

# **The Maps are Too Small: Geography, Strategy and the National Interest**

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Against the grain of many contemporary security visions of the world, the globe is still strategically a big place. The material culture and tools of our time have made the world smaller, but not small. If we abandon a sense of distance and geopolitics, we abandon the proportionality and prudence upon which coherent strategy relies. Without a sense of space, it is harder to relativise and rank our interests and activities. If internationalist hyper-activism undermines a sense of discretion and restraint, we are more likely to over-deplete ourselves and deny one of the most important assets in grand strategy, a comfortable surplus of power. Distance should be at the core of how we define our interests. It continues to place limitations on direct threats to us, and conversely, it continues to impose frictions and resistance on us.

'To defend everything is to defend nothing.' This logic should appeal to Britain, given the material scarcity of the times. Britain is in the most important defence policy debate in a generation. Yet such restraint does not guide British statecraft. In its current state, the UK's official vision has fallen prey to the error of Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli. As Lord Salisbury warned at the time, Disraeli was inflating Russia's threat to India via Constantinople because his maps were too small. Threats that seemed near and great were remote. Space was a physical shield. A sense of distance was a way to think proportionately. Even in our time, when the world is supposedly smaller, faster, and more globalised, the US and UK should use geography to discipline its concept of the national interest - and keep its powder dry.

Grand strategy is a practical exercise. It aligns a nation's power with its interests and orchestrates ends, ways and means in order to 'cause' security for itself and ensure a way of life. If strategy is a child of weakness, as Edward Luttwak argues, at this time of competing demands on depleted resources, it should be pronounced in the US and the UK. Yet it is not. This is apparent in the National Security Strategy (NSS). Instead of a measured calculation of interests and

power, the manifesto offers high-minded wish lists and presents Britain as a good citizen. It claims that Britain's security depends on a liberal, 'rules based' world order that upholds its values. This is a potentially bottomless concept.

For the U.S. the overstretched hegemon and, on its own terms, the guardian of world order, at a time of financial meltdown and fatigue, the scope of its security domain is almost limitless. It underwrites the security of the global commons and chokepoints, garrisoning or guaranteeing states on several continents, extending its deterrence umbrella, enlarging its alliances. To read the language of its Quadrennial Defence Review is to read, in a high-tech, capital intensive form, a blueprint for garrisoning the world: 'Extending a global defence posture comprised of joint, ready forces forward stationed and rotationally deployed to prevail across all domains, prepositioned equipment and overseas facilities, and international agreements.'

The unifying theme of America and Britain's strategic documents is not strategy, but globalism and complexity. They describe a world of interdependence and connectivity. Britain is endangered by globe-girdling, chaotic processes such as state failure. Broken countries are incubators of extremism, disease, or crime. The crises that supposedly originate 'out there' are manifold: pandemics, weapons proliferation, piracy, climate change or ideological militancy. They can reach Western soil or threaten its interests by the vehicles of cheap travel, rapid communications, digital finance, the internet, or diaspora networks. Security is directly linked to the regime type of other states. It cannot tolerate the illiberal. Therefore, the UK must scan the far horizons and take a forward-leaning posture, watching, engaging, and intervening on the periphery to protect its core.

Geography comes up in Britain's NSS, but only in a perfunctory and generalised way. It asserts that Africa matters wherever there is extremism or violence, not a very discriminating test; Eastern Europe matters because Britain is engaged there; the Middle East matters because it is central to security and 'totemic' to extremists, and Afghanistan-Pakistan for its links to domestic terrorism. Central Asia, Eastern Europe, large chunks of Africa and the Middle East: these four spheres would strain a superpower, let alone the UK.

Defined this way, Western interests have acquired an open-ended, de-territorialised and unbounded character. Because its interests are at stake whenever questions of order, values, threat, stability or wealth are concerned,

all things are the UK's concern and virtually everything matters. The ultimate symbols of this interdependence and vulnerability are the training camps that Al Qaeda used in Afghanistan after they bought the Taliban regime. In a poor, neglected country far away, mass casualty terrorism took root and exploded on Western soil.

Just how realistic is this world view? How true is the globalisation theory that this rests on, really?

There's little doubt that the long-term process of globalisation, accelerated by the invention of the telegraph as much as the web, has had an effect. But it is uneven, partial and reversible.

Globalisation theory has come under fire within economics. Skeptics attack what they see as 'Globaloney.' We can quibble with any of their judgements individually, but the overall picture is interesting: to show connectivity is not to show the abolition of frontiers. Consider the following:

The movement of capital, commerce and people is at the core of the vision. Yet economist Pankaj Ghemawat has put this to a few quantitative tests, and it does not survive interrogation. Firstly, 'more than half of global trade, investment and migration happens within regions. Often it is between neighbouring countries. Large chunks of economics are local, or at least regional. The bulk (80%) of stock-market investment is in companies that are headquartered in the investor's home country. 2% of students attend a university outside their homeland. Fewer than 1% of all American companies have any foreign operations. Only 3% of people live outside their country of birth. It is not that the Emperor has no clothes. But we can see more than his chest hair.

What's more, the world is in some respects less globalised than it was 100 or 150 years ago. Compare emigration patterns – back then, folk did not need visas and massive diasporas were more possible. Today we busily and expensively process travel documents and passports cost on average more than a tenth of the average annual income. And I defy any Westerner who has travelled to the US, the supposed heart of this global village, and describe their experience of customs as border-free. It fluctuates with tides of history. 60 years ago two car companies accounted for half of the world's car production, compared with six companies today.

And a fresh sceptical look at globalisation theory can also assist contemporary strategy. Theories of globalisation have been gurgling away for quite a while. Writing amidst a global war in 1944, symbolised when British and Japanese troops from the peripheries of Eurasia clashed in Burma, George Orwell was struck by ‘the automatic way in which people go on repeating certain phrases...two great favourites are ‘the abolition of distance’ and the ‘disappearance of frontiers.’ Orwell countered that for his time, the effect of modern inventions such as the radio was to intensify nationalism and provide a potent vehicle to totalitarian propaganda, to control and limit travel and immigration as never before, and in a time of accelerated scientific innovation to lessen dependency ‘when wool can be made out of milk, and rubber out of oil.’

Skeptics about the direct threat of the Axis to the U.S. agreed, arguing that the logistical demands of modern, mechanised armies would make it more difficult, not less, to cross the Atlantic against resistance into South America and attack the US. No matter how much Roosevelt warned that miles on a map were no guide to security, and despite the efforts of Washington to redraw world maps in the form of a continuous unbroken monosphere uninterrupted by barriers, from the optic of a pilot rather than a sailor.

Looking around us today, do we see a deterritorialised world transcending borders? Not necessarily. As Ken Booth argues, the brutal reality of struggle over physical space is on display in Israel and Palestine. ‘The much vaunted boundary-free world of globalisation has not eliminated the most basic foot-slogging struggles over the possession of land. The violence in Israel/Palestine has shown this every day for many years. Boundaries matter profoundly.’

Rather than being an inevitable historical process that humans uncritically and passively accept, sovereign states are fighting back hard. We now see the return of one of the most ancient instruments of territorial control and interior defence: walls. In Baghdad, along the US-Mexican border, and on the West Bank. In some contexts, aerial munitions and communications haven’t turned them into relics. They return, fortified with electronic enhancements. The presence of walls also suggests a deeper persistence – of the political imperative to control and regulate territory. It can be exclusionary, or it can be designed more subtly to slow and delay incursions. War remains a highly territorial activity, despite the coming of technology and virtual identities that leap over soil. The IDF was shocked to discover in its Lebanon invasion an enemy turning back to

traditional anti-armour hedgehog defences, defending demarcated territory and exploiting terrain. This has also been our experience of Iraq. The 'winning of the people' in the surge involved the forcible walling off of whole communities in Baghdad – signalling a return of a classical practice in counterinsurgency, the separation and walling of antagonistic peoples.

In terms of recent operations, projecting power in places like the Khyber Pass, or across thousands of miles, seriously wears out our airframes and our vehicles. Expeditionary forces – especially our professional, specialised and high-tech ones – are expensive to deploy abroad. We can lunge across space, but only at great strain and cost, and not forever. Clausewitz once characterised the waging of war as like a man moving through an ocean, a resistant medium. That characteristic is literally true of the terrain we patrol as constabulary nations.

It may well be that our security is not greatly tied to everyone else's. For its failure to set priorities, globalism is anti-strategic. It has three flaws. It underestimates the shielding effects of distance. It wrongly claims that the UK's interests are identical with its values. And it overlooks how forward leaning hyperactivity can be the problem as much as the solution.

Contrary to received wisdom, 9/11 was not simply made possible by terrorist sanctuaries in Afghanistan. There was not a straight line from the wastes of Central Asia to mass murder in New York. 9/11 depended on critical spaces in the first world, such as a flight school in Florida and an operational base in Hamburg. But for breakdowns in basic law enforcement and homeland security, it could have been averted. As Marc Sageman argues, neo-jihadi terrorism - even the catastrophic and long-range variety - is effectively curtailed by international police work, border control, the building of databases and intelligence sharing, airport security and support for regional powers like Pakistan. There may be a 'chain of terror' between the mountains of Pakistan to Britain's streets, but it can be disrupted at many points between. Even radicalised Britons need training and resources, and states can disrupt this. Military force from afar can be used effectively to molest any large-scale terrorist base. But we have intermediate alternatives to ambitious projects of armed nation-building. Otherwise, we are left with a promiscuous notion of our vulnerability to failed states, and have prepared the ground for armed interventions in Sudan, Yemen, or the Philippines. That is not strategy, but a blueprint for endless war.

Moreover, the rescue of failed states may be irrelevant. Contrary to developmental theories, religious terrorism is not a by-product of Third World misery and peace is not the twin of modernisation. Most terrorists are well-educated, professional cosmopolitans, who thrive in technologically advanced states rather than slums. And birthing market democracies is historically a bloody undertaking. Free elections and free markets are competitive processes that often accelerate violent conflict. Most Islamist terrorism in any event is limited, local and not directly threatening to Britain.

In terms of great power rivalries, a sense of distance can also inform Western strategy in relation to China. The need to keep Eurasia divided was the basis for undertaking conflict in 1917, 1941 and in the long cold war of 1947-1989. Its logic was that an accumulation of industrial power by a conquering state could present a direct threat. Developments since then make a direct threat posed by a distant power imbalance more remote. Now, America's margin of maritime supremacy alone is unprecedented, the equivalent of a thirteen-navy standard, or measured by firepower, a twenty-navy standard. Nuclear weapons make the conquest of any state prohibitively expensive and virtually impossible. So long as a defending state with a nuclear arsenal has a secure second-strike ability to retaliate, it can devastate an aggressor even with only a few punitive strikes. Nuclear weapons pose other serious dangers, as they may not deter limited wars or all-out nuclear exchange, and accident or misperception can take states to the brink of catastrophe. But they severely limit the capacity of aggressors to expand against other nuclear states. Other innovations such as ballistic and cruise missiles, satellites and information technology confer on defending states a pre-targeting and long-range strike capability, enabling them to inflict severe damage on expeditionary forces operating from forward bases. None of this automatically defeats arguments for going to war, nor does it guarantee that states will not attempt expansion. But these considerations raise the threshold for justifying war on the basis of 'clear and present danger.'

If we imagine strategic life through the eyes of those being expanded towards, its not hard to recognise the insecurity and resistance that proximity breeds. If China proclaimed a Pax Beijing, if its vessels patrolled our maritime periphery even while it proclaimed an exclusion zone in its own backyard, if it subdivided our nations into supersized strategic commands, would we acquiesce on the basis that this is natural, as it's a small world after all? Thinking of NATO, how we would react if the roles were reversed, with a victorious Soviet Union

expanding its Warsaw Pact into our sphere, and preaching the inevitable victory of its Marxist-Leninist model? The drive of the North Atlantic towards the old Soviet borders produced a classic security dilemma, accumulating space and allies but breeding reaction.

What about liberal values? The idea resists geographical limitation. Some commentators claim Britain's values are its interests. This is false. There may be overlap, but often the UK rightly compromises between the two. Britain does not allow ideological differences to preclude relations with Saudi Arabia or China. The Good Friday agreement in Northern Ireland included the early release of paramilitary prisoners, trading justice for order. Even when battling offensive regimes, liberal states often turn to illiberal allies. To roll back Argentina's invasion of the Falklands, Britain relied upon Chile's Pinochet. Geopolitics is not necessarily the enemy of high-mindedness. But altruism must be strategic. With limited power in an anarchic world, Britain cannot be actively moral everywhere.

A liberal interventionist posture and an expansive concept of national interest also has perverse effects. Acting abroad is not necessarily a prudent way to contain or eliminate problems. Interventionism encourages risky behaviour by others, and can incite the humanitarian catastrophes it aims to prevent. Adroit local players deliberately provoke their enemies into counter-atrocities to draw in outside intervention. Expansion breeds resistance. By increasing Atlantic security through ill-conceived NATO enlargement, the West has antagonised Moscow and heightened confrontation on its borders. Negotiated distance is wiser than encroachment.

It is time to narrow rather than extend Western security horizons, and re-territorialise our interests. A starting point could be its region and heartland (Western and Central Europe) and its windpipe (the sea lanes to the Middle East). If the economic foundations of American power erode further, and if the Asia-Pacific replaces the Atlantic as the focus of its geopolitics, the US may over the next decades draw down its military protectorate and shift the burden of regional security onto European states. The UK will be an important part of this. If the world becomes more multi-polar, Western Europe may have to contribute more to guard the sea lanes and choke points of the Middle East, with greater reliance on that region's oil. A focus on the 'commons', or spaces between states, is more limited and workable than surgically fixing states. Marrying its interests and values, the First World must also develop a new

energy strategy to lower its oil consumption and disentangle itself from the region that has ‘totemic status among violent extremists.’

Our conception of the size and connectivity of the strategic environment has a direct bearing on our behaviour. Ultimately if we marry globalisation theory and grand strategy, we will see a world without hemispheres, without core and periphery; our vital interests will be always at stake, and on the line, in hopelessly linked and integrated world; therefore we become wandering vigilantes.

If I am right, or just right enough, it means we should rediscover the discipline of defining our interests territorially, or ranking regions of the world, and organising our limited resources accordingly. In short, we should no longer let the loose theory of globalisation supplant strategy.

The world is physically and strategically too big for our ambitions as they are, leaving our commitments too great for our power. On one level, a heightened sense of the vulnerably small world tends to predispose states with power projection capabilities to remain in a state of continual activism and intervention. On another level, the same idea of the small world supplies an arsenal of ideas to those who argue for the same expansive foreign policy for other reasons.

This state of mind leads to mischief. It misconceives the military not as a form of insurance that is mostly valuable when held back in reserve, but as a tool of social engineering to continually used in a state of what James Forrestal called ‘semi-war.’

It misconceives resources and national strength as assets that should be continually spent, when part of the essence of sound grand strategy is the steady accumulation of a comfortable surplus of power, to use Walter Lippmann’s phrase. This in turn harms our ability to react to unexpected contingencies, whether on the Korean peninsula or in the Straits of Hormuz.

And in such a state of hyperactivity and liberal militarism, we fail to play hard to get. Instead, we offer others endless opportunities to free ride, buckpass, and worse, manipulate us by using their victimhood strategically into involvement in peripheral wars.



This will not be easy to swallow. It implies power conservation over expenditure, a strong but much less busy military, and most difficult of all, a willingness to recognise that chaos and threats are not necessarily independently existing things ‘out there’ in need of our policing, but can be magnified by our own self-defeating behaviour. Against the spirit of the age, maybe it is not such a small world after all.

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