

I am not a neo-realist

In his review 'A New Focus on the Caspian Region: Turning the Periphery into the Centre' in *IIAS Newsletter* 32, Dr Frédéric Grare asserts that my book 'does not really distance itself from a neo-realist perspective'. I disagree and would like to explain why.

Globalisation, Geopolitics, and Energy Security in Central Eurasia and the Caspian Region (The Hague: CIEP, 2003) analyses global power relations and the geopolitics of conflict and co-operation among state and non-state actors for the control of oil and gas resources in Central Eurasia. It employs a new theoretical approach: critical- or neo-geopolitics.

The main ideas of traditional geopolitics are related to the (neo-)realist school of international relations, based on the Westphalian conception of the international system. According to this view, the nation state is paramount; international relations can be explained by the balance-of-power among competing states. This body of theory emerged in the nineteenth century and developed in the first half of the twentieth century. Globalisation (the transnationalisation of production and finance, the

internationalization of trade and state functions) and the end of the Cold War forced scholars to rethink state-centric geopolitics.

One new approach attempts to synthesise traditional geopolitics with the 'geo-economics' of the global political economy. Critical- or neo-geopolitics holds that geographic arrangements are social constructions that may change over time with changing human economic demography. It does not constitute the world as a fixed hierarchy of states, cores and peripheries, spheres of influence, flashpoints, buffer zones and strategic relations, but conceptualises world politics as a system of states, economic and technological developments, and non-state actors including ethno-religious movements, international organizations, transnational energy companies, and international crime syndicates.

Critical or neo-geopolitics further differs from orthodox geopolitics, neo-realism, and world-systems theories in its scepticism to claims of objectivity. Instead, neo-geopolitics holds that any study of world politics carries conceptual and methodological assumptions that skew analysis; it calls for a method-

ological and conceptual re-evaluation of political geography.

Contrary to Dr Grace's assertion, *Globalisation, Geopolitics, and Energy Security in Central Eurasia and the Caspian Region*, in applying the neo-geopolitical framework, goes beyond the neo-realist approach in analysing conflict and co-operation among state and non-state actors for the control of oil and gas resources in Central Eurasia.

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Courtesy of the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Canada

Kunming under siege

As a long-term resident of Kunming, China, I was pleased to read 'From Muslim Street to Brilliant Plaza: Constructions of Urban Space in Kunming' by Leeke Reinder in *IIAS Newsletter* 31. The physical changes in Kunming are indeed drastic, as Reinder notes. But I disagree that these 'drastic physical transformations bring about relatively small social changes'. On the contrary, I suggest they have profound social impact.

Over the past decade the city of Kunming has been torn down and rebuilt – old wooden buildings, low-rise apartment blocks and narrow streets have made way for new apartments, shops and office structures of seven stories or more, and much wider roads. These changes are the result of economic and social change (reform and marketisation) and have produced further change.

Many residents have experienced the speed and extent of change as a crisis in material life. There are two major shifts, from low to high-rise dwellings and from city centre to suburban life. Though most people welcome new flats with running water and private toilets and baths, others lament the loss of old buildings and streets (the Muslim street noted by Reinders is one of the few old streets left). But the broader social impact of the new spaces is more widely felt and doubted.

Older people and children are especially affected. The elderly have suffered abrupt changes in lifestyle through their removal to the suburbs (although they may retain their previous neighbours, having been moved together). An outdoor social life, in courtyards and in doorways of their homes, was previously part of daily life for older people, but is now hardly possible. Many have been placed in old-age homes. For children there are no spaces to play near home where grandparents can keep watch over them.

The construction of new city spaces is further separating rural and urban life, and along with the Kunming's massive increase in traffic, is a reflection of growing social inequalities.

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The atoms of meaning

Dear Professor Goddard,

You wrote a very interesting article in *IIAS Newsletter* 33. I share your view that linguists do not seem to regard semantics as an essential part of their discipline.

However, is this a shortcoming of scientists, or does it reflect the general lack of interest in basic research? It does not produce immediate results, even less spectacular ones, hence those attracted towards this research will continue to be small in number, and their influence too.

All the more I am grateful that scientists like you persevere in this demanding task.

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East Asian geopolitics revisited

Asia accounts for more than half of the world's population. China is the only Asian nation with a permanent seat on the Security Council. Japan, a member of the G8 and a major contributor to the UN, the IMF and the World Bank, is completely under-represented in their leadership. Asian nations are virtually excluded from the ranks of those thought to underwrite global order and stability. The setting of 'global standards' seems to be the preserve of non-Asian powers.

Theories of global order, international relations and security are likewise the preserve of authors active in the United States, with a sprinkling from Northwest Europe. For East Asia, the story is often written in Washington. Although shifts in US policy create ripple effects throughout the region, the focus on America tends to ignore the interests of regional states as well as intra-regional dynamics. The latter fall further out of view as research tends to focus on bilateral rather than multilateral relations.

Despite the outward appearance of stability, East Asian states since the end of the Cold War have been redefining their positions in international society. 'National self-assertion' best seems to describe the new attitude. Contemporary East Asian assertiveness results from a mixture of developments, both domestic and international.

Internationally, the end of the Cold War softened ideological confrontation; with defense alliances with Washington under revision, East Asian governments are voicing their security concerns. Domestically, governments tend to be more populist. Driven by an outspoken, often nationalist, public opinion – it is not always clear whether the (new) media follow or create it – vocal domestic constituencies can curtail governments' foreign policy making autonomy, especially when actions by foreign states seem to infringe on national sovereignty.

Regardless of the many forms nationalism takes, it often carries within it a core of resentment rooted in history. The challenge for East Asian governments is to channel – at times vindictive – nationalist agendas into foreign policies that serve long-term interests. The need for economic stability and the common interest in regional security puts a premium on intra-regional cooperation. While each nation seeks to assert its own place in the region, it is equally clear that all agree on the benefits of regional cooperation.

Increased national self-assertion is a reflection of East Asian governments' and citizens' desires to find autonomous solutions to the region's challenges.

Koen De Ceuster and Kurt Radtke



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