

Is Iran Next? The Importance of Geopolitics

Written by Simon Dalby

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SIMON DALBY, JUL 10 2008

Geopolitics is about politics at the largest scale; it's about how the world is imagined by statespersons and academics, and how policy is legitimated on the basis of these understandings of the basic geographic facets of the world. In many ways geopolitics is so obvious that it doesn't need to be thought about; it's the taken for granted arrangement of things that provides the context for policy making. Except that, as critical scholars of geopolitics have been pointing out for many years, what is most obvious in how we understand the world isn't necessarily the only way things can be understood. Or more specifically; the world can be portrayed differently with very different political implications.

Geopolitics is the assumptions about the world that provide the context for decisions about grand strategy. How we think the world is provides a key to how we think we should act in that world. In the aftermath of the events of 9/11 suddenly the world was understood differently and the grand strategy of the United States in particular changed as threat perceptions altered and the sources of danger were remapped. It's not accidental that the war on terror is specified as a global struggle; literally the whole planet has now become a potential battleground. It could of course have been very different if the events had been specified in other ways.

Part of the reason September 11th was so shocking, was because it was so unexpected; Osama bin Laden may not have read the US military text books on "Shock and Awe", which tell how rapid unexpected assaults may disorient opponents, but his suicide flyers did have that effect on much of the world. The problem for Western thinkers, and in particular the neo-conservative thinkers in Washington, was that they still thought about security threats and political power in terms of the military attributes of territorial states. The military that had been carefully constructed through the cold war period was a professional force designed to fight and beat other professional forces through its technological capabilities.

Al-Qaeda was apparently a new kind of threat, specified as global because it didn't seem to have a recognizable geographical structure that fitted into the assumptions of a world of territorial states. Hence the policy response was a "global war on terror" despite the fact that the hijackers were mostly Saudi Arabians and bin Laden's major war aims were clearly the destabilization of the house of Saud. It had, according to his declaration of war some years earlier, not only violated the sanctity of the two holy places by inviting infidel troops onto holy soil, but also squandered huge oil wealth on weapons and all sorts of un-Islamic activities.

Lacking an obvious state to attack, the American strategy was to reactivate the simmering Afghan civil war between the Northern Alliance and the Taliban. With the help of dollar payments, special forces and aerial attacks the US sought to remove the Taliban from power. The speed of this transformation was not followed, however, by an effective rounding up of the Al-Qaeda leadership, not least because other priorities came to the fore quickly; in particular the war on Iraq and the removal of Saddam Hussein. The axis of evil appeared in the rhetoric of the state of the Union speech in 2002, and while it was much remarked upon, few commentators attempted to understand how it fit the larger rethinking of America's place in the world that was eventually codified as the Bush doctrine.

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The war on terror and the post-9/11 Bush doctrine has been about rethinking how American military and political influence works in what are understood to be new circumstances. A careful reading of American policy statements, and in particular the official doctrinal statements such as the National Security Strategy statements of 2002 and 2006, and the 2005 Defense Strategy reveal the transformation of geopolitical thinking in the White House. Now states are only one among a number of threats. Globalization has supposedly made places vulnerable in new ways and requires a global response that potentially makes combat possible anywhere anytime.

But the biggest change from the period of the cold war, when the overarching geopolitical description of the world was a matter of the competition between the blocs, and the American strategy of containment was portrayed as a defensive one, is the focus on winning the war on terror. The official documents that describe the world in which the war is being fought is one in which danger lurks principally in the more remote regions of the global economy, in places called “failed states” and among “rogue regimes”. In so far as these places are dangerous then America cannot be safe while they persist. Eliminating these dangerous places requires going on the offensive. Although the final goal of this policy is not much commented upon, it is spelled out clearly in the official documents that govern American security and defense strategy. The final goal of stated American policy in the long struggle known as the war on terror is nothing less than eliminating tyranny on earth.

While this might appear to be hubris, folly or plain nonsense to those who supposedly know better, nonetheless there is a simple logic to it if one buys into the basic geopolitical specification of an American led free world which is struggling to overcome forces of chaos, violence and crime. These ‘dark’ forces lurk in what pundit Tom Barnett calls, in his book on The Pentagon’s New Map, the “non-integrated gap” in the world economy. The logic of this designation of places as threatening because they are not participating in the global economy can justify the use of force, if necessary, to integrate them into the global economy. Invading Iraq was supposedly all about changing it into a Western oriented democracy and providing a powerful example for other states to follow that route to economic and political success. All this was justified by claims that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction threatening the West.

As we live through the final year of the Bush administration very similar arguments are being made about the need to attack Iran because it supposedly is well on its way to having nuclear weapons which will apparently threaten many peoples in many places. While opponents of military action, including leading financial commentators finally began to realize the potential chaos a major assault on Iran might bring in mid 2008, the logic of an attack to remove the Iranian regime from power is entirely consistent with the official doctrine of the Bush administration. In Vice President Dick Cheney’s language you don’t negotiate with terrorists or tyrants, you defeat them. Iran is part of the axis of evil in this view of the world, eradicating the regime is a necessity according to the logic of ending tyranny.

Clearly the Iranian elite think that the American forces are overstretched in Iraq and Afghanistan and are incapable of a major assault on Iran. Their repeated warnings that if attacked they will retaliate against American bases and oil facilities in states allied or helping American forces suggests that they wish to deter such an attack. But perhaps the geopolitical logic of regime change suggests that a major air assault to destroy Iranian nuclear facilities and Iranian forces guarding them might work. If Iran can be provoked into some foolhardy action which can be used as pretext for an attack, and if sanctions can prevent the regime rebuilding essential infrastructure, then perhaps what happened in Yugoslavia after the NATO air assault in 1999 might offer a model. Milosevic survived the initial assault but not the eventual political upheavals caused by the damage done to the Serbian economy.

Where the American geopolitical view of the world specifies Iran as a tyrannical regime and in need of removal, that regime desperately wishes to be seen as a legitimate player in a world of sovereign states where international law applies equally to all. Their linking national pride to nuclear technology is especially unfortunate in present

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circumstances, but their geopolitical logic suggests the necessity of states standing up to the use of American power, and if Iran has to take a leadership role in doing so, then they do that too with pride. At stake here are two very different geopolitical views about the sources of danger and the appropriate designation of legitimacy.

If senator Obama becomes President Obama next January, then perhaps the logic of negotiating with Iran and working to a comprehensive political settlement of difficulties in the region may yet get the opportunity to be tried. But for this to happen the geopolitical logic of the war on terror will have to be abandoned and the grand dreams of using military coercion to end tyranny on earth replaced with a geopolitical vision of the United States as something much less than the single arbiter of the political future of an increasingly interconnected world.

Perhaps then, major concerns such as climate change may come to the fore; an issue which requires as the basis for intelligent politics a geopolitical vision of living in a small shared biosphere. Until the abandonment of the current geopolitics driving policy in the White House however, efforts to utilize unilateral military force in an attempt to remake the global economy in America's image will likely continue, and the danger of an expanded war in the Gulf, with all the possible ramifications this might have for the rest of the world dependent on petroleum, remains.

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