

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 27
Number 1 *Parameters Spring 1997*

Article 5

2-13-1997

The Immutable Importance of Geography

David G. Hansen

Follow this and additional works at: <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters>

Recommended Citation

Hansen, David G.. "The Immutable Importance of Geography." *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 27, 1 (1997). <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol27/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by USAWC Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters by an authorized editor of USAWC Press.

The Immutable Importance of Geography

DAVID G. HANSEN

© 1997 David G. Hansen

From *Parameters*, Spring 1997, pp. 55-64.

Contemplating geography as it relates to strategy is not an activity that most of us elect to do on a Saturday afternoon. A friend's comment comes to mind: the only thing he remembered about geography from his school experience was that he didn't like it. Indeed, too many of us have the notion that geography, and particularly strategic geography, has become a relic science of little use to the modern military professional. Since we have access to the latest developments in technology and information, who needs to know the location of the Straits of Malacca, or understand cultural settlement patterns in Africa, or know what is contained on continental shelves?[1]

Students and practitioners of national security policy learn through their experience, or know through intuition, that strategy is carried out over territory and space. In the final analysis, military operations consist of controlling territory and influencing populations. The subjection of territory and populations, as well as control of the space above the territory, are geographical considerations. All this may be a bit Clausewitzian; nevertheless, few attempt to refute Clausewitz's argument that territory, people, and those who control those physical factors are the foundations upon which a successful strategy is built. Similarly, Sun Tzu argued 2000 years before Clausewitz that "the elements of the art of war are first, measurement of space; second, estimation of quantities; third, calculations; fourth, comparisons; and fifth, chances of victory." Geography for the military professional should include the study of subjects that will lend clarity to the issues of spatiality that enable calculations and comparisons. To ensure that a specific concept or plan produces the desired strategic ends, strategists should first make a determined effort to become as familiar with the fields of geography as they are with history or any other academic discipline.[2]

This article seeks to demonstrate the immutable importance of geography for strategists. Misunderstanding or misusing geography can confuse our thinking and thwart our best efforts at developing effective national security strategy. Knowledgeably and sensibly applied, however, geography is a discipline that can clarify strategic issues and increase the chances of success in any political, economic, or military endeavor.

Understanding and Misunderstanding Geography

Geographers have broadened what was traditionally considered their discipline, embracing climate, weather, vegetation, soils, geology, as well as the narrow specialization of place names. The discipline now boasts of regional specialists and of subfields which include economics, politics, diseases, cultures, urban studies, development, population, medicine, and even history. Indeed, the Army's regional specialty program requires incumbents to study and become familiar with many of these same disciplines, and regional specialists are an invaluable resource to the strategist. But strategists and military professionals should not relegate the study of geographic issues to the few regionalists still in uniform, Department of State specialists, or civilian academics; rather, all senior military professionals, especially those who consider strategic concerns, should have a working knowledge of the subfields of geography. Geography, in all its guises, will help them understand the changes the world is experiencing and make sense of the directions the world is taking.

Notwithstanding that geography is useful to the strategist, one should not conclude that geography determines where conflicts will occur or that it should dictate strategy. In the past century several well-known geographic determinists, including Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan and Nicholas Spykman, developed theories from which national policies evolved. It is widely believed that Mahan was responsible for the United States' reliance on a strong navy to push the country into expanding its overseas possessions. One result was that in 1898 President McKinley ordered a US fleet of

six warships to Manila Bay. Not knowing the importance of his directive, McKinley professed to reporters he had no idea where the Philippines were. "God told me to take the Philippines," he is quoted as saying. Only the ineptitude of the Spanish and our phenomenal luck kept the Spanish-American War from being a debacle.[3]

Nicholas Spykman argued in 1944 that Eurasia's periphery held the key to global power. His theories are considered by most scholars to have led to political policies that shaped strategic thinking during the Cold War with effects felt to the present decade. More recently, modern-day strategist Colin Gray dusted off the theory of Sir Halford Mackinder (1861-1947) that western Russia and Eastern Europe's protected core area, something Mackinder called the "heartland," would become the stage for world domination. Gray argued Mackinder's thesis in *The Geopolitics of Super Power* (1988), observing that "for as far into the future as can be claimed contemporarily relevant, the Soviet Union is going to remain *the* source of danger--narrowly to American national security, more broadly (and quite literally) to the exercise of the values of Western Civilization." [4] Gray's book offers more than a tip-of-the-hat to Mackinder, arguing that Mackinder's ideas "provide an intellectual architecture, far superior to rival conceptions, for understanding the principal international security issues" [5]--all this only two years before the Soviet Union collapsed.

One must, of course, exercise caution in using history to explain the geographic significance of a location. In a recent issue of *MHQ*, a respected journal of military history, the editor and a contributor postulated that Jerusalem has historically been a "strategic choke point." Nothing could be further from the truth. The Suez Canal is a "strategic choke point," but not the city of Jerusalem, even in ancient history. After the Hebrew King David took Jerusalem from the Jebusites (c. 1010 B.C.), the town was of little international or regional importance. From the opening days of pre-history, Near Eastern armies had moved through the area of Palestine along coastal routes and the Megiddo Pass; they generally did not even come near to Jerusalem, or Jebus, high in the mountains above the coastal roads. Joshua, the first known leader to have tried to conquer all the region of Palestine, bypassed Jerusalem.[6] In later history the Assyrians avoided it, and the Babylonians finally destroyed the city (587-6 B.C.) because they needed the loot and wanted to repress the troublesome people, more than to control it as a choke point.

Until the city's recent explosive growth, Jerusalem was well off the north-south watershed route and miles south of the east-west trade routes that crossed Palestine. The city is topographically well situated as a defensive location and was surrounded for many centuries in ancient times with deep valleys on three sides and had a self-contained water source. But aside from the hill itself, the city and its inhabitants never controlled (and certainly didn't choke) anything. The Romans and even Napoleon avoided Jerusalem; each comfortably commanded the area of Palestine for different lengths of time without destroying the city because of its geographic position. Jerusalem became a *strategic location* in history not because of its topography but because of its wealth (from c. 1000 - 586 B.C.), its cultural importance, and its prominence as the locus of holy sites for three of the world's major religions. Today these same cultural issues determine the city's strategic importance as well as the fact that the city is the political and religious center of the *de jure* Jewish state and the *de facto* religious and political center of the aspiring state of Palestine.

Contemporary Geographic Issues

Strategists need to familiarize themselves with the diverse sub-fields of geography as well as the traditional concerns of physical geography. Doing so will help them to understand intertwining nation and state relationships. For example, a knowledge of environmental geography can help one understand the potential for conflict based on environmental issues. A persuasive argument has been made that environmental change could shift the balance of power between states, regionally or globally, causing instabilities that might lead to armed conflict.[7] Warmer temperatures could cause disputes over new ice-free lanes in the Arctic, or make Antarctica's potential bonanza of natural resources more accessible, resulting in a worldwide scramble for its treasures. And if recent interpretations of the effects of "global warming" are even close to accurate, the implications for the national security of the United States are staggering. One author has put it this way:

The United States has a particularly large investment in the status quo. Its current preeminence in world affairs ultimately derives from the strength of the country's economy. The productivity of the country's natural resources, such as the incomparably valuable farmland of the Midwest, was a . . . prerequisite to America's elevation as a dominant superpower in the latter half of the 20th century. Impending climate change means this productivity can no longer be taken for granted. The greenhouse effect threatens the

overall health of the American economy and will require a massive diversion of resources to non-production adaptive activities.[8]

Among the other aspects of geography that concern contemporary strategists is the issue of international water passages. There are more than 100 international straits used for navigation that are between six and 24 miles wide. These passages can correctly be called strategic choke points. The Law of the Sea Convention spells out an elaborate regime to prevent states that border these important straits from closing them to innocent passage. The United States has failed to agree to this convention, however, something that has more to do with the future exploitability of undersea manganese nodules, a potentially important economic consideration, than with national security.

Still, strategists considering plans for moving forces around the globe need to be familiar with the fact that we might not have free access to get to where we need to fight, including overflight permission. One needs only to remember that in 1986 the United States was unable to overfly the land territory of France and Spain, our NATO allies, to bomb Libya. Instead of our aircraft taking the most direct route from their bases in Britain to their targets, the pilots had to circle west of Spain, thread the needle over the Straits of Gibraltar, strike the target, and return the same way, adding needless hours to the mission and increasing the risk to the crews.

All too often we take for granted the right of free access in planning for and sustaining interventions. Consider just the tonnage of munitions that was moved by sea to Saudi Arabia in 1990-91. Then calculate the number of air sorties that would have been required to move only the highest priority munitions had we been denied access to the Straits of Gibraltar and Hormuz. Issues involving the Law of the Sea come up frequently and have led to square-offs between NATO allies as well as legal disputes between the United States and friendly nations. Should we expect the future to be significantly different?

Interrupting historical water sources is another issue that could lead to conflict. One author has noted that "so critical are assured water supplies to Israel that one reason it went to war in 1967 was that Syria and Jordan were trying to divert flows of the Jordan River. Israel receives about 60 percent of its water from the Jordan River, [but] only three percent of the river's basin lies within the country's pre-1967 territory." [9] It is interesting to note that Article 6 of the 1994 Israel-Jordan Treaty was a delineation of water sources, whereas Article 9 dealt with "Places of Historical and Religious Significance." [10] Jordan is one of the driest countries on earth and has less water than its neighbors or any of the states of the Sahara. [11] A strategist might be led to believe that historical sites and land are the only issues at stake in the Israeli-Palestinian dialogues. The media has rarely mentioned that water is of significant concern to all in the region.

Another serious contemporary geographical issue is that of world food production. Our recent inconclusive involvement in Somalia was a direct result of public pressure to alleviate suffering by the inhabitants of that state. There, as in many other situations, the world has seen that a drop in food production will result in waves of refugees which can possibly lead to conflicts. However, how many strategists will consider such issues when they wrestle with America's security policies in the next century?

Despite the propensity of the United States to use or threaten the application of military force since becoming the world's sole surviving superpower, international conflicts will inevitably involve allies or friends on the other side of the problem. For example, understanding where the major river systems in the Middle East flow, and through which countries they travel, can help strategists foresee problems that could arise from dams being constructed in Turkey and elsewhere. Issues such as these require a knowledge of geography if they are to be anticipated, understood, and settled to our advantage.

Strategic thinking will often require more options than the direct application of force in solving problems. The ability to put troops on the ground, a fleet over the horizon, or cruise missiles on station in the belly of an aging B-52 does not connote sophistication in managing geopolitical issues. Deep and abiding interest in all forms of geography, however, can help the strategist address problems in ways that involve all the elements of national power in a search for peaceful outcomes.

Understanding Cultures

Strategists should also become more familiar with the cultural differences among the people of the world, a major and growing field of geography. A step toward enlightening the military profession was provided by Paul M. Belbutowski's article, "Strategic Implications of Cultures in Conflict" in the Spring 1996 issue of *Parameters*.^[12] In that same issue, Major Ralph Peters pointed out in dramatic fashion that the geography of future conflicts may well be the milieu for which we are the least prepared: the cities and urban complexes of the developing world. As the United States discovered in Somalia, even a poor and desolate city like Mogadishu, with an estimated population of only 600,000, can confound our strategic and operational planning. Similarly, the Soviets paid the price of trying to operate in Kabul, a city with twice that population, using doctrine developed to stop NATO forces in Europe.

In Jeffrey Record's recent article critiquing theories of whether the United States could have won in Vietnam, he concludes that "the US war effort was compromised not only by failure to appreciate the complexity and evolution of the war's character, but also by a fundamental ignorance of the country, its history, and culture."^[13] Samuel P. Huntington's seminal article, "The Clash of Civilizations?" also pointed to the importance of understanding cultures. Huntington stirred academic strategists out of their lethargy in 1993 when he argued that "in the future, the world will be shaped in large measure by the interactions among seven or eight major civilizations," which he identified as "Western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin American, and possibly African."^[14] He made his point that over the centuries, "differences among civilizations have generated the most prolonged and the most violent conflicts."^[15] Long-running conflicts between Islamic and other groups in the Philippines and Indonesia underscore the accuracy of Huntington's insights, while events in the Balkans since 1991 have not seriously challenged his thesis.

Despite the commitment of US lives and treasure to the effort to solve the Balkan problems and despite the decision by the President in 1995 to deploy thousands of American fighting men and women to that region, how many US politicians or interested citizens have developed even an inkling of the morass of cultural, religious, and ethnic differences existing there? Might a greater general awareness have changed US policy? Might it at least have forced clearer expectations of the limits of our interest and the duration of our involvement there? Attempts to explain our presence as "in the American interest" still fall on unbelieving ears. Perhaps that would change if military strategists and national security policymakers could better comprehend and articulate the importance of cultures, ours as well as others', in our policy considerations.

Geography and Policy

Martin van Creveld makes the point in his book, *The Transformation of War*: "The logic of strategy itself requires that the opponent's motives be understood, since on this rests any prospect of success in war. If, in the process, the notion of interest has to be thrown overboard, then so be it."^[16] Although one could take issue with the implication that the United States can long maintain troops in the field without a credible national interest at stake, Van Creveld is certainly right that an opponent's motives must always be understood. However vital, this is a difficult task and one that American strategists and historians do not do well.

The British Falkland Islands War provides a case in point. In 1982, 14,000 Argentine soldiers seized the undefended Falklands, 250 miles off the Argentine coast, from the British, who in 1833 had taken control of the windswept, barren islands best known for harboring penguins, seals, and other marine life. Textbooks have struggled to explain why the British went to war--undertaking a conflict ultimately costing hundreds of British and Argentine lives, the sinking of British and Argentinean warships, and enormous sums of money. One text explains the British involvement in this remarkable fashion: "Ponder, for example, the Falkland Islands War and the venerable British lion's defense of its territory. Male lions mark off their territory by scenting it. Woe betide any other male lion who enters that claimed space!"^[17] Such observations, offered in a textbook to explain a major strategic move on the part of a NATO ally, defy reason and logic. They are an affront to common sense and to the intelligence of our students.

Unfortunately, few monographs or articles address the strategic issues at stake in the Falkland Islands War, which permits such facile fabrications as the preceding to fill the void in attempting to explain strategic issues. Some legitimate writers have rationalized that the war amounted to little more than a waning Great Britain asserting her sovereign rights. But this argument hardly seems logical since barely three decades previously the British had voluntarily given up much greater territorial holdings around the world. Why would Britain risk a war, and her

strategic reputation, by going halfway around the world to contest a few pieces of rock in the South Atlantic? Honor? Hardly! Geography, on the other hand, can provide some reasons, if not an answer.

The Falklands rise up from one of the world's most extensive underwater continental shelves, a landform rich with potential oil deposits, whose surrounding seas teem with life and nutrients. Britain's desire to protect a potential international economic treasure, rather than glib explanations or half-baked theories of biological relativism, offers the more reasonable explanation for the loss of British (not to mention Argentine) lives. The ageographical quality of our world causes many of us to overlook the geographical motives for behavior, including the fact that the Falklands are in close proximity to resource-rich Antarctica, another probable reason for the short but nasty 1982 war. The likelihood of oil deposits in the South China Sea, the uses of outer space, and the rise of the region-state are other aspects of the influence of geography on strategy that seldom receive their due.[18]

Outcomes

Consideration of the many subfields of geography may help US national leaders and military strategists both to develop sound policy and to focus and explain our national strategies in terms acceptable to the American public. Recently, we have seen America's reluctance to intervene militarily in states whose behavior does not seem to threaten our national security. This attitude can be traced to the concept that our military forces exist to protect and uphold our national purposes. Our national security leaders have had to scramble to justify costly foreign interventions because they have been unable to articulate how such adventures serve our national values and purposes. As a result, they have sometimes appealed either to the country's lack of understanding of world geography or tried to stimulate a messianic excuse for the resulting operation.

If Americans had realized where Somalia was located, or how large it is (placed on a map of the United States, it covers an area from southern Michigan east to Maine and south to northern Florida), would they have been so passive about sending our forces to that country? Today, two years after thousands of personnel were deployed to the former Yugoslavia, how many US citizens can identify the nationalities involved or articulate how our national purpose is served other than to "prevent further fighting between the various factions"? Until the public decides to learn for itself what it needs to know about security issues, our long-standing ignorance of all aspects of geography will keep us equally ignorant of the real issues in such decisions. Strategists need to assume the responsibility to educate themselves so that they can provide effective counsel in the development of national security policy. No one is going to show them why it is that our ability to intervene militarily (as we discovered in Somalia) is constrained by geography.

In a recent article, Peter Wooley served the profession well by beginning an examination of geographic variables (access and isolation) to help analysts and policymakers explain if, and how, the nation might intervene militarily in international crises.[19] Wooley makes a strong case that "students of foreign policy and national security would do well to refocus on geography as an essential element of analysis, prediction, and policy recommendation." [20] Similarly, Colin Gray points out in a recent article that

The argument is neither that geographical setting determines policy and strategy in some all-but-mystical way, nor that the implications of that setting remain constant as technology evolves, but rather that geographical factors are pervasive in world politics. Geography defines the players (which are territorially organized states, or would like to be), frequently defines the stakes for which the players contend, and always defines the terms in which they measure security relative to others.[21]

These two sources alone would be a good place to begin one's education.

It is important for strategists to refamiliarize themselves with the physical makeup of our globe--with distances, populations, cities, transportation hubs, routes of communication, and cultures. The wise questions used to develop strategy--the reasons why and where the United States will go to war in the coming years--will need to be probed by military strategists. They, along with our political leaders and the public, need to resist the temptation to believe that the American military can do anything, anywhere. It can't. Geography should be among the prominent disciplines that strategists use to determine just what we can do, and where.

NOTES

1. Some of this ambivalence can be attributed to the demise of geography as a curricular course of study in favor of "social studies." (As I describe in this article, there is much overlap, with the definition of "geography" now expanding beyond considerations of land and water to include aspects of cultures, politics, and history.) Thirty years ago educators believed teachers of geography did not require special training, and geography could be taught by teachers whose own fields were history, civics, or even coaching. Now, the American public's geographic illiteracy has become a common complaint, often made by the same planners who pushed geography into the social sciences programs and concurrently eliminated secondary teacher education requirements.

Unfortunately, this ageographical attitude is not just with those who finish secondary schools. I teach geography to upper-division (junior-senior) and graduate college students. Students who will become primary and secondary education teachers frequently take my class to obtain credit for the one required geography course they must have for state certification. Over the past few years, on the first day of class, I have given them a short diagnostic test to determine their geographic literacy. One question is: "Name the large country immediately south of Texas." My respondents, admittedly an unscientific sample of the universe, have been unable to respond correctly (that is, to even name *any* country south of Texas) one-third of the time. Further, when I review the preparation of my students, fully two-thirds have never taken a geography course in their scholastic careers.

2. My point here is not to argue that the strategist should study geography at the expense of any other academic discipline. It is trite but true that all academic disciplines are complementary and useful for the strategist. For example, history examines issues over time, but geography examines issues spatially. History is useful in understanding the genesis, evolution, and resolution of issues; however, geography can be used to examine how those same events relate with each other economically, culturally, politically. Combining the two disciplines allows the strategist to learn what has and has not worked in previous instances, and geography may reveal the hidden relationships that led to the outcomes described by the historian.

3. George J. Demko, *Why in the World: Adventures in Geography* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), p. 15.

4. Colin S. Gray, *The Geopolitics of Super Power* (Lexington: Univ. of Kentucky Press, 1988), pp. 1-2. Emphasis in original. See my review, "Seductive Reasoning Behind 'Dynamic' Strategy," *Army*, September 1988, 77-78.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

6. "Judah could not dislodge the Jebusites, who were living in Jerusalem; to this day the Jebusites live there with the people of Judah." Joshua 15:63, NIV.

7. See David Wirth, "Climate Chaos," *Foreign Policy*, 74 (Spring 1989), 3-22. For an analysis of the current state of the global warming debate, see Shawna Vogel, "Has Global Warming Begun?" *Earth*, December 1995, pp. 24-35.

8. Wirth, p. 11.

9. Norman Myers, "Environment and Security," *Foreign Policy*, 74 (Spring 1989), 28.

10. *The New York Times*, 27 October 1994, p. A-13.

11. "Raising the Dead Sea," *New Scientist*, 22 (July 1995), 32-37.

12. Paul M. Belbutowski, "Strategic Implications of Cultures in Conflict," *Parameters*, 26 (Spring 1996), 32-42.

13. Jeffrey Record, "Vietnam in Retrospect: Could We Have Won?" *Parameters*, 26 (Winter 1996-97), 55.

14. Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs*, 72 (Summer 1993), 25.

15. Ibid.
 16. Martin van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), p. 217.
 17. John T. Rourke, *International Politics on the World Stage* (4th ed.; Guilford, Conn.: Dushkin Publishing Group, 1993), pp. 117-18.
 18. Two recent articles which address this interesting geopolitical development are: Robert D. Kaplan, "The Coming Anarchy," *Atlantic Monthly*, February 1994, pp. 44-76; and Kenichi Ohmae, "The Rise of the Region State," *Foreign Affairs*, 72 (Spring 1993), 78-87.
 19. Peter J. Wooley, "Geography and the Limits of US Military Intervention," *Conflict Quarterly*, 11 (Fall 1991), 35-50.
 20. Ibid. p. 35.
 21. Colin Gray, "The Continued Primacy of Geography," *Orbis*, 40 (Spring 1996), 248-49.
-

Colonel David G. Hansen (USA, Ret.) is the Academic Assistant to the Provost and Dean of Penn State University's Capital College where he also teaches courses in geography and national security policy. He is a graduate of the University of Nebraska, the US Army War College, holds an M.A. from the University of Texas, and is a candidate for the Ph.D. at Trinity College and Seminary. Prior to his voluntary retirement from the Army in 1990, Colonel Hansen spent eight years on the faculty of the Army War College, the last four of which were as Chairman of the Department of National Security and Strategy. He also chaired the college's Current Affairs Panel for three years and held the Maxwell Taylor Chair of Military Studies. He has published numerous articles on military strategy and geography in ancient Near Eastern warfare, his primary field of interest, and coauthored a 1993 textbook and accompanying anthology, *The Dilemmas of War and Peace*.

Reviewed 11 February 1997. Please send comments or corrections to carl_Parameters@conus.army.mil