

Review - Geopolitics of the World System

Written by Abbas Kardan

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ABBAS KARDAN, SEP 21 2010

Geopolitics of the World System, by Saul Bernard Cohen examines the dramatic changes wrought by ideological and economic forces unleashed by the end of the Cold War. Cohen considers these forces in the context of their human and physical settings and explores their geographical influence on foreign policy and international relations. Presenting a global spatial scope, the book considers the entire hierarchy of geopolitical units: subnational, national states, and quasi-states; geopolitical regions; and geostrategic realms. By emphasizing the interaction between geographical settings and changing ideological and economic forces, Cohen has succeeded in creating a new geopolitical map.

Salient features of the book include:

- Putting theory into action in an understandable way;
- Presenting geopolitical patterns and elements through illustrations;
- Using geopolitical analysis to forecast global trends and draw a new map of the world; and
- A Study of the evolution of geopolitics from the very beginning up to the present time.

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“Geopolitics” is a term which is frequently used to explain or analyze foreign policy issues of various countries. It is also a way of analyzing international relations with its own history, theories, and distinct aspects.

Distribution of power is more extensive in the context of a complicated geopolitical world which has been influenced by globalization while hierarchy is losing importance, so that, no single country will be able to dominate others. The 21st century will be a “global century,” not an “American” or “Pacific” century. Due to this complexity, all regional powers should be steered in such a way as to create a balance among various challenges.

At present world-system theory has two branches. One emphasizes the distinctly economic, the political economy of the world-system tradition associated with Wallerstein. The other emphasizes global culture, the world polity, or world society, tradition associated with John W. Meyer and his Stanford students. A third perspective on world system is introduced here: what could be called the geopolitical world-system, predicated upon classic ideas of geopolitics. To flesh out some of the principles of this third theorization of world system dynamics, examples are chosen from the dynamics of ancient world-systems, such as the conflictual world of 5th century Greek city states.

In this book, Saul Bernard Cohen, means to introduce complex nature of the world geopolitical structure and roles played by its various players. From his viewpoint, geopolitical outlook of the world is a dynamic one which evolves through changes in international system and operational milieu. Cohen has also paid attention to dynamic quality of geographical contexts which can greatly explain changes in geopolitical models. He has also pointed out that such contexts react to new international phenomena such as discovery of new or depletion of old natural resources, immigration, capital flow, and long-term climate changes.

The book claims that geopolitical changes in the past century have been much faster than the previous two and a half centuries; that is, when the modern and sovereign nation-states appeared and European imperialism was imposed on many parts of the world. From this standpoint and due to the abovementioned developments, gradual collapse of the imperialistic system started in early years of the 20th century and during World War I, leaving the European powers economically bankrupt and bereft of adequate manpower. Cohen has pointed to future geopolitical map of the world in his book noting that the map is a result of restructuring patterns which have come into being during the past half century. He also asserts that despite emergence of new geopolitical structures and bipolarity, principles which guided global developments in Cold War era still hold water and provide necessary basis for projection of the main lines of the world’s geopolitical map in the 21st century.

It is noteworthy that although the United States shoulders the main responsibility for stability of the new world order, it cannot be its sole manager and other geopolitical players following other goals and enjoying different fields of influence should also do their parts. In fact, when a more powerful country is not able or not willing to use military force to achieve its special goals, international and regional organizations will be in a better position to make the system secure and stable.

The book has also reflected on remarkable changes made by ideological and economic forces following the Cold War era. Saul Bernard Cohen has studied those forces within their own human and physical frameworks to discuss their geographical impacts on foreign policy and international relations of various countries. In fact, by emphasizing on interaction between geographical contexts, on the one hand, and ideological and economic forces, on the other hand, he has succeeded to plot a new geopolitical map of the world showing borders which do not conform to merely physical or political frontiers. In addition to focusing on key issues affecting world stability (whether certain regions will turn into shatterbelts), the book also defines those borders.

On the other hand, Cohen takes a global approach to a hierarchy of geopolitical units (including subnational units, nation-states and quasi-states as well as geopolitical regions and domains) and discusses their geopolitical conditions, as well as related terms, structures and theories. The book not only focuses on geopolitical restructuring in various regions of the world, major powers in those regions and global networks connecting them, but also seeks to explain why some regions are more strategically important, others enjoy marginal geostrategic significance and the Middle East is still a shatterbelt. On

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the whole, the author hopes to provide a better understanding of geopolitical forces shaping the international system as a prelude to forging common national strategies which will foster global balance and stability.

Abbas Kardan is the Research Reports Department Manager of Tehran International Studies and Research Institute (TISRI). Born in 1977, he received his MA in Regional Studies from Tehran University. He has been awarded three times for translating different books into Persian, including the Year Book Award for translating "Geopolitics of the World System"