pipeline diplomacy”. Certainly, other players on this game will have a say on this issue, namely China, India, Russia and Japan. The energy policies/demands and geoeconomic imperatives will prove to be the driving force on this “new great game”; China will compete with the US for the quest of natural resources in this wide region, and this will ultimately be one the biggest sources of Sino American conflict and rivalry in the foreseeable future.

Conclusions

I finally argue that Geopolitics and geography can engage in a fruitful discussion when it comes to put into practice peace and conflict studies. Moreover, the multidisciplinary pattern of this discipline does not need to resort to traditional or classical approaches of Geopolitics. It’s my conviction that peace and conflict studies do have an opportunity to commit itself to problem solving. By that I mean that it can be linked to Geopolitics, thus bridging the gap between both disciplines.⁴⁰

The problem, I argue, is that the US administration(s) should take into consideration that learning Geography is what matters when it comes to controversial foreign policy decisions that only spark and fuel more havoc and hatred. By making *tabula rasa* of International Law and International Institutions, most notably the United Nations, and by converting the fight against global terrorism as a justification for unilateral actions, the US is risking undermining its basic constituent principles of assuring an open civil society, freedom, liberty, and private property.⁴¹ What is relevant to this fact and can be used for the purpose of this discussion is that the US is

⁴⁰ Colin Flint, “Dying for ‘P’? Some questions facing contemporary political geography”, *Political Geography*, vol. 22, no. 6, August 2003, pp. 617-620.

⁴¹ A extremely remarkable sentence by one of the “fathers” of the USA should be cited: “*Those who would give up essential liberty to purchase a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety*”, Benjamin Franklin, quoted in Georg Schild, “Bürgerrechte in Zeiten der Bedrohung”, *Der Staat*, vol., 42, no. 3, 2003, p. 329.

presently at the disposal and willing to assume a unilateral world role that can bring more chaos and anarchy worldwide.

The present geopolitical landscape associated with the notion of resource wars in the Caspian and Central Asian regions, as well as in other continents, wars fought for gaining access and control of raw products, will be the distinctive feature of worldwide security concerns. Notwithstanding this fact, a sense of unease prevails over which way the US is conducting its policies of savage neo-liberalism tied up to the notions and common practices of globalisation phenomena. This also renders visible that some sort of *Weltanschauung*, the only possible world outlook, is set up arbitrarily in the name of progress and commodity, but at the expense of the underdeveloped South, which for sure does not take advantage or profits from this “brave new world”.

The British cult band *Wire* sang in “Reuters” in 1977:

*Our own correspondent is sorry to tell
Of an uneasy time that all is not well
On the borders there's movement
In the hills there is trouble
Food is short, crime is double
Prices have risen since the government fell
Casualties increase as the enemy shell
The climate's unhealthy, flies and rats thrive
And sooner or later the end will arrive
This is your correspondent, running out of tape
Gunfire's increasing, looting, burning, rape...*

(Newman, Lewis, Gilbert, Gotobed)

More than a quarter of a century ago, and not much has changed.

Bruno Ferrari

(In revised form, Uppsala, 26 January 2004)