

The Influence of Geopolitics on the East-West Struggle

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A Review Essay on: **The Geopolitics of Super Power.** By Colin Gray. 274 pages. The University Press of Kentucky, 1988.

The argument of Colin Gray's book can be simply stated. There is an inevitable and permanent confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union, created not by ideological diversity but by the facts of geopolitics. Geopolitical imperatives drive the Soviet Union to expand outward until it controls the entire Eurasian "World Island," whence it would dominate the rest of the world. To combat this drive the United States must continue to dominate the oceans so as to hold "the Rimlands" of the World Island, notably Western Europe and Japan, and also prevent Soviet expansion to the south.

The strategy the United States should pursue in fulfilling this objective, continues Dr. Gray, should be neither that of isolating itself in "Fortress America," nor the impractical aspiration of "roll-back," nor even the relatively passive policy of "containment." It should consist of "dynamic containment": "the organization and where necessary the arming of actual and potential resistance around the Rimlands of Eurasia," without too much concern about the political complexion of the groups it is supporting. Strategic defenses should be built up, not to make the United States invulnerable but to "render perception of nuclear risk more manageable in American domestic politics." Finally, "extended deterrence" for Western Europe should consist not of barely credible threats of nuclear first use, but of a capacity for sustained conventional war, fought on battlefields of America's own choosing, which her mobility, her technology, and her industrial muscle would enable her to win.

This thesis is set out with all the lucidity and learning we have come to expect from Dr. Gray, whose emigration to the United States has been a

sad loss to the British world of strategic studies. There is much good sense in it, though few people would endorse all his recommendations. But the pseudo-science of geopolitics is a fragile basis on which to build any theory. It has never been taken very seriously, either by historians or by political scientists. That geographical location plays a large part in shaping political development is self-evident, but to attribute to that a dominant role in social and political evolution is crudely reductionist. Geopolitics has not been ignored by the academic community. It has been appraised, and appraised rather critically.

The thesis of a World Island, control of which depends on control of an ill-defined "Heartland," was first set out by the Englishman Halford Mackinder in a lecture in 1904. This lecture was occasioned by the newly acquired capacity of Russia to transport troops over the Trans-Siberian railway to fight the Japanese, a capacity which worried the leaders of a British Empire whose frontier marched with the Russian in Central Asia. A member of the audience, in an intervention not chronicled by Dr. Gray, suggested more plausibly that simultaneous events at Kittyhawk were of rather greater relevance, and that the future of the world in fact lay in the hands of the power which, irrespective of geographical location, could gain a lead in inventive technology and maintain the industrial base to support it. Mackinder ignored, and continued to ignore, this fundamental criticism. He surfaced again with a book, *Democratic Ideas and Reality*, written in the darkest days of 1918 when the Germans had broken the Russian resistance and were advancing across Central Asia to the same sensitive outposts of the British Empire. In that work he restated his thesis with oracular dogmatism:

Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland
Who rules the Heartland commands the World Island
Who rules the World Island commands the World.

To this one can only reply that it is self-evident nonsense. There are few areas of less importance to the hegemony of the world than East Europe, however defined. I am reminded of the splendid rejoinder made by Marshal Blücher during the Allied invasion of France in 1814, when a pedantic member of his staff advised him to establish his army on the plateau of Langres

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since that was "the key to the country." Blücher examined the map and grunted, "I can see that if I stand on the plateau and piss to the north it will drain into the Atlantic, while if I piss to the south it will drain into the Mediterranean. But I don't see how that will help me to win the war."

A comparatively robust skepticism is in order when confronted with the analyses and warnings of the geopoliticians. They simply leave out too much. Too many other factors go into the development of societies capable of exercising and willing to project political power—factors which actually operate far more effectively in Rimland states, with their better communications, intense commercial activity, and advanced industrial and technological development, than they do in Heartland ones. After all, the Russians were defeated by the Japanese in 1904. They were defeated again by the Germans in 1918—and would have been so in 1942-45 had they been fighting alone. The Heartland has in fact been able to survive the repeated incursions of the Rimland states only by imitating them. If one took geopolitics seriously it would be the Russians, not the West, who would have to worry; as indeed they do.

This reductionist emphasis on geopolitics at the expense of any analysis of those other factors making for social change—mobility, modernization, literacy, urbanization, mass communications—on which historians and social scientists place such emphasis, enables Dr. Gray to present a picture of a Soviet Union frozen forever in the mold imposed on it by the Revolution and Civil War of 1917-23. "Soviet ideological commitment to an essentially conflictual relationship with the West is thoroughly inalienable," he states. "Because it is rooted in a conflictual world view, the character of Soviet power and purpose is unlikely to alter in a benign direction." But the influence of ideological or religious dogma in society depends on political and social conditions which are as subject to change in the Soviet Union as anywhere else. It is, after all, some time since the Inquisition operated in Spain. Nor has ideology prevented a complete transformation in the foreign policy of the Peoples Republic of China, as Dr. Gray admits; but he gives no explanation as to why it should have been possible for one major Marxist-Leninist state to enter into friendly relations with the West, while it is intrinsically impossible for the other.

Readers of *Parameters* would thus be wise to suspend judgment on the intellectual underpinnings of Dr. Gray's proposals and concentrate on their substance. Of course if one entirely rejects Gray's belief in the inalienable hostility and expansion of the Soviet Union, very few of them will command much support; but it would be prudent to agree with him that for the moment at least the Soviet Union is ideologically hostile and militarily powerful, and that a shrewd deployment of Western military strength will for long be necessary to dissuade the old guard in the Kremlin from using military force to sustain or extend their influence. One might however enter the caveat that we should not deploy it in such a fashion as to discourage

those Soviet elements who are in favor of what Dr. Gray calls "benign" change. Whether the full projected SDI program would be desirable in the light of this is a matter of legitimate controversy, but I for one find Dr. Gray's hope that any foreseeable development of strategic defenses would "render perception of nuclear risk more manageable in American domestic politics" highly unrealistic.

Dr. Gray's advice that the United States should lean on the Soviet Union by "aiding and abetting local elements among Soviet clients who wish to reverse the course of their incorporation into the socialist commonwealth" makes good sense; the Soviet Union should not be permitted peacefully to extend her influence through surrogates. One can also sympathize with the hard-nosed warning that "the focus of American policy should be on the essentials of its security needs, not on the attractiveness or otherwise to Americans of the local political game." But such intervention calls for at least some understanding of the local political game. Such understanding would imply a refusal to back players who, like the Contras, do not have a hope in hell of winning; or those whose victory in the short run, like those of Marcos in the Philippines, Galtieri in Argentina, or Pinochet in Chile, builds up in the long run a growing store of resentment toward the United States among those very elements whose support the Americans wish to attract. To regard the Third World simply as an arena in which the United States and the Soviet Union can fight out their geopolitical battles without any concern for, or understanding of, the needs of the countries concerned is to ensure that in the long run those battles will be lost.

Finally, one can applaud Dr. Gray's robust defense of the American commitment to the security of Western Europe and share his concern about the credibility of the nuclear guarantee without accepting his alternative solution: "to substitute the threat of long duration and global geographical scope of conflict for that of nuclear escalation at the end of the sputtering fuse from war in Europe . . . the extended deterrent should be the total mobilizable potential of the United States and its allies . . . the core of deterrence would be the Soviet understanding that, however well they might fare in a campaign in Europe, they could not guarantee that the campaign would be synonymous with the war as a whole."

It is hard to see this as anything other than an appeal to the United States and its allies to tool themselves up to fight a global, non-nuclear World War III; a war which would begin as did World War II, with the loss of Western Europe. Apart from any feelings the West Europeans might have in the matter, the obvious question arises: how much is this going to cost? As Dr. Gray himself states elsewhere, "It does not much matter what goals American statesmen believe the United States should pursue in the international order: what matters is what the United States and its allies are prepared to pay for." Dr. Gray does not put a price tag on his recommendations. Indeed,



General Secretary Gorbachev and President Reagan toast each other during the Moscow summit of May-June 1988.

his whole book is as short on economic as it is on social and political analysis. He does not address the argument that the United States is already dangerously weakened by financial overstretch. Until he does so, and is prepared to spell out not only the financial but the general economic implications of his preferred strategy, his book is not likely to be taken very seriously by decisionmakers in Washington.

Published in the twilight months of the Reagan Administration, this book already has the look of a period piece. Dr. Gray confidently restates the two dogmatic assumptions on which President Reagan based his defense policy at the beginning of this decade: the unchanging nature and ineluctable hostility of the Soviet Union, and the willingness of the American people to bear whatever burdens were needed to contain it. Now both these pillars are crumbling. A huge question mark hangs over the whole future of the Soviet Union, with whose leaders President Reagan seems to have established relations of almost embarrassing intimacy. The lavish expenditure of Secretary of Defense Weinberger's tenure at the Pentagon is already being pruned back, and is likely under any successor administration to be pruned back still further. We are moving into a very different world in which Dr. Gray's arguments are likely to be of greater interest to his fellow academics than to those responsible for shaping American defense policy for the 1990s. □