Geopolitical Basics

Research Note: This report contains two foundational analyses that elucidate geopolitical basics. Stratfor’s core philosophy is that transformative global trends and directions are predictable through the lens of geopolitics. Geopolitics is the way in which geography and other structural constraints shape people and nations. To understand those constraints, we must understand the principle that lies at the heart of how humans behave, and thus how human groups will behave, a theme we explore in the first half of this report. Once geopolitics reveals what is likely to happen, we can attempt to determine when the pattern that exists will yield to a new one. But when doing so, we must also account for inertia in geopolitical forecasting, a theme we explore in the second half of this report. Curated by our Research Analytics Department, this report brings us up to 2016.
The study of geopolitics tries to identify those things that are eternal, those things that are of long duration and those things that are transitory. It does this through the prism of geography and power. More precisely, geopolitical inquiry seeks not only to describe but also to predict what will happen. Those predictions frequently — indeed, usually — fly in the face of common sense. Geopolitics is the next generation’s common sense.

William Shakespeare, born in 1564 — the century in which the European conquest of the world took place — had Macbeth say that history is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. If Macbeth is right, then history is devoid of meaning, devoid of order. Any attempt at forecasting the future must begin by challenging Macbeth, since if history is random then the future, by definition, is unpredictable.

Forecasting is built into the human condition. Each action a human being takes is intended to have a certain outcome. The right to assume that outcome derives from a certain amount of knowledge of how things work. Since this knowledge is generally imperfect, the action sometimes has unexpected and unintended consequences, but there is a huge gulf between the uncertainty of a prediction and the impossibility of a prediction. When I turn the hot water knob on my sink, it is with the expectation hot water will come out. I may not have a full understanding of why this hot water comes out — and sometimes when I turn the knob, it fails to appear — but in general, it is there and I can predict that. A
life is made up of a fabric of such expectations and predictions. There is no action taken that is not done with the expectation, reasonable or not, erroneous or not, of some predictable consequence.

The search for predictability suffuses all of the human condition. Students choose careers by trying to predict what would please them when they are 30 years older, what would be useful and therefore make them money and so on. Businesses forecast what can be sold and to whom. We forecast the weather, the winners of elections, the consequences of war and so on. The fact that human beings make forecasts about every aspect of their existence means they must find every aspect of their existence predictable to some degree.

There are entire professions based on forecasting. The simplest sort of forecast is about nature, since it lacks will and cannot make choices. (Saturn will not change its orbit in a fit of pique.) The hardest things to predict are things involving human beings. First, human beings have choices as individuals. Second, and more important, the predictors themselves are humans. Their own wishes and prejudices inevitably color their view of how other humans will behave.

Nevertheless, entire sciences exist for forecasting human behavior. Consider econometrics, a field dedicated — with greater or lesser success — to predicting how a national economy will perform. Consider military modeling and war gaming, which try to predict how wars will be fought. Stock analysts try to predict the future of stock markets, labor analysts try to predict the future of labor markets and so on. Forecasting permeates society.

All these social forecasting systems operate the same way. Rather than trying to predict what any individual will do, they try to generate a statistical model consisting of many individuals, the goal of which is to predict general patterns of behavior. Economics and war share in common the fact that they try to predict the direction of many individual actors interacting with nature and technology.

Successful forecasting should begin by noting the obvious. Smart people tend to pass over the obvious too quickly, leaping toward highly sophisticated concepts and principles and searching for things that ordinary people won’t notice. Their forecasting floats in air rather than being firmly anchored in reality. Therefore, let’s begin at the beginning.

Since it is human history we are trying to forecast, we should begin by noticing the obvious about human beings. Now, there are many things we can begin with, but perhaps the most obvious thing about humans — and about other animals — is that they are born and then they die. Human beings are born incapable of caring for themselves. Physically, human beings must be nurtured for at least four or five years, at minimum, or they will die. Socially, in some advanced industrial countries, that nurturing can last into a person’s 30s.

Humans protect themselves and care for their young by forming families. However, it is easier to steal from the weak than to produce for oneself, so a small, isolated family is thus vulnerable to human predators — people who will steal, enslave and kill. In order to protect small families, it makes sense to create larger communities, where some nurture, some hunt, some farm, some make things and some defend the community. The division of labor is an obvious outcome of human physical nature. Next comes the question of with whom a person should ally to create this larger community. This question is only mysterious when asked in the abstract. In practice, the answer is obvious: Relatives and in-laws constitute the natural milieu of the division of labor.

And this, in turn, raises the most important question: Why should you trust a relative more than a stranger? This is the eccentric core of our problem. It is the question of the love of one’s own. It is a matter that stands at the heart of any understanding of how humans behave and whether that behavior can be predicted. It also contrasts sharply with a com-
peting vision of love — the love of acquired things, a tension that defines the last 500 years of European and world history.

The idea that this acquired love, which includes romantic love, should pre-empt the love of one’s own introduces a radical new dynamic to history, in which the individual and choice supersede community and obligation.

Let’s begin in an odd place — Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet. The subject of the play is the relationship between these two kinds of love. Romeo and Juliet are born to different families, different clans. These clans are at war with one another. Romeo and Juliet fall in love. The question of the play is this: Which love is pre-eminent? Is it the love to which you are born — your family, your religion and your tradition — the love of one’s own? Or is it the acquired love, the one you have chosen because it pleases you as an individual?

In most of human history and in most human societies, marriages were arranged. One would marry out of love — but not necessarily love for one’s betrothed. Rather, one married out of love for, and sense of duty to, one’s parents. The Fifth Commandment of the Decalogue demands that one honor one’s mother and father. That is not about calling home. It is about this: Their God is your God, their friends are your friends, their debts are your debts, their enemies are your enemies and their fate is your fate.

Shakespeare juxtaposes that sort of love with romantic love. Romantic love is acquired love. An infant is born to his traditions. An infant cannot fall in love. The idea that romantic love should pre-empt the love of one’s own introduces a radical new dynamic to history, in which the individual and choice supersede community and obligation. It elevates things acquired through choice as superior to the things one is born with.

This notion is embedded in the American Declaration of Independence, which elevates life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness over obligation. Indeed, modern Europe in general introduced an extraordinary idea with the rise of revolutionary Protestantism and its mutation into the European Enlightenment, an idea paralleling the concept of romantic love — the notion of ideology. Ideology is an acquired value. No child can be a Jeffersonian or a Stalinist. That can only be chosen after the age of reason, along with romantically acquired spouses.

Protestantism elevates conscience to the pinnacle of human faculties and conscience dictates choice. When the Enlightenment joined choice with reason, it created the idea that in all things — particularly in political life — the individual is bound not by what he was taught to believe but by what his own reason tells him is just and proper. Tradition is superseded by reason and the old regime superseded by artificially constructed regimes forged in revolution.

To fully appreciate this paradox, consider the following. I am an American. I am also a citizen of the United States. America is a natural entity, a place and a people. You are American at the moment of birth. It is the way in which you identify yourself to the rest of the world. Then there is the United States. It is impossible, linguistically, to refer to
yourself as a “United Statian.” It makes no sense. You can refer to yourself as a citizen of the United States. As a citizen, you have a relationship to an artificial construct, the constitution, to which you swear your loyalty. It is a rational relationship and, ultimately, an elective relationship. Try as one might, one can never stop being an American. One can, as a matter of choice, stop being a citizen of the United States. Similarly, one can elect to become a citizen of the United States. That does not, in the fullest sense of the word, make you an American. Citizenship and alienage are built into the system.

It is very easy to be an American. You are born to it. By language, by culture, by all of the barely conscious things that make you an American, you are an American. To become a citizen of the United States, in the fullest sense of the word, you must understand and freely accept the obligations and rights of citizenship. Loving America is simple and natural. Loving the United States is complex and artificial. This is not only about the United States, although the linguistic problem is the most striking. Consider the Soviet Union and its constituent nations, or France as opposed to the French Republic.

The modern Enlightenment celebrated acquired love and denigrated the love of one’s own. Indeed, modernity is the enemy of birth in general. Modern revolutionary regimes overthrew the ancien regimes precisely because the ancien regimes distributed rights based on birth. For modern regimes, birth is an accident that gives no one authority. Authority derives from individual achievement. It is based on demonstrated virtue, not virtue assumed at birth.

The struggle between the love of one’s own and acquired love has been the hallmark of the past 500 years. It has been a struggle between traditional societies in which obligations derive from birth and are imposed by a natural, simple and unreflective love of one’s own and revolutionary societies in which obligations derive from choice and from a complex, self-aware love of things that are acquired — lovers or regimes.

In traditional society, you knew who you were and that, in turn, told you who you would be for the rest of your life. In post-revolutionary society, you may know who you were but that in no way determined who you would become. That was your choice, your task, your obligation. Traditional society was infinitely more constrained but infinitely more natural. Loving one’s parents and home is the simplest and first emotion. It is far easier to love and hate the things you love and hate than to go into the world and choose what else there is to love and hate.

This leads us to nationalism — or, more broadly, love and obligation to the community to which you were born, be it a small band of nomads or a vast nation-state. The impulse to love one’s own is almost overpowering. Almost, but not quite, since in modernity, self-love and the love of acquired things is celebrated while love of one’s own is held in suspicion. The latter is an accident. The former is an expression of self and therefore more authentic.

Modern liberalism and socialism do not know what to do with nationalism. On one side, it appears to be an atavistic impulse, irrational and unjustifiable. Economists — who are the quintessential modern thinkers — assume with their teacher Adam Smith that the primary purpose of individuals is to maximize their self-interest in a material sense to acquire wealth. To put it simply, acquire wealth. They argue that this is not only something they should do but also something that all people will do naturally if left to their own devices.

For economists, self-interest is a natural impulse. But if it is a natural impulse, it is an odd one, for one can see widespread examples of human beings who do not practice it. Consider the tension between the idea that the United States was created for the purpose of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,” and the decision of a soldier to go to war and even willingly give his life. How can one reconcile the constant presence of self-sacrifice for the community — and the community’s demand for self-sacrifice — with the empirical claim that men pursue the acqui-
sition of goods that will give them happiness? War is a commonplace event in modernity and soldiers go to war continually. How can a regime dedicated to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness demand that its citizens voluntarily put themselves between home and war’s desolation?

Obviously this happens. Nationalism is very much a critical driver today, which means that the love of one’s own remains a critical driver. Dying for a regime dedicated to the pursuit of happiness makes no sense. Dying for the love of one’s own makes a great deal of sense. But the modern understanding of man has difficulty dealing with this idea. Instead, it wants to abolish war, banish war as an atavism or at least brand war as primitive and unnatural. This may all be true, but it should be noted that war simply won’t go away. Neither will love of one’s own and all that follows from it.

There is an important paradox in all this. Modern liberal regimes celebrate the doctrine of national self-determination, the right of a “people” to choose its own path. Leaving apart the amazing confusion as to what to do with a nation that chooses an illiberal course, you have the puzzlement of precisely what a nation is and why it has the right to determine anything.

Historically, the emergence of the doctrine of national self-determination had to do with the political dynamics of Europe and America’s revolutions. Europe had been ruled by dynasties that governed nations by right of birth. Breaking those regimes was the goal of Europe’s revolutionaries. The driving impulse for the European masses was not a theory of natural rights but a love of their own communities and nations and a hatred of foreign domination. Combining revolutionary moral principles with the concept of the nation created the doctrine of national self-determination as a principle that coincided with the rights of man. Now, the fact that the right of the individual and the right of the nation — however democratically ruled it might be —stood in direct opposition to each other did not deter the revolutionaries. In the case of the American founders, having acted on behalf of national self-determination, they created a Bill of Rights and hoped that history would sort through the contradiction between the nation, the state and the individual.

At the root of modern liberal society, the eccentric heart of the human condition continues to beat — love of one’s own. Its eccentricity can be clearly seen now. Why should we love those things that we are born to simply because we are born to them? Why should Americans love America, Iranians love Iran and Chinese love China? Why, in spite of all options and the fact that there are surely many who make their lives by loving acquired things, does love of one’s own continue to drive men?

Andre Malraux wrote once that men leave their country in very national ways. An American expatriate is still an American and very different from a Mongolian expatriate. Wherever one chooses to go, whatever identity one chooses to claim, in the end, you cannot escape from who you are. You can acquire as many loves as you might, yet in the end, whether you love one’s own or not, you are what you were born. Your room for maneuver is much less than you might have thought. A man may have given up his home, but his home has not given him up. You can reject your obligations — you can cease to love — but your own remains your own.

For the vast majority of humanity, this is not only the human condition, but it is a condition in which there is no agony. Being born an American or a Ukrainian or Japanese and remaining one is not only not an effort, it is a comfort. It tells you who
you are, where you belong and what you must do. It relieves you of choice but frees you to act. There are those for whom this is a burden and they have shaped our understanding of ourselves. As much as Ernest Hemingway hated his home town, he remained, to the moment of his death, a man from an American small town. The only difference between Hemingway and the clerk in his hometown drugstore was that the clerk was content with who he was and Hemingway died desperately trying to escape from himself. In the end he could not.

There is no escape from love of one’s own, at least not for the mass of humanity. The Fifth Commandment remains the most human and easy of the Decalogue. Nietzsche spoke of horizons. A horizon is an optical illusion, but it is a comforting illusion. It gives you the sense that the world is manageable rather than enormously larger than you are. The horizon gives you a sense of place that frames you and your community. It relieves you of the burden of thinking about the vastness of things. It gives you a manageable place, and place, after love, defines who you are the most.

In practical terms, this means that nationalism — the modern form of the love of things that you were born to — remains the driving force of humanity. There have been many predictions that interdependence means the decline of the nation-state, the decline of religious exclusivity, the decline of war. For this to be true, the basic impulse to love one’s own, to love the things one was born to, would have to be overcome. Certainly, economic self-interest is a powerful force, but there is no empirical evidence that economic self-interest undermines the intensity of nationalism.

Quite the contrary. During the 20th century, at the same time that economic interdependence grew, nationalism became more and more intense. In fact, it became more and more refined as smaller and smaller groupings claimed national identity and rights. The history of the 20th century was the simultaneous intensification of economic rationalism and the intensification of nationalism. Nothing can be understood about the future that doesn't grasp the essential necessity and permanence of nationalism as a commitment that frequently transcends individual economic interests.

Place and Fear

Communities — cities, nations, even nomads — exist in places. Separate them from their places and their natures change. There is certainly such a thing as culture — language, religion, table manners and so on — that does not simply reduce itself to place. At the same time there are characteristics that can only be ascribed to place, understood in the broadest sense. If we say that who you are born to matters, then geopolitics teaches that where you are born also matters.

Begin with the simplest fact. An Eskimo experiences the world differently from a New Yorker. That requires no explanation. An Eskimo, particularly in his traditional life, before contact with Europeans, faced nature directly. He ate what he caught or found. What he caught or found was determined by where he was. How he caught or found these things was determined by what they were and what tools he had at hand and that, in turn, was determined by place. Certainly, culture could not simply be seen as the expression of this struggle. Humans are far too complex to be reduced to this. At the same time, someone born in that particular place to those particular people experiences life in a particular way.

Consider a New Yorker. Most New Yorkers would be as bewildered on the coast of the Arctic Ocean as an Eskimo would be in Manhattan. A New Yorker gains his sustenance in extraordinarily different ways than an Eskimo. The purpose here is not to delve into the esoterica of American urban life but to simply point out the obvious, which is that living like a New Yorker is as idiosyncratic as living in the Arctic wastes.
We will not go into the ways in which geography shapes a nation’s culture. Thucydides noted the difference between a coastal city and an inland city. He discussed the difference between large cities and small ones, cities with enough resources to build walls and villages that lacked the resources to build walls and therefore never truly became cities. It is easy to consider the difference between being born in Singapore and being born in Ulan Bator.

But there is a fundamentally important concept to introduce in relation to place: the idea of fear. Wherever you live, there is always the fear of the other nation, the other community. Two communities, living side by side, always live in fear of the other. The origin of the fear is the unknown intention of the other. No one can know what another person really intends. In casual relationships, where the cost of miscalculation is something trivial, you are free to assume the best about people. Where the only thing at stake is your own life and your own freedom, the consequences of miscalculation can be borne. But when the lives and freedom of your children, your spouse, your parents and everything you hold dear is at stake, then your right to take chances decreases dramatically. At this point, the need to assume the worst case takes precedence.

As Thomas Hobbes explained in detail in “Leviathan,” wars originate far less from greed than they do from fear. It is the unknown intention and capability that causes neighbors to distrust one another. Knowing that one’s own intentions are benign does not mean anything concerning your neighbor. His appetite for conquest is the great unknown. This drives a community to more than defense. It drives them to pre-emption. If the enemy wishes the worst, then better to strike first. In a universe of mirrors, where the soul of the other is permanently shielded, logic forces one to act vigorously and on the worst case.

Place determines the nature of a community. It drives the manner in which humans make a living, how they bear and raise children, how they grow old. It determines who will wage wars, whom they will wage wars against and who will win. Place defines enemies, fears, actions and, above all, limits. The greatest statesmen born in Iceland will have less impact on the world than the poorest politician born in the United States. Iceland is a small, isolated country where resources and options are limited. The United States is a vast country with access to the world. While its power is limited it is nonetheless great. Place determines the life of peasants and presidents.

Place imposes capabilities. It also imposes vulnerabilities. Consider a nation like Poland, sandwiched between two much larger countries, Germany and Russia. It lacks any natural defensive positions — rivers, mountains, deserts. Throughout its history it has either been extremely aggressive, pushing back its frontiers (rare, given its resources), or a victim (its usual condition). To a great extent, the place the Polish people occupy determines Poland’s history.

It goes deeper than that. Place also determines economic life. Germany was heavily dependent on French iron ore to fuel its economic life. The Japanese were heavily dependent on the United States for steel and oil to run its industries. Neither Germany nor Japan could control American behavior. Both France and the United States tried to use German and Japanese dependence on them to control their behavior. Germany and Japan were both terrified that they would be strangled. How could they know the intentions of the others? Did they have the right to stake their futures on the continued good will of countries with whom they had other disagreements?

Had French steel been located one hundred miles to the east or had Japan had oil and other minerals close at hand and under its control, history might have evolved differently. But place was place, and the iron mines were to the west of Germany and the oil was thousands of miles away from Japan. Both countries were driven by two things. The first was interdependence — the fact that they were not
self-sufficient created vulnerability. The second was fear that the country they were dependent on would exploit that vulnerability to crush them.

The result was war. The Germans, whether under Bismarck, the Kaiser or Hitler, tried to transform the situation by imposing their will on the French. The Russians, terrified of a Germany that was powerful and secure on its western flank, did not want to see France defeated. Germany, knowing of Russian fears, understood that if France and Russia attacked Germany simultaneously, in a time and manner of their own choosing, Germany would be defeated. Fearing this, Germany tried on three occasions to solve its problem by striking first. Each time it failed. What is important here is only this: Nations and other communities act out of fear far more than they act out of greed or love. The fear of catastrophe drives foreign policies of nomadic tribes and modern nation-states. That fear, in turn, is driven by place. Geography defines opportunities; it also defines vulnerabilities and weaknesses. The fear of dependence and destruction drives nations, a fear that is ultimately rooted in place.

Time and Resistance

Any model of how communities behave that assumes that a community behaves as if it were a single organism is obviously wrong. A community is filled with numerous sub-communities, divided many ways. It can contain a range of ethnic groups, religious distinctions or socially determined castes. But the single most important distinction, of course, is the difference between rich and poor. The difference in the life of a poor peasant without land and a wealthy man is qualitatively different in all respects except the fundamental facts of birth and death. They live differently and earn their livings differently. They can be grouped by the manner in which they live and earn their livings into classes of men.

No one who has thought about political life has ever failed to miss the presence and importance of social and economic class. In the 19th and 20th centuries, thinkers like Karl Marx elevated the importance of social class until it was considered more important than any other human attribute. Nation, family, religion — all became not only less important than class but also simply the manifestation of class. In the same way that economic liberalism elevated the isolated individual to the essence of being human, socialists elevated class.

It is interesting to note that economic liberals and Marxists, on the surface mortal enemies, both shared a single common view that the nation, understood as a unitary community that made all other things possible, was at best a convenience and at worst a prison. Both expected the nation and other communities to wither away, one through the transnationalism of capital, the other through the transnationalism of the working class.

For the rich and the intellectual, an optical illusion frequently emerges: that nationalism really doesn’t matter. The world’s richest people, able to place layers of technology and servants between themselves and nature, live far more like each other than like their own countrymen. Place matters to them less than others. Consider the royal families of Europe in the first global epoch. The more successful they became the less differentiated they were from each other and the more differentiated they were from their countrymen. It is the nature of technology that it not only dominates nature but also places layers of separation between the human condition and nature. Therefore, in obvious ways, the more advanced a community’s technology the less important place becomes — or appears to become. An American banker, for example, has much more in common with his German or
Chinese counterpart than he has with many of his own countrymen. Wealth appears to dissolve place. The same with the intelligentsia, who have more in common with each other than with the townsfolk who serve the food at the university.

One would think that similar universalization of interest would take place among poorer people. Karl Marx argued that the workers have no country and that they feel transnational solidarity with other workers. Bankers might have no country and intellectuals might imagine that workers have no country, but there is not the slightest empirical evidence that the workers or peasants have felt they have no country or, at least, community. Certainly, the 20th century has been the graveyard of intellectual fantasies about the indifference of the lower classes to national interest.

In two world wars, it was the middle and lower classes that tore the guts out of each other. In the United States, it was the middle and lower classes that supported the war in Vietnam. Any discussion of geopolitics must begin with an explanation for this, since the normal one, which is that the poor are manipulated by the rich to be warlike, makes little sense. After all, the rich usually oppose wars as bad for business and — far more important — the poor are not nearly as stupid as intellectuals think they are. They have good reasons for behaving as they do.

Begin with the principle of shared fate. Think of two axes. First, think of the size of a nation or community. Consider Israel, which is a small country. Whatever happens to Israel happens to everyone in it. If Israel is overrun, no Israeli is immune to the possibly profound or even catastrophic consequences. In larger nations, particularly in nations that are less vulnerable, it is easy to hypothesize — or fantasize — circumstances in which consequences to the community will not affect an individual. Americans can imagine that national security is not of personal consequence to them. No such hypothesis is credible in smaller nations at direct risk, and no such fantasy can sustain itself.

The second axis is class. It is easier for the wealthy to shield themselves from a fate shared with their community than it is for middle- and lower-class citizens. The wealthy can store money in other countries, have private planes standing by, are able to send their children to live in foreign countries and so on. No such options exist for those who are not wealthy. Their fate is far more intimately bound up with their nation’s fate. This is the case on matters ranging from war to population movement to liberalized trade. The wealthy can protect themselves from the consequences — or even profit by those consequences. The rest cannot.

It follows logically from this that the lower classes would tend to be much more conservative in the risks they want their country to take on a spectrum of international relations. Having less room for maneuver, more to lose relative to what they have and less profit from successful risk, the average person is risk-averse, more mistrustful of the intentions of foreign countries and more suspicious of the more extravagant claims made by the rich and intellectuals about the benefits of transcending nationalism.

If love is the first emotion that men experience, then fear is the second. Love of one’s own is rapidly followed by fear of the other. The weaker the person the fewer resources he has and the more dependent he is on the community he inhabits. The more dependent he is, the more cautious he will be in taking risks. The more suspicious he is about the risks undertaken by his wealthier countrymen the more dubious he will be about anything that puts at risk his community or that dilutes his autonomy and thereby further weakens his life. The wealthy and powerful are free to be avaricious and greedy. They are free to take risks and to be adventurous. The common man lives his life in fear — and he is not at all irrational in doing so.

In a democratic age, the class struggle is not as Marx envisioned it. It is a struggle between the wealthy internationalists and the common nationalists. The internationalist, having room for maneuver,
argues that in the long run, transnational adventures — WTO, IMF, EU, NAFTA — will benefit society as a whole. Their poorer compatriots don’t deny this, but they do not share the long run. If they lose their jobs, their grandchildren may prosper, but their own lives are shattered. The long run is real, but it is a perspective that only the wealthy can enjoy.

The purely self-interested individual exists, but he is harder to find than one might think. The nation-state solely committed to economic development is equally hard to find. There is first the obvious reason. Pursuing economic growth without considering the danger of pure growth is suicidal. The wealthier you are, the greater the temptation of others to steal that wealth. Defending wealth is as important as growing it. But the defense of wealth runs counter to building wealth, both in terms of expense and culturally. In the end, a society is much more complex than an engine of economic growth and therefore it is more than an arena for economic classes.

There is a deeper aspect to this. Economic growth, of the sort that might transform the United States from a barely settled agrarian nation into an industrial and technological giant, takes generations. Those generations require sacrifice and austerity in order to achieve goals. They require a social discipline in which, as just one example, immigrant parents live out lives more impoverished than might be necessary in order to raise children who can live better. The willingness of a parent to sacrifice not merely his life but his comfort, hopes and aspirations in order for his children to succeed in life is not only the foundation of economic development but also a refutation of any model that regards the individual as the self-obsessed instrument of history. It just doesn’t work.

Scenarios such as this do not play out in a vacuum, however. Consider the following example. Assume that it were demonstrated clearly that it would greatly benefit the United States if China took over all production of electronic equipment. Assume that in 30 years it would mean the doubling of the GDP and standard of living in the United States. From the standpoint of society as a whole, it might be a good idea.

However, look at it from the standpoint of a 30-year-old American computer engineer with a child. Those 30 years would cover his productive life. He would not be able to practice his chosen profession, and also the massive investment in his education would not pay off. Between the ages of 30 and 60, when the social payoff should come, he would live a life quite different from the one he hoped for and would be, in all likelihood, substantially less comfortable. Societies and people run on different clocks. A society counts in terms of generations and centuries. A man counts in terms of years and decades. What constitutes a mere passing phase in American history, in a small segment of the economy, constitutes for that individual the bulk of his life. This is the fundamental tension between a nation and an individual. Nations operate on a different clock than individuals. Under most circumstances, where the individuals affected are few and disorganized, the nation grinds down the individual. In those cases where the individual understands that his children might make a significant leap forward, the individual might acquiesce. But when the affected individuals form a substantial bloc, and when even the doubling of an economy might not make a significant difference in the happiness of children, they might well resist.

The important point here is to focus on the clock, on the different scales of time and how they change things. □
Geopolitics, at least in the sense that we practice, is neither deterministic in its approach to understanding nations and their interactions nor simply synonymous with current events or international relations. At its most basic, geopolitics as a discipline seeks to explain the intersection between place and people, or more specifically between place and the nation, and the impact they have on one another. Practitioners assess geography, politics, economics, security, history and society inclusively to build a deeper understanding of nations, subnations, regions and the world.

Constraints, Compulsions and Circumstances

Geopolitics teaches us how to identify and assess the compulsions and constraints on nations and their principal actors — the driving forces and limiters that shape the behavior and direction of nations and their interactions. The balance between “compulsions” (what must be done) and “constraints” (what cannot be done) — a tension that induces or restricts certain behaviors, actions and directions — changes with differing “circumstances,” or the current state of being domestically, regionally or internationally at a given moment in time. Thus, some compulsions may exist for years or decades, but only in a very special set of circumstances do they really induce action.

By identifying these constraints and compulsions, the limitations on options become more apparent, allowing predictions of patterns and actions. If history explains the past with an eye on the present, geopolitics explains the present with an eye on the future. The purpose is not only understanding the pressures on nations, but also predicting future responses — and thus providing time to prepare for, dissuade or counter the actions of others.

At a certain level, geopolitics eliminates the impact of the individual human element: Each individual is diluted in the totality, subsumed in some sense by the forces at work, namely, the broader constraints and compulsions that compel and limit options and decisions. Individuals by their very nature are highly variable, being affected by numerous unseen elements at any given moment. Consider, for example, John Lewis Gaddis’ musings in “The Landscape of History” on the potential that an unrecorded flea may have given Napoleon itchy underwear, leading to his loss at Waterloo. While individuals are relatively unpredictable on a short time frame, their collective behavior, their decisions as they shape the directions of nations, are less variable and more compelled or constrained. Thus, in rising above the individual, geopolitics presents a framework for forecasting and a method that can be taught and tested.

The relationship between the constraints and the compulsions is in a constant state of flux and influenced by circumstances. Assessing these three factors presents a picture of fairly limited options and, in reducing possibilities, leaves a very small number of likely directions for future action. This allows geopolitics to serve as the starting point for forecasting. Frequently, however, a directional pattern that appears obvious from a geopolitical assessment and forecast will not come to pass within the expected time frame, or a dynamic that may appear highly constrained will suddenly break forth far ahead of the forecast.
Three Case Studies

As a case in point, let’s look at the current European crisis. Nearly from the beginning of our existence, Stratfor has clearly seen and identified the core constraints on European unity, and in particular on the creation of a common European currency. Our 1995-2005 Decade Forecast stated:

The European Union’s enjoyment of this period will be limited somewhat by Germany’s ongoing digestive problems — absorbing the old East Germany — and an inability to create a Monetary Union. On the one hand, the reluctance of major powers to abdicate sovereignty to Brussels makes negotiations difficult and subject to collapse and breakdown. On the other hand, the fact that the EU contains both net creditor and debtor nations makes the creation of a single, integrated fiscal policy — the precondition for monetary union — difficult to imagine. The idea that Greece or Portugal and Norway or the Netherlands will share fiscal strategies is a bit difficult to imagine. As the EMU frays, European integration in general will be questioned. The great reversal of 1997 will resonate through the next decade.

Our fourth quarter of 1998 forecast continued to expect the failure of the EMU:

We continue to believe that the EMU will be dead on arrival. The EMU is an economic colossus built on a base of political sand. Each European election now has the potential of undermining the entire edifice. Even if this German election doesn’t, some election will. The EMU, like Russia and Asia, is going to meet the dark face of politics sooner rather than later. This last quarter of 1998 may destroy the EMU, postpone it, or most likely, allow it to go forward with political constraints that will guarantee its failure.

Applied geopolitics clearly showed that the EMU and the euro were inherently flawed. We assumed that if these flaws appeared obvious to us, they would be as obvious to the Europeans. We also believed the Europeans would be unable to bring the new currency to fruition even if they did not consciously recognize the same constraints we had identified. But not only did the euro move forward, for a time it was a very strong global currency. In our 1999 Annual Forecast, we admitted: “We were clearly wrong when we expected the euro to fail. The euro is here and seems likely to work in the short run.”

Today, however, the European Union is hampered by many of the very constraints we recognized two decades ago. While an integrated fiscal policy may have worked relatively well during times of economic prosperity, in times of crisis, it stripped some countries of the tools they needed to respond — bringing increasing political strain within member countries and toward the entire European experiment. Put simply, the very different economic models of Northern and Southern Europe require more than a “one size fits all” set of economic tools. While geopolitics exposed those constraints, we missed something in initially predicting that they would block the formation of the EMU and the euro or give rise to a monetary union so politically constrained it would be destined to fail from the outset. The error was not one of failing to recognize constraints but rather of failing to understand how they applied and in what time frame.

Now consider our long-standing forecast of an economic crisis in China as “the Chinese miracle” outlived its growing internal contradictions. For more than a decade, we identified the constraints that would bring an end to the miracle and lead to a political crisis as China sought to manage the social consequences of slowing growth. Many of the problems we identified are now generally accepted as obvious precursors to China’s economic slowdown, which was finally set in motion
by the European financial crisis. Though what is obvious now to many was obvious to us for a long time, we still failed to forecast the timing of the crisis.

The recent action by Russia in Ukraine fits a similar pattern. We identified the stresses on Russian-U.S.-European relations, the sense of unease felt by Russia at seeing its periphery eroded, and the likely locations for a Russian response to reassert its national security interests. And yet we failed to forecast the timing of the crisis in Ukraine. In this case, it was not an issue of being too early, but rather of being too late. Though very challenging to nail down, the time factor in forecasting is critical: The best forecast with an inaccurate time component is of limited value.

In looking back at nearly two decades of inaccurate forecasts, particularly those that erred in timing, three basic factors emerge. The first is an intelligence gap, where key information needed to make an accurate forecast is either missing or has been overlooked or misinterpreted. The second is a basic analytic failure, namely, the failure to adhere to our methodology due to complacency, allowing assumptions to become “facts.” The third is something that I will call “inertia.” In physics, inertia is the principle that an object moving in a particular direction will tend to continue moving in that particular direction unless acted upon by some factor or force, or that an object at rest will remain at rest unless acted upon by some factor or force. In short, objects tend to continue to do what they are doing unless something knocks them off kilter.

Inertial factors may be institutional (the structure of government, for example), fiscal (the method of budgeting and spending), societal (the nature of society and the population), or manifest in other subsystems. Regardless, inertia must be assessed and understood to add greater time accuracy in forecasting. What geopolitics makes apparently simple and clear is made complex and muddy by inertia.

We know a large ship is hard to turn quickly and keeps moving forward long after the helm is thrown over. A ship of state is much larger, and its direction is accordingly more difficult to alter even after a crisis moment is recognized and acted upon. We also know that the economic effects of certain policies or of changing circumstances are often not fully felt until the next leadership is in place, and that the repair is often not noted until long after circumstances have improved. Inertia is the factor that shapes these delays and, as such, complicates the time factor in forecasting.

What are the inputs in measuring inertia? How is inertia different from constraints, or should it be considered among the constraints? And are inertial factors universal or situational? When we look at differing groups of peoples, different nationalities and subnationalities, there are often common characteristics in the ways they act and react. In some sense, there are French, American and Chinese ways of acting. Stereotypes exist for a reason: They are exaggerations of national characteristics. This is
not to say that every individual is the same, or that there are no differences within cultures and nations, but rather that places exert certain forces on the development of a people over time that eventually produce common characteristics.

What has shaped the mindset of the leadership of Japan over time is far different than what has shaped the mindset of the leadership of Congo. Geography places certain constraints, encourages certain behaviors, and over time builds in a set of generally identifiable characteristics of thought and typical responses. These are, at their core, conditioned by geography, by place. In some sense, this is one step in what we refer to as “empathetic analysis,” or understanding the factors that shape the outlook of the individual leaders. Whereas geopolitics often rises above the individual, the narrower the time frame and the more discrete the scope, the more the individual and their worldview matter.

Constraints such as political power, political checks, economic activity and natural resources may be shared by all, but they are still expressed differently in different places, and their relative significance to one another changes. Empathetic analysis, our term for the process of getting inside the thinking of geopolitical actors, tells us to look at the constraints within a particular geographical area, system and time. If constraints were common across geographic space and time, then there would be no need for empathetic analysis; applying my own paradigm would be sufficient to assess the paradigm of another. But as that is clearly not the case, then there must be something like a national characteristic, the culmination of history, culture, economic activity and societal factors in a particular geographical area shaped, guided and constrained by the realities of that geography.

If geopolitics helps reveal this national characteristic, perhaps inertia and the factors and balances to consider also have national characteristics, as well as elements unique to specific locations at specific times. The general types of inertial factors may be common across differing locations, but they exert a different balance of forces based on location.

What are the compulsory factors that direct behavior? Perhaps they are external stresses, domestic economics, politics, demographics, etc. The balance of these factors may shift with differing circumstances, one being more important at one moment, another at another moment. What is the response time to these pressures, to these compulsions? Is it always conscious, is it at times nearly inevitable, and is the response limited by constraints? It would seem that inertia can be considered an important component that determines the delay time between stimulus and action/reaction. Inertia may be fairly elastic, exerting a slow resistance, but is by no means insurmountable, instead merely producing steady delays on the timelines of expected outcomes. Inertia may also be fairly inelastic, exerting a strong resistance until, all at once, it is overcome in a massive breaking moment.

Understanding the inertial forces applicable in a given place and time is critical to improving forecasting accuracy because it impacts the critical time component of the forecast. Timing in forecasting is just as important as accuracy and separating the significant from the insignificant. But timing requires a more complete understanding of the balance between compulsion, constraint, circumstances and the resistant pull of inertia. Inertia exerts a strong pull on the time factor in any otherwise obvious forecast produced by the overall assessment of constraints, compulsions and circumstances. Given what we have learned over the years, inertia will be elevated as a variable in our practice.
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