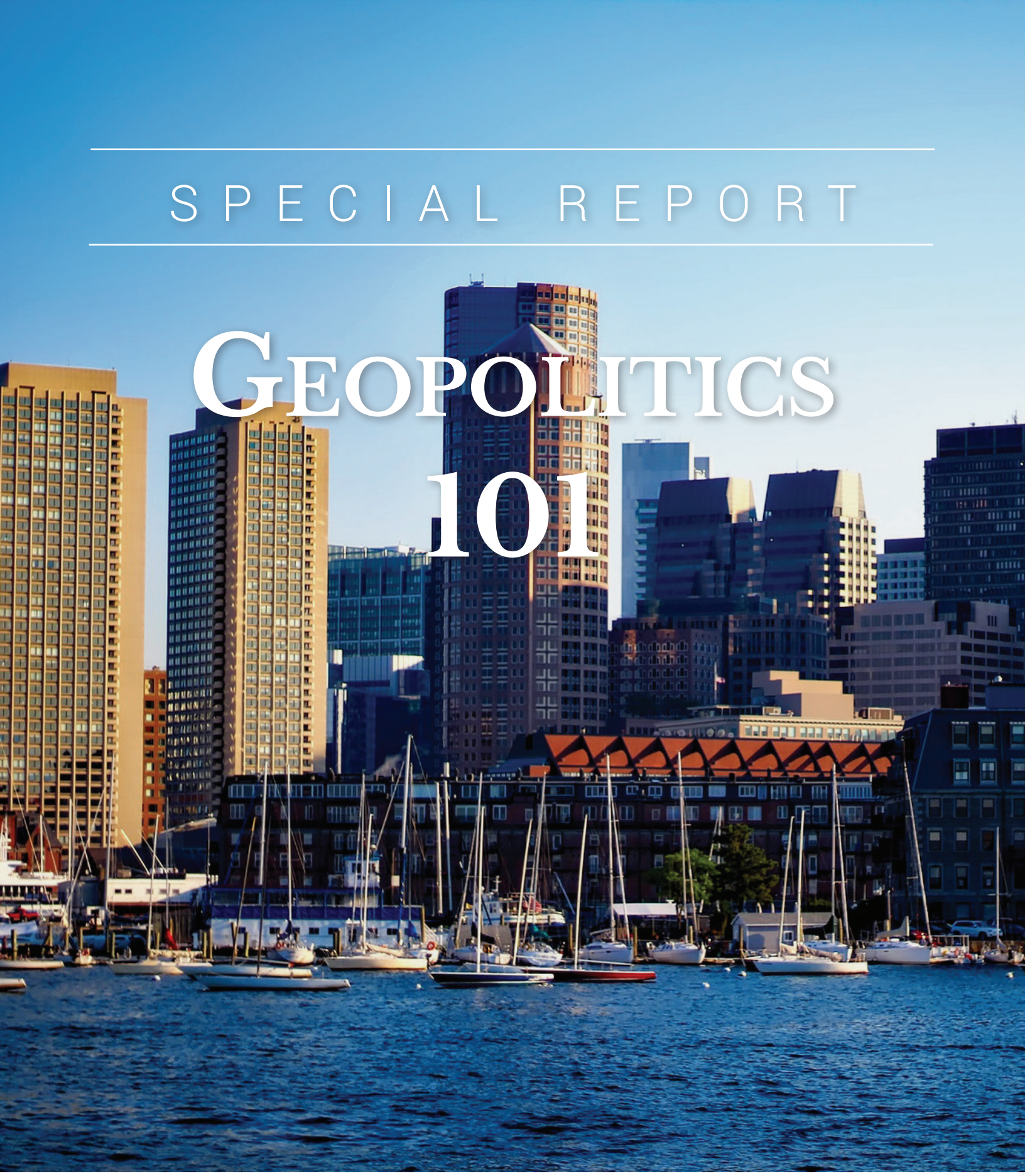
SPECIAL REPORT

GEOPOLITICS 101



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Geopolitics 101

What is Geopolitics?

In Greek, "geo" means "earth" and "politika" means "affairs of the city." The "earthly affairs of the city" is a more elegant definition of geopolitics than what the dictionary offers: "politics as influenced by geographic factors." But neither of these definitions does much to explain what geopolitics is and how we use it at Geopolitical Futures.

For us, geopolitics is a tool, a way of thinking about the relationship between what states can and cannot control. It is not focused on any one thing but on all things; not on any one moment but on all moments, past and future; above all, it is not judgmental. It is concerned with describing what is and leaves what should be to theologians and think tanks.

Geopolitics is not something you can learn from books alone, though reading Thucydides and Machiavelli and Clausewitz and Alfred Mahan certainly doesn't hurt. Geopolitics is more akin to common sense than to international relations theory. It requires you to understand why men die for their country as well as a country's grand strategy. It requires that you know how much a loaf of bread costs at the grocery store as well as what kind of guidance system an ICBM needs to be effective. It requires you to be able to put yourself in the shoes of a man like Adolf Hitler and understand his decisions with a cold and dispassionate accounting of Germany's national interest.

It requires that you see the world not as you would want it to be, but as it really is. Geopolitics is never disconnected from reality; it is reality at its grittiest.

The Content of Geopolitics

Let's begin, then, with some observations about that reality. Our first observation is that human life is defined by place. In fact, geography defined the development of human life itself. Before homo sapiens could appear, a place hospitable to their development had to exist. Different environments produced early humans of different kinds; some of them died out, and some of them survived. The first thing to understand about geopolitics, then, has nothing to do with politics. It has to do with how geography shapes who and what we are. Geography defines the parameters within which human life can exist.

And it does so in spite of the fact that the world has shrunk. Airplanes make once impossible distances traversable in a matter of hours. Cellphones give us instant communication at our fingertips. The internet instantly connects us with people and events around the world, and increasingly makes the problem of language obsolete.

But that hasn't subverted the primacy of place, which shapes human life as much today as it did 50,000 years ago. Where you are born defines the opportunities you have. It defines your greatest fears and your greatest ambitions. It gives you your mother tongue. Your mother tongue is your mother tongue no matter how sophisticated Google Translate becomes. Your thoughts occur in that language, and you feel at home with people who speak your language and share your values and who faced the same obstacles you did. A Russian and an American have profoundly different national identities, and the root of that difference is in the physical space in which they reside. All the other differences flow from that most basic one.

This leads to our second observation: Human life is not solitary but communal. Humanity did not begin with an individual. Humanity began in small groups – groups that got bigger over time, that fought each other for resources, that learned how to define who was in their group and who was in a rival group. Geopolitics makes a simple observation, the same one Aristotle made millennia ago: Man is, by nature, a political animal. That is to say, he lives in community.

Today, the international system is based around political communities we have come to know as nation-states. In fact, the word "international" betrays just how fundamental nation-states are to politics today. But nation-states have not always been the building blocks of the relations between different political communities. The nation-state begins with the nation, and the nation begins with the family. As humanity evolved, so did its political communities, into broader and larger groups. The clan, the tribe, the polis, the empire, the monarchy, the republic and various other forms of states all at one point or another defined the way in which different groups of human beings interacted with each other.

The deep yet deceptively simple insight with which geopolitics begins is that all political communities are made up of a group of related human beings occupying the same space. The space they occupy defines what they fear, and the family defines what they love. This combination of fear and love binds communities together.

Imperatives

So geopolitics is the study of human communities living in a defined space. To survive, a community must have access to some basic resources like food, water and shelter. The way these things are acquired varies. Some communities live in places where it is hard to grow food, so they develop other

resources to trade with nearby communities in order to provide for their well-being, and so economics springs into being. The larger the community, the more resources it needs. But resources are finite and competition for them is fierce – and that means defense of a community's resources and members must be ensured.

These types of basic needs are what we call imperatives. Geography defines what these imperatives are for each country. Some countries may have the same imperatives, like North Korea and South Korea, both of which ultimately seek to unify the Korean Peninsula under one rule. Other countries, like Israel, may have an imperative to secure independence from surrounding powers but in practice find doing this very difficult because of a disadvantageous geography and the presence of stronger neighbors around them. But though their imperatives may be difficult or impossible to attain, all countries have them, and understanding what a given country's imperatives are is far more useful in predicting its behavior than listening to the statements of politicians or reading long policy papers.

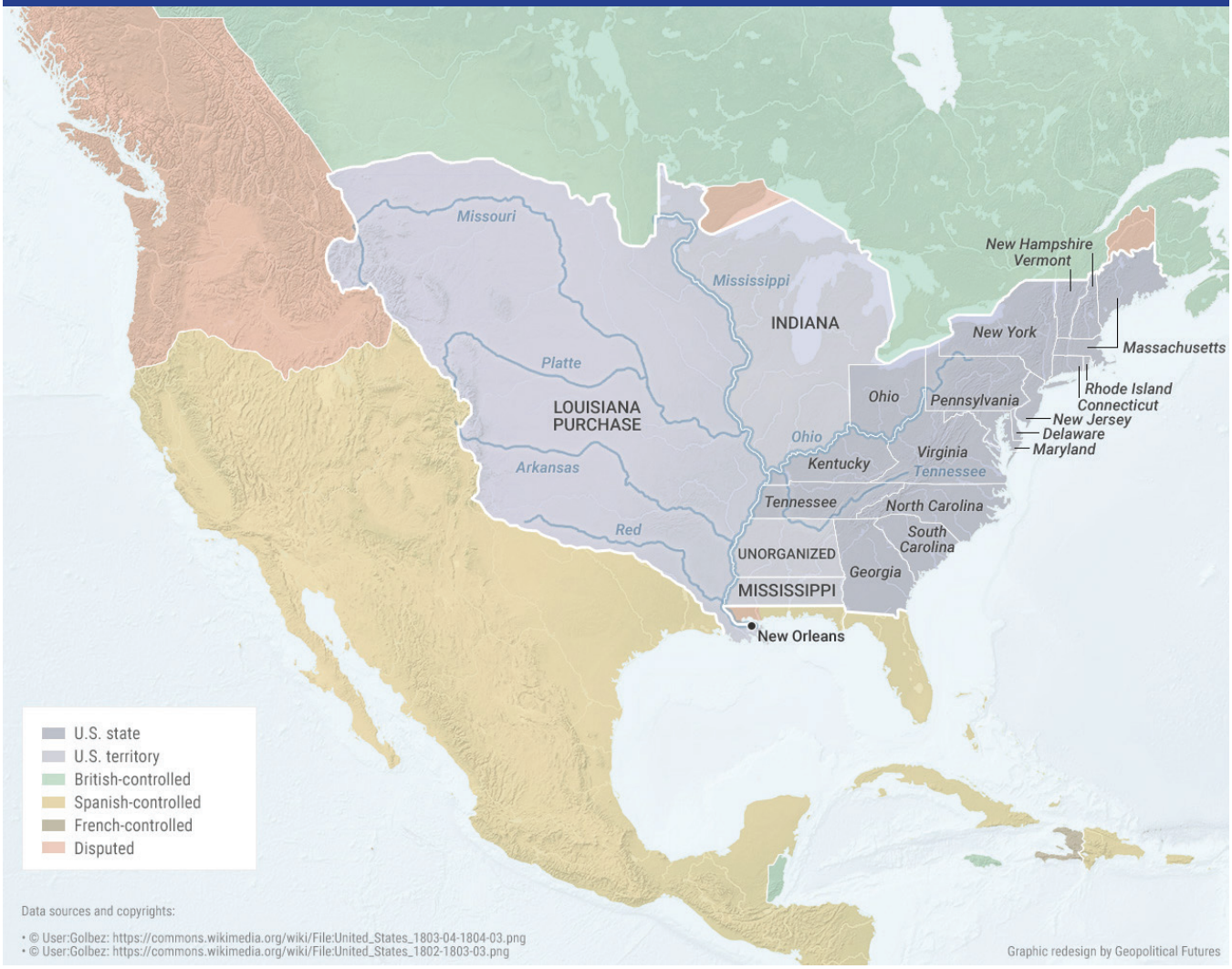
Let's consider the case of the United States, unique among most countries in that it has achieved all its strategic imperatives. The United States began as 13 British colonies occupying a narrow strip of land on the eastern coast of North America. Had the United States remained in this geography, it would not have evolved into the global superpower it is today. At the time, the U.S. was not wealthy enough to construct a navy that could challenge British dominance on the seas. So the first imperative of the United States was to occupy enough territory inland (what we call "strategic depth") so it could absorb a British attack and live to fight another day. The peculiar geography of North America meant that strategic depth could come in only one form: control of the Greater Mississippi Basin.

The United States acquired significant lands on the other side of the Appalachians in the 1783 Treaty of Paris, but this territory by itself was insufficient to provide the U.S. with the strategic depth necessary to make its national project viable. This was because the dominant geographic feature of the land west of the Appalachians was the Mississippi River, a massive river running north to south, into which many smaller rivers flowed. Most important, the Mississippi was navigable. On the one hand, this meant that the agricultural wealth in places like Ohio and Kentucky could easily be shipped out to sea, or moved to different parts of the United States. But on the other hand, this meant that any foreign entity that controlled New Orleans, the port from which U.S. goods left the mainland for foreign markets, would be able to impose its will on the United States.

Until the U.S. controlled New Orleans, it could not ensure the viability of the new nation. The most important moments in U.S. geopolitical history, then, occurred when New Orleans was at stake. In 1803, the U.S. jumped at the chance to purchase the Louisiana Territory from Napoleon. In 1814, the U.S. successfully defended its position from Britain in the Battle of New Orleans. In 1863, Gen. Ulysses S. Grant's armies seized New Orleans from the Confederacy, in effect breaking any chance the Confederacy had of winning the Civil War. U.S. dominance of the Greater Mississippi Basin has not been seriously threatened since – though even the vaguest hint of a threat can cause the U.S. to get obsessed with places like Cuba. It is not a coincidence that in the decades after the U.S. achieved this imperative, it became the most powerful nation in the world.

The second U.S. imperative was to neutralize any threat in the Western Hemisphere. The U.S. faced two key enemies in this regard. The first were the Native American tribes that resisted the inexorable advance of American settlers into newly acquired territories. The technological superiority of the American

United States After Louisiana Purchase, 1803



settlers and the inability of the natives to resist the diseases they brought from the Old World meant that, with some notable exceptions, these tribes were easily defeated. The second and more important enemy was Mexico. Before the Mexican-American War and Santa Anna's defeat at the Battle of San Jacinto, it was not clear which power was going to dominate North America – the U.S. or Mexico. But Santa Anna's defeat broke the last major threat the U.S. faced on the continent and enabled the Manifest Destiny policy that extended U.S. control from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

Now that the United States was the most dominant force on the North American continent, the next step was to defend the

maritime approaches to the U.S. through the construction of a large navy. Until this was accomplished, the United States remained vulnerable to naval powers like Great Britain – a threat that loomed over the United States even during the Civil War, when Great Britain flirted seriously with the idea of supporting the fledgling Confederate States of America. It was after the Civil War and the economic consolidation that went along with it that the U.S. was both powerful enough and rich enough to invest in its navy. Alfred Mahan, one of the great American geopolitical thinkers, wrote his book on the importance of sea power in the second half of the 19th century. Later, Teddy Roosevelt, immensely important in the development of the U.S. Navy, and Franklin D. Roosevelt saw the importance of the navy and prioritized its development.

By the end of the 19th century, the U.S. boasted a navy that was capable of more than just defending against enemies. In the Spanish-American War of 1898, the United States solidified not just its control of the maritime approaches to the U.S. but also its naval dominance in the entire hemisphere. The Monroe Doctrine of 1823 had been the first expression of this imperative, but it was not until the U.S. could push the Spanish out at the end of the 19th century that it could be said to have achieved this imperative. When the U.S. did so, it joined the stage of global powers in the world, taking colonies in the Pacific (the Philippines and Hawaii).

This leads to the United States' fourth imperative: complete domination of the world's oceans. Securing the maritime approaches to the continental United States was important, but by itself it was not enough to guarantee U.S. security. The more power the U.S. amassed, the more far flung its imperatives to ensure its security. What began in 1898 led directly to war between Japan and the United States in World War II. The two sides were both vying for control of the Pacific – Japan because it is dependent on the import of raw materials to sus-

tain its economy, the U.S. because control of the Pacific was a necessary part of ensuring the physical safety of the United States. Victory, of course, would go to the United States, the first country in world history to mount simultaneous invasions across both the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.

Having achieved that imperative, there was only one more left for the United States: to prevent another nation from challenging U.S. global naval power. This imperative has motivated U.S. foreign policy for centuries, even before the U.S. was the global power it is today. Once the United States became the strongest power on the North American continent, its potential enemies would be forced to cross wide oceans to attack it. That meant that what had to animate U.S. foreign policy more than anything was preventing the rise of a power that could marshal the kind of resources necessary to mount an attack on the United States. The U.S. went to war with Germany in World War I and World War II precisely because it feared that if Germany gained control of the European continent it could then muster the resources to challenge the U.S. on the seas. The U.S. went to war with the Japanese Empire and opposed the Soviet Union in the Cold War for the same reason.

When viewed this way, the decisions of even the president of the United States become relatively unimportant. To understand the development of the United States and its growth into a global power means understanding the place in which the U.S. began and the people who made up the country. From there it becomes possible to explain how the U.S. behaved – the wars it fought, the enemies it feared and the capabilities in which it invested its considerable resources. The precise choreography of the steps is not predictable, but that the U.S. would need to achieve these basic imperatives to survive is. Few thought in the 18th century that a North American power would come to dominate the world a century later, but there were some who did, and what they saw was what geopolitics

showed them: what the U.S. possessed, and what it would be forced to do to survive.

Constraints

Imperatives are what a country must do to survive. But not all countries survive (e.g., Poland has flickered in and out of existence in recent centuries), not all nations have their own countries (e.g., Scotland), and not all those that do are able to satisfy their imperatives (e.g., Japan in World War II). This is because there are limits to what a country can do. In the same way that a country's geography defines its imperatives, it also defines its constraints. Russia, for instance, has an imperative to secure an area in Eastern Europe that buffers it from invasion. This is because Russia is located on the North European Plain, the invasion superhighway of Europe. The farther Russia can push out into Eastern Europe, the more secure the country's core in Moscow is. This was how Russia survived both world wars.

The fall of the Soviet Union meant in practical terms that Russia lost control over its buffer zone. Russia's imperative is to control this territory, but it's an impossible task for Moscow. Take the 2014 Ukrainian revolution. The status of Ukraine is of vital importance to Russia – a pro-West Ukraine is nothing less than an existential threat to Russian security. But Russia had very limited ability to respond to the change in government that happened in Kiev in 2014. Russia's military is incapable of conquering and holding Ukraine, and evidently Russia's softer methods – the use of proxies or well-placed individuals supporting a pro-Russia line – were not able to change the situation. Russia's imperative is to change the status quo in Ukraine, but the imperative outstrips Russian capabilities. Russia is constrained. It cannot achieve its imperative.

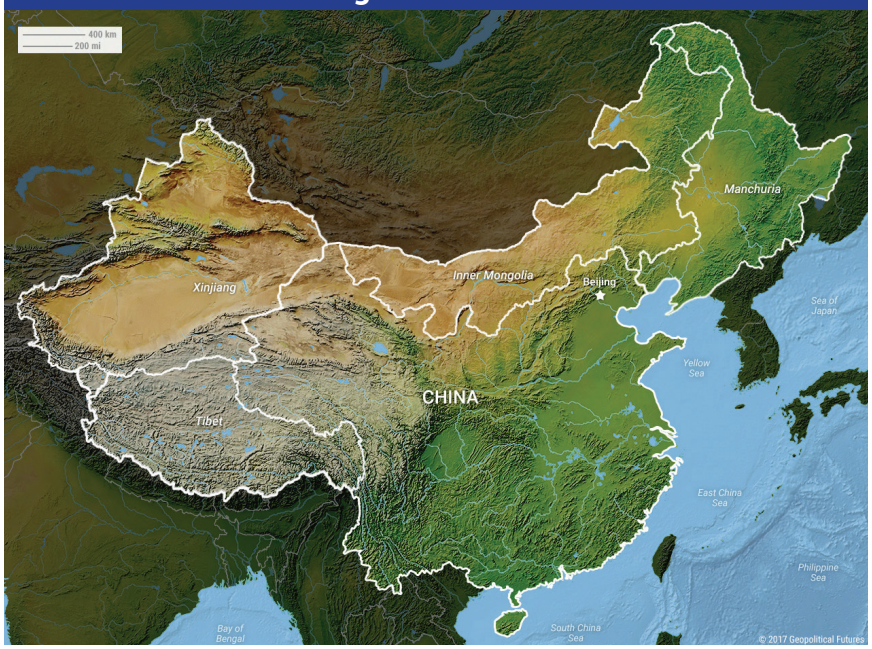
The area in which constraints are most clearly visible is in the limits they place on leaders. So abstract are the broad, impersonal forces that drive how countries behave, that it is tempting to think of history as the annals of the decisions of exceptional individuals. But individuals, even ones important enough to have risen to the leadership of their nation, are constrained by geography just as their countries are. The basic question here is one that has been argued back and forth for hundreds of years: Does man make history, or does history make man? Geopolitics states very clearly that the latter is true. The shorter the time horizon, the more influential an individual leader's decisions can be, and certainly individuals can shape a great many things. But they cannot change the substructure that gives impetus to the behavior of nations. Individuals are shaped by geopolitics – they do not shape geopolitics.

Consider the case of modern China. China has become an immensely powerful country – more powerful than most could have predicted when the communists emerged victorious in the civil war in 1949. Most of the mainstream media coverage of China these days focuses on Xi Jinping, who is described as the second coming of Chairman Mao. And it is true that Xi is a powerful leader, one who is attempting to consolidate control over the country to prevent it from breaking apart. But Xi is fundamentally constrained in what he can do to improve China's strategic position. One of China's most pressing issues is poverty and wealth disparity. The coast is wealthy and the interior is poor. If Xi could do whatever wanted in a consequence-free environment, he could redistribute wealth from the coast to the interior. But Xi cannot rule without the support of the coast. The result is that Xi is caught between the masses of the interior who will revolt if wealth isn't redistributed, and the wealthy power centers along the coast that are the source of China's economic power. Xi is the most powerful man in China, but even he cannot solve China's domestic issues.

Or consider China's position in the world. China has been modernizing its military at an impressive rate, but its capabilities are still fundamentally limited. China is hemmed in by various islands that allow an outside power with a strong navy to block China's expansion. China's navy has made great strides, but China is still not in the same weight class as the United States, and that affects China's ability to project power in its own backyard, let alone beyond. For all of China's strength, for instance, it has not been able to consider an amphibious assault on Taiwan. China also depends on its ability to extend its maritime boundaries because its economy has grown to its current size on the back of foreign trade. That means there are limits to how far China can push the United States, because if a real conflict between the two breaks out and the U.S. moves to block Chinese trade, it would exacerbate the domestic issues that make ruling China so difficult.

From the point of view of geopolitics, we have to understand Chinese geography, and the way it makes China a de facto island, to the benefit of the coast and the detriment of the interior. We have to understand the Chinese people and how

Regions in China



Chinese history oscillates between strong, centralized control and regionalized civil war. We have to understand that China's geography defines China's imperatives, but also that it limits just how powerful China can become. And we have to be able to view all of this through the eyes of China's leader, and recognize that in many ways he is an expression of China's imperatives and constraints. He is as shaped by them as China is itself. When you put these pieces together, you begin to arrive at a geopolitical understanding of China, and therefore a sense of what China's future must look like.

Explanations and Predictions

Geopolitics is not a synonym for international relations, or political philosophy, or a realist approach to U.S. foreign policy. At its core, geopolitics is a method, a world view that separates the important from the trivial, the enduring from the ephemeral. We use geopolitics to explain and predict what is going to transpire among communities. We accept that different groups of people are different by virtue of where they come from and whom and what they love and fear. A Russian is not an American, and Russia is not America. Obvious as that may seem, geopolitics can help explain why that is and what that will mean.

We also understand that an individual cannot exist without a community any more than a tree can exist without soil. Geopolitics explains and predicts how different groups of people interact. The nation-state is the basis upon which human communities are organized today. Nation-states have imperatives – things that must be done to survive. They have capabilities – resources to help ensure survival. They have constraints – realities that cannot be overcome that set limits on what is possible. Without those limits, prediction would be impossible – without constraints, there is no horizon.

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