Editor's Corner

By Mackubin T. Owens

In These Pages

2015 marks the 60th anniversary of the Foreign Policy Research Institute. FPRI was founded by the influential strategic thinker, Robert Strausz-Hupé. This issue of Orbis is dedicated to the legacy of Strausz-Hupé, most notably his role in rehabilitating the study of geopolitics. To this end we begin the issue by republishing three essays, including Strausz-Hupé’s inaugural essay from Orbis in 1957, in which he provides a profound window into his conception of the role of geopolitics in thinking about international affairs.

We next excerpt a chapter from Robert Kaplan’s influential book, The Revenge of Geography, in which he rejects the “idealist” view that the importance of geography has been diminished by technology and a political ideology that stresses cooperation rather than competition in international affairs. Finally we include my article from the Naval War College Review in 1999, defending classical geopolitics as articulated by Halford Mackinder, Nicholas Spykman, and Strausz-Hupé, and making predictions about international relations based on geopolitical reasoning.

This fall issue features a cluster of four articles based on FPRI’s Ginsburg Family Lecture Series. The first of these by Ronald Granieri is general in nature, tracing the intellectual roots of FPRI’s approach to Geopolitics, as initially formulated by its founder Strausz-Hupé, and discussing how this approach contrasts with other intellectual traditions.

The remaining three Ginsburg essays take a regional focus. In the first article, Jakub Grygiel examines the geopolitics of Europe, contending that “Europe” is a term that describes a geographic reality that aspires to be a political one, while highlighting Europe’s illusions of unity and its delusions of international harmony permeating its politics today.
Next, June Teufel Dreyer explores the rise of China and its assertive actions in the East China and South China seas, noting that efforts by neighboring states to form a countervailing coalition have thus far proved ineffective. Nonetheless, she contends, although Beijing’s tactics have been successful thus far, China’s financial, structural, and resource weaknesses suggest that its effort to control the area will ultimately fail.

In the final article of the Ginsburg series, Adam Garfinkle discusses the limitations to geopolitics as applied to the contemporary Middle East. The problem is, he argues, that geopolitics’ analytical spotlight focuses on “states” but in the Middle East, “states” lack real decisional agency, a problem that lies at the core of the region’s instability.

Tally Helfont also addresses the Middle East and what many see as a decline of U.S. influence in the region. She contends that while the U.S. ability to project power and assert influence in the Middle East has waned over the past few years, the United States should be able to capitalize on the emergence of a strong pro-Western geopolitical alliance bloc poised to confront Iran and other subversive actors in the region.

John Haines writes about the geopolitics of energy as he evaluates Russia’s network of natural gas pipelines and ethnic enclaves in its near abroad in the interest of exploring whether and how the two intersect.

Michael Noonan catalogues the problems arising from the changing geopolitical landscape and the failure of the United States to adapt to those changes. U.S. instruments of power lag behind changes in the global environment. If the United States is to maintain its position in the world, it must be able to exploit more easily opportunities when they arise, using all the tools of national power and applying a blend of direct and indirect strategies to advance its interests and to counter those of competitors.

The final article of the issue takes us back to the genesis of geopolitical thought. Here, Francis Sempa outlines the “roots” of Sir Halford Mackinder’s worldview that are visible in his lesser-known early writings. These writings make it clear that a frequent charge against geopolitics, that it is merely geographic determinism, is false.

**Impromptus and Asides: A Dangerous World Becoming More So**

During the 1990s, many in the United States who should have known better succumbed to the siren call of what might be called “strategic happy talk.” The Soviet Union had disintegrated and the United States led a coalition to quickly oust Saddam Hussein from Kuwait. Thus, many concluded that we had entered a new era in which the old rules of international relations no longer applied. Henceforth, liberal principles would prevail. Those principles for which the United States successfully fought two World Wars were, despite the U.S. defeat in Vietnam, now triumphant. A new world order was indeed at hand as we had reached the “end of history.”

This liberal triumphalism was reinforced by the belief that U.S. technological superiority, especially in the area of information technology, was a permanent condition. The first Gulf
War seemed to show that Clausewitz was dead. His “friction” and “fog of uncertainty” were things of the past.

Of course this liberal and technological triumphalism began to come apart in Iraq and Afghanistan. Our enemies adapted to battlefield conditions and acted in unexpected ways. It turned out that friction and the fog of uncertainty in war were indeed still part of conflict. Of course, the U.S. military adapted as well, adopting a hybrid counterinsurgency approach that led to military, if not political, success.

But this led to a new debate. Should the United States shape and size its forces to conduct counterinsurgency or should it maintain a robust capability to deal with what were once called “near-peer competitors,” treating counterinsurgency as a lesser included case? Of course, with the drawdown of forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the rise of ISIS and other terror groups, this question also became moot as the Obama Administration opted to cut overall force structure and rely on unmanned aerial strikes and special operations raids. That is the situation that prevails today.

But while policymakers have been focused on Middle Eastern terror groups, China and Russia have taken the opportunity to act aggressively. And that has raised the question: is the United States prepared to fight a sustained conflict with either Russia or China? The answer appears to be no. During his confirmation hearing in July, incoming chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Marine General Joseph Dunford, identified Russia as the source of the greatest threat to the United States: “If you want to talk about a nation that could pose an existential threat to the United States, I’d have to point to Russia…If you look at their behavior, it’s nothing short of alarming.”

Meanwhile China has taken steps designed to deny the United States access to the Western Pacific. This, of course, is of great concern to the U.S. Navy as the Pacific theater is a maritime region. Chinese anti-ship ballistic missiles and emerging hypersonic weapons could raise the risk of U.S. Navy operations in the Western Pacific to unacceptable levels.

But defense budget cuts continue. The Army has borne most of the cost of force reductions but the capabilities of the other services have been diminished as well, all because of the questionable view that state vs. state conflict is a thing of the past. Who can forget President Barack Obama’s mocking of former Governor Mitt Romney during the 2012 presidential campaign for the latter’s argument that Russia was this country’s preeminent geopolitical adversary? Or Secretary of State John Kerry’s suggestion that Russia’s actions in Ukraine were more appropriate to the nineteenth century than to the twenty-first century?

But history has not ended. Not all states are motivated by the liberal principles that have traditionally shaped U.S. policy and that of other liberal democracies. And if there is no liberal state to deter them, those states that do not share liberal principles will continue to act aggressively. As the United States has stepped back from the world, liberal principles have retreated as well. And
with this retreat, aggressor states such as Russia, China, and Iran have stepped forward to fill the void.

The greatest danger to peace today is the threat of a miscalculation that triggers war. If the West has acquiesced in Russia’s annexation of Crimea and its subversion of eastern Ukraine, why not test Western resolve in the Baltics? But since the Baltic States are members of NATO, the West would be obligated to respond to Russian actions there, thus sparking war. Thanks to our force structure decisions over the past decade and a half, the United States would be hard pressed to sustain the resulting conflict.