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The New Geopolitics of Energy

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While the day-to-day focus of US military planning remains Iraq and Afghanistan, American strategists are increasingly looking beyond these two conflicts to envision the global combat environment of the emerging period--and the world they see is one where the struggle over vital resources, rather than ideology or balance-of-power politics, dominates the martial landscape. Believing that the United States must reconfigure its doctrines and forces in order to prevail in such an environment, senior officials have taken steps to enhance strategic planning and combat capabilities. Although little of this has reached the public domain, there have been a number of key indicators.

Since 2006 the Defense Department, in its annual report *Military Power of the People's Republic of China*, has equated competition over resources with conflict over Taiwan as a potential spark for a US war with China. Preparation for a clash over Taiwan remains "an important driver" of China's military modernization, the 2008 edition noted, but "analysis of China's military acquisitions and strategic thinking suggests Beijing is also developing capabilities for use in other contingencies, such as conflict over resources." The report went on to suggest that the Chinese are planning to enhance their capacity for "power projection" in areas that provide them with critical raw materials, especially fossil fuels, and that such efforts would pose a significant threat to America's security interests.

The Pentagon is also requesting funds this year for the establishment of the Africa Command (Africom), the first overseas joint command to be formed since 1983, when President Reagan created the Central Command (Centcom) to guard Persian Gulf oil. Supposedly, the new organization will focus its efforts on humanitarian aid and the "war on terror." But in a presentation delivered at the National Defense University in February, Africom's deputy commander, Vice Adm. Robert Moeller, said, "Africa holds growing geostrategic importance" to the United States--with oil a key factor in this equation--and that among the key challenges to US strategic interests in the region is China's "Growing Influence in Africa."

Russia, too, is being viewed through the lens of global resource competition. Although Russia, unlike the United States and China, does not need to import oil and natural gas to satisfy its domestic requirements, it seeks to dominate the transportation of energy, especially to Europe. This has alarmed senior White House officials, who resent restoration of Russia's great-power status and fear that its growing control over the distribution of oil and gas in Eurasia will undercut America's influence in the region. In response to the Russian energy drive, the Bush Administration is undertaking countermoves. "I do intend to appoint...a special energy coordinator who could especially spend time on the Central

Asian and Caspian region," Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice informed the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in February. "It is a really important part of diplomacy." A key job of the coordinator, she suggested, would be to encourage the establishment of oil and gas pipelines that bypass Russia, thereby diminishing its control over the regional flow of energy.

Taken together, these and like moves suggest that a momentous shift has occurred. At a time when world supplies of oil, natural gas, uranium and key industrial minerals like copper and cobalt are beginning to shrink and the demand for them is exploding, the major industrial powers are becoming more desperate in their drive to gain control over what remains of the planet's untapped reserves [for more evidence of major shortages in fossil fuels, see Klare, "Beyond the Age of Petroleum," November 12, 2007, and Mark Hertsgaard, "Running on Empty," May 12]. These efforts typically entail intense bidding wars for supplies on international markets--hence the record high prices for all these commodities. But they also take military form, as arms transfers and the deployment of overseas missions and bases. It is to bolster America's advantage--and to counter similar moves by China and other resource competitors--that the Pentagon has placed resource competition at the center of its strategic planning.

Alfred Thayer Mahan Revisited

This is not the first time that American strategists have placed a high priority on the global struggle over vital resources. At the end of the nineteenth century a bold and outspoken group of military thinkers, led by naval historian and Naval War College president Alfred Thayer Mahan and his protégé, then-Assistant Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt, campaigned for a strong American Navy and the acquisition of colonies to ensure access to overseas markets and raw materials. Eventually, their views helped generate public support for the Spanish-American War and, upon its conclusion, the establishment of a Caribbean and Pacific empire by the United States.

During the cold war, ideology reigned supreme as containment of the USSR and the defeat of Communism were the overriding objectives of American strategy. But even then, resource considerations were not entirely neglected. The Eisenhower Doctrine of 1957 and the Carter Doctrine of 1980, though couched in the standard anti-Soviet rhetoric of the day, were principally intended to ensure continued US access to the Persian Gulf's prolific oil reserves. And when President Carter established the nucleus of Centcom in 1980, its primary responsibility was protection of the Persian Gulf oil flow--not containment of the Soviet Union.

After the cold war, the first President Bush tried, and failed, to establish a global coalition of like-minded states--a "new world order"--that would maintain global stability and allow Western corporate interests (American firms foremost among them) to extend their reach across the planet. This approach, in watered-down form, was subsequently embraced by President Clinton. But 9/11 and the current Administration's relentless campaign against "rogue states," notably Iraq under Saddam Hussein and Iran, has reinjected an ideological element into US strategic planning. As George W. Bush tells it, the "war on terror" and rogue states are the contemporary equivalents of earlier ideological struggles against Fascism and Communism. Examine the issues closely, however, and it is impossible to disentangle the problem of Middle Eastern terrorism or the challenge posed by Iraq and Iran from

the history of Western oil extraction in those regions.

Islamic extremism of the sort propagated by Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda has many roots, but one of its major claims is that the Western assault on and occupation of Islamic lands--and the resulting defilement of Muslim peoples and cultures--has been driven by the West's craving for Middle Eastern oil. "Remember too that the biggest reason for our enemies' control over our lands is to steal our oil," bin Laden told his sympathizers in a December 2004 audiotaped address. "So give everything you can to stop the greatest theft of oil in history."

Likewise, the US conflict with Iraq and Iran has largely been shaped by the fundamental tenet of the Carter Doctrine: that the United States will not permit the emergence of a hostile power that might gain control over the flow of Persian Gulf oil and thus--in Vice President Cheney's words--"be able to dictate the future of worldwide energy policy." The fact that these countries might be seeking weapons of mass destruction only complicates the task of neutralizing the threat they pose, but it does not alter the underlying strategic logic.

Concern over the safety of vital resource supplies has, therefore, been a central feature of strategic planning for a long time. But the attention now devoted to this issue represents a qualitative shift in US thinking, matched only by the imperial impulses that led to the Spanish-American War a century ago. This time, however, the shift is driven not by an optimistic faith in America's capacity to dominate the world economy but by a largely pessimistic outlook regarding the future availability of vital resources and the intense competition over them waged by China and other rising economic dynamos. Faced with these dual challenges, Pentagon strategists believe that ensuring US primacy in the global resource struggle must be the top priority of American military policy.

Back to the Future

In line with this new outlook, fresh emphasis is being placed on the global role of the Navy. Using language that would sound surprisingly familiar to Alfred Mahan and the first President Roosevelt, the Navy, Marines and Coast Guard unveiled *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower* in October; it emphasizes America's need to dominate the oceans and guard the vital sea lanes that connect this country to its overseas markets and resource supplies:

Over the past four decades, total sea borne trade has more than quadrupled: 90% of world trade and two-thirds of its petroleum are transported by sea. The sea-lanes and supporting shore infrastructure are the lifelines of the modern global economy.... Heightened popular expectations and increased competition for resources, coupled with scarcity, may encourage nations to exert wider claims of sovereignty over greater expanses of ocean, waterways, and natural resources--potentially resulting in conflict.

To address this danger, the Defense Department has undertaken a massive modernization of the combat fleet, entailing the design and procurement of new aircraft carriers, destroyers, cruisers, submarines and a new type of "littoral combat" (coastal warfare) ship--an endeavor that could take decades to complete and consume hundreds of billions of dollars. Elements of this plan were unveiled

by President Bush and Defense Secretary Gates in the budget proposal for Fiscal Year 2009, submitted in February. Among the big-ticket items highlighted in the shipbuilding budget are:

§\$4.2 billion for the lead ship of a new generation of nuclear-powered aircraft carriers;

§\$3.2 billion for a third Zumwalt class missile destroyer; these warships with advanced stealth capabilities will also serve as a "testbed" for a new class of missile cruisers, the CG(X);

§\$1.3 billion for the first two littoral combat ships;

§\$3.6 billion for another Virginia class submarine, the world's most advanced undersea combat vessel in production.

Proposed shipbuilding programs will cost \$16.9 billion in FY 2009, on top of \$24.6 billion voted in FY 2007 and FY 2008.

The Navy's new strategic outlook is reflected not only in the procurement of new vessels but also in the disposition of existing ones. Until recently most naval assets were concentrated in the North Atlantic, the Mediterranean and the Northwest Pacific in support of American forces assigned to NATO and the defense pacts with South Korea and Japan. These ties still figure prominently in strategic calculations, but ever-increasing weight is placed on the protection of vital trade links in the Persian Gulf, the Southwest Pacific and the Gulf of Guinea (close to Africa's major oil producers). In 2003, for example, the head of the US European Command declared that the aircraft carrier battle groups under his command would be spending fewer months in the Mediterranean and "half their time going down the west coast of Africa."

A similar outlook is guiding the realignment of overseas bases, which has been under way for the past several years. When the Bush Administration came into office, most major bases were in Western Europe, Japan or South Korea. Under the prodding of then-Defense Secretary Rumsfeld, however, the Pentagon began to relocate forces from the outer fringes of Eurasia to its central and southern regions--especially East-Central Europe, Central Asia and Southwest Asia--as well as to North and Central Africa. True, these areas are home to Al Qaeda and the Middle Eastern "rogue states"--but they also contain 80 percent or more of the world's oil and natural gas, as well as reserves of uranium, copper, cobalt and other critical industrial materials. And, as noted, it is impossible to separate the one from the other in US strategic calculations.

A case in point is the US plan to maintain a basing infrastructure to support combat operations in the Caspian Sea basin and Central Asia. American ties with states in this area were established several years before 9/11, to protect the flow of Caspian Sea oil to the West. Believing that the Caspian basin could prove a valuable new source of oil and natural gas, President Clinton worked assiduously to open the doors to US involvement in the area's energy production; aware also of the endemic ethnic antagonisms in the region, he sought to bolster the military capabilities of friendly local powers and to prepare for possible intervention by American forces. President Bush later built on these efforts, increasing the flow of US military aid and establishing bases in the Central Asian republics.

A corresponding mix of priorities governs the Pentagon's plans to retain a constellation of "enduring" bases in Iraq. Many of these installations will no doubt be used to support continuing operations against insurgent forces, for intelligence activities or for the training of Iraqi army and police units. Even if all US combat troops are withdrawn in accordance with plans announced by senators Clinton and Obama, some of these bases will probably be retained for the training activities they say will continue. At least some bases, moreover, are specifically earmarked for the protection of Iraqi oil exports. In 2007, for example, the Navy revealed that it had established a command-and-control facility atop an offshore Iraqi oil terminal in the Persian Gulf to oversee the protection of vital terminals.

A Global Struggle

No other major power is capable of matching the United States when it comes to the global deployment of military power in the pursuit or protection of vital raw materials. Nevertheless, other powers are beginning to challenge this country in various ways. In particular, China and Russia are providing arms to oil and gas producers in the developing world and beginning to enhance their military capacity in key energy-producing areas.

China's drive to gain access to foreign supplies is most evident in Africa, where Beijing has established ties with the oil-producing governments of Algeria, Angola, Chad, Equatorial Guinea, Nigeria and Sudan. China has also sought access to Africa's abundant mineral supplies, pursuing copper in Zambia and Congo, chromium in Zimbabwe and a range of minerals in South Africa. In each case the Chinese have wooed suppliers through vigorous diplomacy, offers of development assistance and low-interest loans, high-visibility cultural projects--and, in many cases, arms. China is now a major supplier of basic combat gear to many of these countries and is especially known for its weapons sales to Sudan--arms that reportedly have been used by government forces in attacks on civilian communities in Darfur. Moreover, like the United States, China has supplemented its arms transfers with military-support agreements, leading to a steady buildup of Chinese instructors, advisers and technicians, who now compete with their US counterparts for the loyalty of African military officers.

Much the same process is under way in Central Asia, where China and Russia cooperate under the auspices of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to provide arms and technical assistance to the military forces of the Central Asian "stans"--again competing with the United States to win the loyalty of local military elites. In the 1990s Russia was too preoccupied with Chechnya to pay much attention to this area, and China was likewise consumed with other priorities, so Washington enjoyed a temporary advantage; in the past five years, however, Moscow and Beijing have made concerted efforts to gain influence in the region. The result has been a far more competitive geopolitical environment, with Russia and China, linked through the SCO, gaining ground in their drive to diminish US influence.

A clear expression of this drive was the military exercise the SCO conducted last summer, the first of its kind to feature participation by all member states. The maneuvers involved some 6,500 personnel from China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan and took place in Russia and China. Aside from its symbolic significance, the exercise was indicative of China's and Russia's efforts to enhance their capabilities, placing a heavy emphasis on long-range assault forces. For the first time,

a contingent of Chinese airborne troops were deployed outside Chinese territory, a clear sign of Beijing's growing assertiveness.

To ensure that the intended message of these exercises did not go unnoticed, the presidents of China and Russia used the occasion of an accompanying SCO summit in Kyrgyzstan to warn the United States (though not by name) against meddling in Central Asian affairs. In calling for a "multipolar" world, for example, Vladimir Putin declared that "any attempts to solve global and regional problems unilaterally are hopeless." For his part, Hu Jintao noted, "The SCO nations have a clear understanding of the threats faced by the region and thus must ensure their security themselves."

These and other efforts by Russia and China, combined with stepped-up US military aid to states in the region, are part of a larger, though often hidden, struggle to control the flow of oil and natural gas from the Caspian Sea basin to markets in Europe and Asia. And this struggle, in turn, is but part of a global struggle over energy.

The great risk is that this struggle will someday breach the boundaries of economic and diplomatic competition and enter the military realm. This will not be because any of the states involved make a deliberate decision to provoke a conflict with a competitor--the leaders of all these countries know that the price of violence is far too high to pay for any conceivable return. The problem, instead, is that all are engaging in behaviors that make the outbreak of inadvertent escalation ever more likely. These include, for example, the deployment of growing numbers of American, Russian and Chinese military instructors and advisers in areas of instability where there is every risk that these outsiders will someday be caught up in local conflicts on opposite sides.

This risk is made all the greater because intensified production of oil, natural gas, uranium and minerals is itself a source of instability, acting as a magnet for arms deliveries and outside intervention. The nations involved are largely poor, so whoever controls the resources controls the one sure source of abundant wealth. This is an invitation for the monopolization of power by greedy elites who use control over military and police to suppress rivals. The result, more often than not, is a wealthy strata of crony capitalists kept in power by brutal security forces and surrounded by disaffected and impoverished masses, often belonging to a different ethnic group--a recipe for unrest and insurgency. This is the situation today in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, in Darfur and southern Sudan, in the uranium-producing areas of Niger, in Zimbabwe, in the Cabinda province of Angola (where most of that country's oil lies) and in numerous other areas suffering from what's been called the "resource curse."

The danger, of course, is that the great powers will be sucked into these internal conflicts. This is not a far-fetched scenario; the United States, Russia and China are already providing arms and military-support services to factions in many of these disputes. The United States is arming government forces in Nigeria and Angola, China is aiding government forces in Sudan and Zimbabwe, and so on. An even more dangerous situation prevails in Georgia, where the United States is backing the pro-Western government of President Mikhail Saakashvili with arms and military support while Russia is backing the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Georgia plays an important strategic role for both countries because it harbors the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline, a US-backed conduit carrying Caspian Sea oil to markets in the West. There are US and Russian military

advisers/instructors in both areas, in some cases within visual range of each other. It is not difficult, therefore, to conjure up scenarios in which a future blow-up between Georgian and separatist forces could lead, willy-nilly, to a clash between American and Russian soldiers, sparking a much greater crisis.

It is essential that America reverse the militarization of its dependence on imported energy and ease geopolitical competition with China and Russia over control of foreign resources. Because this would require greater investment in energy alternatives, it would also lead to an improved energy economy at home (with lower prices in the long run) and a better chance at overcoming global warming.

Any strategy aimed at reducing reliance on imported energy, especially oil, must include a huge increase in spending on alternative fuels, especially renewable sources of energy (solar and wind), second-generation biofuels (those made from nonedible plant matter), coal gasification with carbon capture and burial (so that no carbon dioxide escapes into the atmosphere to heat the planet) and hydrogen fuel cells, along with high-speed rail, public transit and other advanced transportation systems. The science and technology for these advances is already largely in place, but the funding to move them from the lab or pilot-project stage to full-scale development is not. The challenge, then, is to assemble the many billions--even trillions--of dollars that will be needed.

The principal obstacle to this herculean task is the very reason for its necessity in the first place: massive spending on the military dimensions of overseas resource competition. I estimate that it costs approximately \$100 billion to \$150 billion per year to enforce the Carter Doctrine, not including the war in Iraq. Extending that doctrine to the Caspian Sea basin and Africa will add billions. A new cold war with China, with an accompanying naval arms race, will require trillions in additional military expenditures over the next few decades. This is sheer lunacy: it will not guarantee access to more sources of energy, lower the cost of gasoline at home or discourage China from seeking new energy resources. What it *will* do is sop up all the money we need to develop alternative energy sources and avert the worst effects of global climate change.

And this leads to a final recommendation: rather than engage in militarized competition with China, we should cooperate with Beijing in developing alternative energy sources and more efficient transportation systems. The arguments in favor of collaboration are overwhelming: together, we are projected to consume 35 percent of the world's oil supply by 2025, most of which will have to be imported from dysfunctional states. If, as is widely predicted, global oil reserves have begun to shrink by then, both of our countries could be locked in a dangerous struggle for dwindling supplies in chronically unstable areas of the world. The costs, in terms of rising military outlays and the inability to invest in more worthwhile social, economic and environmental endeavors, would be staggering. Far better to forswear this sort of competition and work together on the development of advanced petroleum alternatives, super-fuel-efficient vehicles and other energy innovations. Many American and Chinese universities and corporations have already initiated joint ventures of this sort, so it is not hard to envision a much grander regime of cooperation.

As we approach the 2008 elections, two paths lie before us. One leads to greater reliance on imported fuels, increased militarization of our foreign fuel dependency and prolonged struggle with other powers for control over the world's remaining supplies of fossil fuels. The other leads toward diminished

reliance on petroleum as a main source of our fuel, the rapid development of energy alternatives, a reduced US military profile abroad and cooperation with China in the development of innovative energy options. Rarely has a policy choice been as stark or as momentous for the future of our country.

About Michael T. Klare

Michael T. Klare, *Nation* defense correspondent, is professor of peace and world security studies at Hampshire College. His latest book is *Rising Power, Shrinking Planet: The New Geopolitics of Energy*. [more...](#)

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