

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نېاشد تن من مېباد بدین یوم وېر زنده یک تن مېباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

M. Mandl

A Simple Tool for Understanding the Trump Presidency

By Reva Goujon

NOVEMBER 15, 2016

We hear all the time about how the world "should" work. Self-proclaimed liberals and conservatives, Keynesians and Reaganites, humanists and hawks, globalists and nationalists have crammed the airwaves and filled our Twitter feeds with policy prescriptions, promoting their worldview while scorning others'. But after the emotionally charged year this has been, I suspect many people are growing weary of big theories and cursory character assassinations. Instead, it may be time to replace the pedantry with something more fundamental — and less divisive — in which to ground our thoughts and make sense of the world.

Rather than focusing on what should happen, perhaps we would do better to turn our attention to what will happen. And in this, geopolitics can come in handy. It is a deceptively simple tool, one that won't bury you in academic pretension or require a fancy algorithm to model. But its simplicity doesn't make it any less powerful. When you boil down the frothy mixture of ideas, personalities and emotions that have bubbled up over the past year, what is left are some fairly obvious answers on how we got to this point and, more important, where we are heading.

Geography Doesn't Argue

It all starts with the map. And not just any map, but one that emphasizes topography over political borders. The beauty of such a map is that it doesn't leave much room for polemical

debate. As the Dutch-American geopolitical thinker Nicholas Spykman once put it, "Geography does not argue. It simply is."

The map can tell us the basic facts about a particular nation or region. Is it massive or tiny, mountainous or flat? Is it a land power or an island? Is it stuck between bigger powers or does it loom over smaller neighbors? Is it enclosed by geographic barriers or split from within? Do its river systems run in a direction that unites or divides? The map will show whether a place has navigable waterways and coastal depth, where its biggest population centers are, how much rain its lands get and how many resources those lands contain, whether it rests in a temperate zone or an inhospitable wasteland, what infrastructure links it with others or isolates it, and so on.

Then, we layer on history. How has the map shaped a nation's behavior over the centuries? Regardless of the prevailing personality or ideology of the time, what were the constraints that limited that nation's options, or the compulsions that pulled it in a particular direction? What internal and external conditions existed when the nation was most celebrated in its history? When it entered its darkest days? Do the circumstances emerging today resemble a cycle of the past?

Time is important. Geopolitics is the study of the human condition, and human history is told through the passing of generations. On average, a new generational cycle is completed every 20 years or so. This means that the world we knew two decades ago and the world we will see two decades from now should look very different from the one we're experiencing today. If you're skeptical, consider 2016. Now subtract 20-25 years and see what picture you end up with. In the late 1990s, the United States was in the midst of an economic boom, and political theorists in a postwar euphoria boldly claimed that we had reached the "end of history" and that liberal, capitalistic democracy had triumphed over dangerous ideological thinking. Russia was still in shambles, and the European Union was convinced that closer integration would invite economic prosperity, positioning the Continent to better compete with America. Meanwhile, Japan was starting to feel the pain of its first Lost Decade, and China had begun its rapid ascent as the world's economic "miracle."

Now consider the cycle we are in today, one that began with a crisis that shattered the world. The 2008 collapse of the global financial system stripped away the prosperity that bound the European Union together, short-circuited China's low-end manufacturing boom and triggered a prolonged slump. Jobs were lost and disillusionment with the political establishments spread. At the same time, discontent began to boil over in the Islamic world as populations rose up against their ruling strongmen, all while the United States drowned in its Middle Eastern wars. Russia used these regional fires to blow smoke into Washington's eyes, distracting it while Moscow rebuilt its influence in the Russian borderlands. From this position of relative strength, the Russians squeezed Ukraine's energy supplies and warred with Georgia to remind its neighbors of Moscow's military might — and of the weakness of U.S. security guarantees.

Once we find our place in the generational cycle, we can look to the future and weigh the bigger structural forces at play. How will aging demographics, energy availability, climate change, migrant flows, expanding power vacuums, technological advances and China's economic evolution work together to compound global stressors, create opportunities and revive historical

compulsions? This is where the "-isms" will rear their heads: Nativism, protectionism, populism and nationalism will flow easily from these broader forces as the world tries to steady itself from the hyperglobalization of the previous generation.

Only at this point do we add in the individual. If you skip ahead, as many intuitively do, and try to glean answers from what figures such as Donald Trump, Marine Le Pen or Rodrigo Duterte say, you risk falling into the deep chasm between intention and reality. But when you organize the world into generational cycles and base your understanding on a firm geopolitical foundation, individuals form but a thin film on what is already a thick body of analysis. The leaders in question are then revealed as products of their time, not aberrations in need of constant psychoanalysis. And the structural forces that brought them to power will be the ones to constrain, shape and bend their actions once in office, limiting the possibilities as to what may actually transpire.

Imperatives Laid Bare

We find ourselves today at a particularly compelling phase of this generational cycle. The election of straight-talking populists amid a stressful global environment has laid bare the basic imperatives of the nation-state. Whereas idealism in better, more prosperous times does a good job of cloaking unpleasant truths, hard survival instincts will drive behavior under more trying circumstances.

And this is where geopolitics matters most.

Russia's sprawling landmass and lack of natural defenses compel it to reach beyond its borders and build buffers against the West. As tension inside Russia increases, solidifying those buffers while Russia is still strong enough to do so will become a matter of urgency. Regardless of who sits in the White House, Moscow has no choice but to assume that the West will take advantage of Russia's inherent vulnerabilities to keep the Eurasian power in check. Should the Kremlin perceive the next U.S. president to be a more pliable negotiator, its biggest imperative will be to try to reach an understanding that rolls back NATO's encroachment in the former Soviet Union. But this also means Russia cannot be expected to make any concessions that fundamentally weaken its grip on the critical buffer territory it has seized in eastern Ukraine.

This is where it will become important to focus on the smaller powers squeezed between the bigger ones. These countries tend to have the most acute sense of their environment, and they often adapt to the shifting tides of geopolitics before anyone else sees them coming. The rim of states in Central and Eastern Europe will have to soberly calculate the course of negotiations between Russia and the United States at a time when core Continental powers such as Germany are trying to manage the fallout from the European Union's disintegration. For nations sitting on Russia's front lines, such as Poland, now is the time to band together and bolster their defenses. But for those such as Hungary that rest easier behind the shield of the Carpathian Mountains, now is the time to stay close to Moscow and keep their options open.

Russia will surely run into roadblocks as it barter with the Americans, but it can use the perception of a budding bargain with Washington to intimidate its neighbors while taking advantage of the geopolitical forces pulling Europe apart to weaken the West's resolve. As an

island nation, the United Kingdom's instinct will be to distance itself from the Continent — and balance off of the United States across the Atlantic — as other European powers revive their age-old feuds. France, rooted in the southern Mediterranean, will become increasingly polarized from Germany and its allies in Northern Europe as nationalist forces chip away at their troubled union.

Questions over the United States' security commitments in the Far East have presented an opportunity for China as well. The nations stretching from the Indochina mainland to the island chains of Southeast Asia are caught between China's overbearing reach and Japan's reawakening. Even before the U.S. election, these countries were trying to chart a course forward without the firm assurances of their longtime U.S. protector. Seeking strength in numbers, these small, exposed nations will try to coordinate with one another, acting under the larger umbrella of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in the hope that their collective voice will grant them some level of parity with their bigger and more powerful neighbors. But in the face of economic stress, political tumult, North Korea's nuclearization and uncertainty over Washington's role in the region, they will eventually break with one another to tend to their own needs. And when they do they will become more vulnerable, giving China ample space to assert its military dominance and extend economic concessions in an attempt to reshape the regional status quo in its favor.

The Middle East will be no less immune to this geopolitical test. Turkey is determined to reclaim its sphere of influence in the former Ottoman belt reaching from Aleppo through Mosul to Kirkuk. At the same time, Iran is trying to preserve its influence in the arc between the Persian Gulf and Mediterranean Sea. As the two countries collide amid the region's broader ethno-sectarian struggle, the volatile Middle East will continue to draw in the United States, as well as Russia, which will use these conflicts as bargaining chips in its negotiation with Washington. Strategically speaking, neither the United States nor Iran is in a position to renew tension in the Persian Gulf by throwing out their nuclear deal. But domestic politics could put that theory to the test. Meanwhile, Israel will wait and react to the larger rivalries unfolding around it. Though the United States will maintain its relationship with Israel, it is unlikely to go out of its way to support Israel in ways that could alienate the region's key Muslim powers. Regardless of the next administration's personal preferences for allies, they will not outweigh Washington's strategic interest in maintaining working relationships with the countries taking the lead in reshaping the region.

The fate of North America likewise hangs in the geopolitical balance. The United States rests at the heart of a continent endowed with many resources, navigable waterways, deep coastal ports and massive oceans that protect it from and link it to the rest of the world. The robust trade, infrastructure and cultural ties the United States shares with Mexico and Canada cannot be abruptly severed without creating significant turmoil at home. To be sure, the elemental forces currently fueling nativism, protectionism and anti-establishment sentiment in the United States will force Washington to recalibrate its policies somewhat. But the unique advantages that destined the United States to become a global empire will reduce the chances of a dramatic retrenchment in its foreign policy. The United States will still be driven to capitalize on revolutionary changes in technology to stay competitive and to build a North American economic powerhouse. And when it looks overseas, the United States will still be compelled to prevent larger powers such as China and Russia from dominating their neighborhoods and will

have little choice but to rely on regional partners with often-colliding interests to manage developing crises.

Still, the nuances of the United States' policy adjustments and the time it takes to shape them will spread uncertainty in many parts of the world and drive nations to prepare for their worst-case scenarios. So now is the time to put our ears to the ground and feel the earth tremble. We then need to raise ourselves up, dust ourselves off and watch the map come alive.