Editor's Corner

by Mackubin T. Owens

In These Pages

This issue of *Orbis* features three timely article clusters on Europe, counterinsurgency, and Asia. In the first article of the Europe cluster, Jakub Grygiel argues that the current crisis afflicting the European Union (EU) is the result of a flawed understanding of Europe's political development, which reverses cause and effect. The founding assumption of the EU was that a common market and a common currency would lead to a unified polity. But the fact is that Europe represents a cultural idea that Europeans have largely discarded. Focusing on the euro has led to a fraying Europe rather than a Europe whole, secure, and free.

John Deni contends that rather than seeking to build partner capacity among the newest North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members or aspirants, the United States needs to refocus its military-to-military engagement programs on those allies that are adaptive and innovative, deployable and expeditionary, and capable of full spectrum operations—that is, allies such as France, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom.

Ilai Saltzman claims that Washington policymakers must understand that Russia's grand strategy is aimed at undercutting U.S. primacy and that in order to achieve its goals, Moscow is willing to apply limited military force. The United States should engage Russia, but be prepared to confront it if necessary.

Turning to counterinsurgency, T.X. Hammes makes the point that despite what many national security specialists may argue, counter-insurgency is not a strategy itself but a capability that is part of an overarching strategy, one that the United States is obliged to retain. He examines the drivers of modern insurgency as well as the range of counterinsurgency approaches that have worked globally, using illustrative case studies to suggest how the United States might improve its counterinsurgency activity in the future.

Chris Harmon examines a case of a state's defeating an armed group: Spain's apparent victory over the terrorist organization, "Basque Fatherland & Liberty" (ETA). He attributes Madrid's success to three factors. First, in the late 1970s Spain agreed to limited autonomy for Basque-dominated provinces, this contributing to a decline in Basque militancy. Second, Spain and France have forged a

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strong counterinsurgency bond that made it harder for ETA gunmen to hide among French Basques. Third, Spanish policing is now excellent. Thus, a resilient Spanish democracy offers a case study in how terrorist groups may end.

Leading off the Asia cluster, Jacques deLisle looks at China's claims to the South China Sea, arguing that the cost-benefit equation favors China in a confrontation with the United States, especially if smaller states in the region choose to "bandwagon" with Beijing.

John Maurer draws an analogy between the rise of China today and that of Japan during the 1930s. Just as the Japanese sought a "game changer" in carrier-based aviation to defeat the United States and Britain in the Pacific, the Chinese seek one today, making it potentially difficult for American leaders to manage the rise of Chinese power.

The final two articles of this issue address the diverse topics of the Arab Spring and deterrence. First, Peter Schraeder argues that the activities of prodemocracy activists in the Middle East and North Africa have ushered in a period of substantial change. He asks if the actions of the international community in promoting democratic transition will contribute to the further strengthening of the "Arab Spring" or a return to an "Arab Winter" of authoritarianism. He sees reason for optimism based on the fact that each wave of global democratization over the last 200 years has contributed to the further strengthening of the international democratic imperative. Thus, he claims, the Arab Spring will, with time, likely to lead to an "Arab Summer," in which democratic processes and institutions are consolidated throughout the region.

Finally, Robert Rubel offers a critique of "tailored" deterrence, which he claims is based on a flawed assumption: that the United States operates from a position of strength relative to its potential adversaries. Rubel contends that the tacit assumption of strength is too narrow and can lead to actions that result in effects opposite of those intended. Deterrence, rightly understood, is a component of a conflict management strategy which implies a degree of weakness on the part of the state that employs it.

Bruce Kuklick's review essay in this issue discusses four new books about George Kennan.

Impromptus and Asides: The End of Strategic Happy Talk?

During the decades after the fall of the Soviet Union and the American victory against Iraq in 1991, far too many U.S. policymakers came to accept a vision of the world that can only be described as "strategic happy talk." First, there was the "end of history" narrative, which argued that liberal democracy had triumphed as the universal ideology. While conflict might continue on the peripheries of the liberal world order, the trend was toward a more peaceful and prosperous world. The economic component of the end of history narrative was "globalization," the triumph of liberal capitalism.

The end of history narrative was complemented by that of the "technological optimists" who contended that the United States could maintain its dominant position in the international order by exploiting the "revolution in military affairs" (RMA). The eminent British strategist Colin Gray described the technological optimists as pursuing a technological El Dorado, a "golden city of guaranteed strategic riches."

The rapid coalition victory over Saddam Hussein that drove Iraqi forces out of Kuwait led some influential defense experts to argue that emerging technologies and the RMA had the potential to transform the very nature of war. One of the most prominent advocates of this position was the former Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral William Owens, who contended that these emerging technologies and "information dominance" would eliminate "friction" and the "fog of war," providing the commander and his subordinates nearly perfect "situational awareness," thereby promising "the capacity to use military force without the same risks as before."

Some combination of the end of history and technological optimist story lines exerted a great deal of influence over the administrations of Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama. Unfortunately, as illustrated by the course of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the failure of the Russian "reset," the travails of Europe, China's seemingly relentless military rise, and the failure of many Islamic states to embrace liberalism, strategic happy talk continues to run up against geopolitical reality. One element of this recalcitrant reality is geography.

Under the influence of the strategic happy talk narrative, it was not unusual for foreign policy analysts in the 1990s to dismiss geopolitics and geography as reactionary concepts not worthy of consideration. But geography persists and policymakers who ignore geographical reality are likely to make mistakes. This is the theme of a new book by Bob Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography*, a work he dedicates to the memory of Harvey Sicherman. As is fitting for the journal of an organization founded by the great geopolitical thinker, Robert Strausz-Hupé, we will have this book reviewed in a future issue of *Orbis*. At this point it is sufficient to note that Kaplan provides an antidote to the strategic happy talk that has dominated American foreign policy over the past two decades.

Kaplan argues that makers of foreign policy and strategy must recover the sensibility about time and space that has been lost because of the view that technology trumps all other considerations, that economic liberalism and globalization are unstoppable forces driving the world toward the end of history, and that in the words of the *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman, *the world is flat*. Kaplan shows that the world is *not* flat and that to believe so is to entertain a conceit we can no longer afford.

The fact is that geography—the physical setting of human activity, whether political, economic, or strategic—exerts a great deal of influence on the formulation of strategy. As the Dutch-American strategic thinker Nicholas Spykman observed 70 years ago, "geography is the most fundamental factor in foreign policy because it is the most permanent." The geographic setting imposes distinctive constraints on a nation's foreign policy and strategy while at the same time providing distinctive opportunities. Those like Kaplan who stress the importance of geography understand that the physical setting of human action, at a minimum, defines the players in international relations, the stakes for which the players contend, and the terms by which they measure their security relative to others.

Geopolitics—"the relation of international political power to the geographical setting"—is concerned with the study of the political and strategic relevance of geography in the pursuit of international power. As such, it is most closely related to strategic geography, which is concerned with the control of, or access to, spatial areas that have an impact on the security and prosperity of nations.

Adherents of geopolitics contend that the study of the international scene from a spatial viewpoint, by which one better understands the whole, has strategic implications. The main directions of proper strategy may be deduced from an understanding of the overarching spatial relationships among political actors: by discerning broad *geographical patterns*, it is possible to develop better strategic options for ensuring states their place in the world.

Geopolitical thinking about strategy atrophied during the era of strategic happy thought. Let us hope that U.S. policymakers take Kaplan's advice and return geography and geopolitics to their rightful place in the making of foreign policy and strategy making.