The radical geopolitics of US foreign policy: Geopolitical and geoeconomic logics of power

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Abstract

This article presents a version of geopolitics termed “radical geopolitics,” which is critical, political economic, and concerned with investigating the “why” (the causes) of policy and political events, without neglecting the “how” (the way they unfold). In particular, it examines the relative importance of the geopolitical and geoeconomic factors that drive policy. It seeks to address questions which have been neglected by current approaches in geopolitics, a number of which fail to incorporate political economy or to identify the fundamental reasons behind policy. Inspired by revisionist Cold War historiography, it modifies and reformulates David Harvey’s logics of power into a “geoeconomic logic” and a “geopolitical logic” through which postwar American foreign policy may be interpreted. The former logic arises out of capitalism’s tendency to expand geographically and the latter out of politicians’ need to maintain credibility internationally as well as from pressures generated by domestic public opinion. A discussion of the Vietnam War illustrates the approach and criticizes Harvey’s account of postwar American foreign policy, which he claims is the product of political and economic forces that sometimes display “outright antagonism.” On the contrary, it is advanced that their oppositions are tactical, but not fundamental, and that it is mostly the geoeconomic logic that has driven postwar American foreign policy. The conclusion illustrates the relevance of a radical geopolitics approach to post-Cold War events through a discussion of the current Iranian crisis.

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Keywords: Radical geopolitics; Critical geopolitics; Geoeconomics; Logics of power; Vietnam War

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Introduction

Geographers have presented several approaches to the study of geopolitics, the classical and the critical being the most popular (Kelly, 2006). However, methodologies borrowing from radical political economy have been neglected, which is paradoxical since they have been used widely in other disciplines like history. This paper offers such an approach, “radical geopolitics,” as applied to the case of postwar US foreign policy. The first section situates radical geopolitics relative to current scholarship in geopolitics, including critical and feminist geopolitics, Lacoste/Hérodote, and world-systems theory. Focusing on critical geopolitics, it argues that its engagement with radical political economy could be taken further (the same applies to Lacoste/Hérodote and feminist approaches), and that when it relies heavily on discourse analysis, it is less radical than it claims to be — in fact, its statements are sometimes similar to those of mainstream scholars in other disciplines. Some versions of critical geopolitics do include political economy but are not radical and do not put enough emphasis on geoeconomics as a driver behind American foreign policy. Further, whereas critical (and feminist) geopolitics emphasizes the ways in which political events unfold and are represented (the “how”), the investigation of their fundamental causes (the “why”) could be accentuated. Finally, world-systems theory tends to fit political events into somewhat rigid nomothetic models and focuses on large spatial and temporal scales (world-economic cycles), resulting in analyses at times remote from the specificities of actual political events that tend to neglect officials of statecraft’s agency — it is argued that more contextual interpretations lead to more meaningful accounts.

The second section discusses the geoeconomic and geopolitical logics which are at the center of radical geopolitics, directly concerned with identifying the roots of American foreign policy from a critical political economic perspective. In particular, it seeks to determine the relative importance of political factors and economic forces in shaping policy. To this end, David Harvey’s (and other scholars’) conceptualization of the logics of power will be critiqued and modified through an examination of some of the debates to which they have given rise. The article will present a “geopolitical logic” and a “geoeconomic logic” that will be located within the emerging literature on geoeconomics as well as relevant scholarship on the relative importance of political and economic forces in shaping the nature of the capitalist state and its policies.

The third section illustrates how radical geopolitics might work in practice by discussing the Vietnam War, and offers a critique of Harvey’s interpretation of American foreign policy. To highlight more precisely where radical geopolitics situates itself relative to other approaches, the contributions to our understanding of the war made by current scholarship in geopolitics will be discussed and compared to that of radical geopolitics, clarifying how the latter improves upon them. The predominance of geoeconomic factors over geopolitical ones will be underlined, corroborating the claims of radical scholarship.

A critique of geopolitics scholarship

Critical geopolitics

Critical geopolitics is a very diverse school of thought, difficult to characterize in bold terms. As such, it should be kept in mind that the following critical statements cannot do justice to the full complexity of the field. They are intended to identify explicitly some of critical geopolitics’ blind spots, although they apply more or less directly to various pieces under this heading. One
point is that critical geopolitics often neglects to investigate the political economic dynamics of policy, usually directing its attention to the analysis of discourses and representations (as noted early on by Dodds & Sidaway, 1994). True, it often includes political economy, but when it does, it either mostly discusses the institutional affiliation of elite groups — but stops short of examining the workings of the political economic system which shapes policy-making — or does not put enough emphasis on the (geo)economic factors behind policy.

To be sure, there are obviously important aspects of culture and a panoply of social norms that do arise for reasons having little or nothing to do with political economy. However, the focus of this article is on dominant political ideologies, and it is those which are conceived of as mostly arising out of specific political economic forces. For instance, whereas liberal analyses would argue that “Cold War ideology” is at the root of American foreign policy, radicals would maintain that this begs the question of why this particular ideology arose in the first place and strived for so long? Americans were not born with a Cold War ideology in their mind, nor is the idea of a monolithic Soviet conspiracy innate. Radical scholarship provides a compelling rationale explaining why elites in the “free world” would have sought to demonize and destabilize communist and socialist movements during the Cold War. First, the military and political power of the Soviet bloc had the potential to inhibit the expansion of American and Western business overseas; and second, since leftist ideologies called for a redistribution of resources from the better-off to the lower echelons of society, they posed a threat to the prerogatives of powerful groups, mostly the corporate sector. As such, those threats to elites provided the basis for ideologies and accompanying discourses that pictured the Soviet Union and leftist and progressive social movements in negative terms. Of course, once a Cold War ideology came into being, it acquired an autonomous power to influence events and perceptions, as well as to continuously transform itself as well as other ideologies; nevertheless, its origins may be found in political economy. Scholars who contend otherwise must provide a convincing explanation of why such a pervasive ideology has emerged and maintained itself in the Cold War United States and other countries.

Consequently, this paper argues that critical geopolitics analyses focusing on discourses and representations neglect important political economic forces that shape policy, a point paraphrasing Smith’s (2000) critique of Toal (1996a). Although one must be careful not to caricature a field as diverse and vibrant as critical geopolitics, for illustrative purposes, examples of this approach include Dalby (1990, 1996), Dittmer (2005), Dodds (1996, 2005), Toal (2002, 2003), Toal and Agnew (1992), and Toal and Dalby (1998). When critical geopolitics incorporates political economy, it tends to limit itself to descriptions of the institutional affiliation of powerful actors: examples of such research include Campbell (1992, 2007), Dalby (2007), Dodds (2000, 2007), Sharp (1996), Toal (1992, 1993, 2005), and Toal, Dalby, and Routledge (2006).

Such analyses are sometimes more akin to liberal, or mainstream, approaches than radical ones, by the standards of the social sciences as a whole. For example, Toal et al. (2006) have addressed the criticism that “representations of geopolitical discourses do not exist in a material vacuum” (Agnew, 2001: 11). Toal’s general introduction (Toal, 2006a) draws from neo-Weberian analysis (Mann, 1993) and discusses the “power networks” in American society through the concept of the “iron triangle” (defense contractors, congress and Pentagon officials). This political economic theoretical framework however is mostly concerned with interest groups and their motivations and downplays the significance of (geo)economic factors in shaping policy. Similarly, Toal’s critical geopolitics of the FSX jet fighter debate limits itself to “the study of institutions” (1992: 979) but neglects the workings of the capitalist system in
which they are embedded, such as the key postwar American objective of integrating Japan in the world economy.¹

Perhaps the most convincing way to demonstrate the argument that critical geopolitics tends to be closer to liberal scholarship than might appear at first glance is to compare interpretations of specific political events. Take the Vietnam War. Toal argues that the driving cause of American involvement in Indochina was ideological:

That the United States became involved in civil wars in Korea and Vietnam, locations thousands of miles from the United States and of questionable strategic value in themselves, was a consequence of a geographically unspecified commitment to containment in US Cold War geopolitical culture (2006b: 64).

The key point is that this is virtually identical to the mainstream interpretation of the war, as enunciated for instance by George Herring, in arguably the most popular book on the subject. Herring argues that the American intervention was the result of deeply ingrained ideological assumptions:

The United States’ involvement in Vietnam… was a logical, if not inevitable, outgrowth of a world view and a policy, a policy of containment, which Americans in and out of government accepted without serious question (1979: x).

The problem with both interpretations is that they neglect the political economic workings which led American elites to intervene in Vietnam.

Some versions of critical geopolitics adopt an explicitly political economic angle to the study of “geopolitical world orders” (Agnew, 2003, 2005; Agnew & Corbridge, 1995). This is methodologically closer to the approach presented in this paper, but conceives of representations (discourses) and political economic processes as “dialectically related” and argues that “no one concept can be given causal primacy” (1995: 7). Radical scholarship does not deny that both discourses and political economic processes are implicated in the production of each other, but asserts that the direction of influence is mostly from political economy.

_Lacoste/Hérodote_

French geographer Yves Lacoste established the journal _Hérodote_ in the 1970s and in collaboration with colleagues developed an approach to geopolitics described as radical, or “subversive.” Only a few engagements with Lacoste/Hérodote have appeared in the Anglophone geographical and geopolitical communities (e.g., Claval, 2000; Girot & Kofman, 1987; Hepple, 2000; Mamadouh, 1998; Toal, 1994, 1996). But Lacoste/Hérodote neglects economic factors – mostly concerned with political and military issues – and when it addresses geoconomics, the treatment tends to remain untheorized, as noted by Hepple (2000) and Claval (2000). Accordingly, early on, La Géographie, ça sert, d’abord, à faire la guerre declared that “geographers must cease to be the economists’ trailers” (Les géographes doivent cesser d’être à la remorque des économistes) (1985: 190–191). For instance, the Cold War is treated as a political and military event, the geoeconomic stakes and reasons involved in its emergence and continuation not described (Lacoste, 2006: 55–67; also Lacoste, 1987a, 1987b). In short, although there are exceptions (Foucher, 1987; Gentelle, 1980; Joxe, 2003), the geoeconomic roots of territorial conflicts are often left unexamined or untheorized by Lacoste/Hérodote.

¹Toal’s study of the “geofinancial panopticon” (Toal, 1997) admittedly would be less subject to such criticisms.
**Feminist geopolitics**

Feminist geopolitics makes three important claims. First, it calls for giving space to the voices of marginalized groups, which is often linked to a critique of critical geopolitics advancing that it focuses too much on texts and representations and should become more embodied, for instance by rewriting the actions of men and women into geopolitical thought (Dowler & Sharp, 2001; Gilmartin & Kofman, 2004; Hyndman, 2004; Kofman, 1996; Sharp, 2000). Second, it states that geopolitical discourses should be analyzed to expose their gendered nature, as they “often draw on and reinforce stereotypical readings of gender” (Dalby, 1994; Smith, 2001: 215; Toal, 1993; Weber, 1994). Third, it advances the idea of “human security” in order “to decenter the state-centred discourses of security which have traditionally formed the core of geopolitical enquiry” (Smith, 2001: 217).

Such contributions are important since they provide richer accounts of foreign policy and international relations by documenting the often erased roles gender relations play in the conduct of international politics. On the other hand, feminist geopolitics has put less emphasis on investigating the causes behind foreign policy, in particular political economic ones. To give an example, Secor (2001) records the thoughts of women in Turkey on Islamist politics and examines the ways in which they are active participants in local politics — a different project than asking questions such as, how does gender influence Turkey’s foreign policy? But some examples of feminist scholarship focusing on the “why” of policy can be found in the discipline of history, where the case is made explicitly that an important cause of American foreign policy and/or intervention, notably in the Vietnam War, is gender. For instance, Cuordileone states that “The enthusiasm for counterinsurgency [in Vietnam] lay not just in its geopolitical and strategic aims but also in the appeal of manly adventure and cool subversion that subterranean conflicts in the mountains and jungles of the third world offered American men.” (Cuordileone, 2005: 223; see also Dean, 2002). As such, feminist scholarship has in several instances offered a compelling argument that patriarchal social structures provide a general climate conducive to adventurism overseas (e.g., Hannah, 2005; Hoganson, 1998) and shown how mainstream accounts often erase women’s roles in foreign policy-making (Sylvester, 1998).

However, relatively absent from such interpretations are considerations of why, where and when intervention occurred. Indeed, it is crucial to explain why intervention occurred in the jungles of Vietnam as opposed to other countries? And why was Vietnam appealing in the 1960s, but not in the 1930s or 1970s when Americans withdrew from Vietnam? The answers to those questions are directly related to the fact that leftist Viet Minh rebels posed a challenge to American hegemonic plans for the development of the capitalist world economy, as will be seen below. In short, although feminist analyses identify elements of a cultural context that may encourage policy-makers to take aggressive actions abroad, they tend to fall short of explaining why certain interventions take place and others do not. Indeed, accepting that policy-makers are imbued with notions of masculinity that are conducive to military involvement overseas, what makes them select some countries and places for such intervention, but not others? This paper argues that the answers have much to do with political economy — in blunt terms, countries which do not “play by the rules” of the US-led world economy will be more likely to be subjected to American intervention.

**World-systems theory**

Inspired by Immanuel Wallerstein’s writings, the work of Peter Taylor and Colin Flint has reformulated political geography in terms of world-systems theory (Flint & Taylor, 2007;
Taylor, 1985, 1996). World-systems theory is rooted in radical political economy, and as such shares many of this paper’s goals and methodology. Most importantly, it seeks to answer the “why” of world political events and emphasizes geoeconomics and geopolitics in doing so. However, world-systems theory tends to be nomothetic and to fit complex political events into rigid models; second, it focuses on spatial and temporal scales which are so large that it is often difficult to connect them to the specific causes of particular events, resulting in a tendency to underplay policy-makers’ agency.

For instance, Flint and Taylor state that “Using our paired Kondratieff model we would expect current challenges to the United States as hegemonic power… The world-systems approach allows us to conceptualize the timing and meaning of al-Qaeda’s terrorist campaign against the United States within the temporal dynamics of hegemonic cycles” (2007: 65–67). But it seems implausible to attribute 9/11 to cyclical variations in worldwide prices and production levels, especially since American interests have been attacked around the world throughout the twentieth century, that is, at various points along the cycles; would it not be more meaningful to link 9/11 to specific American foreign policies in the Middle East such as the establishment of military bases in Saudi Arabia some years earlier? The point is that attributing responsibility for governmental policies to long-waves results in abstract explanations that neglect the agency of policy-makers, and makes it more difficult to ascribe responsibility to officials of statecraft (similar problems arise in Taylor, 1985). Further, claims that history is cyclical have been disputed: Kondratieff waves are controversial contrivances and empirical evidence for them has been questioned (e.g., McCormick, 2004). In short, although there are several versions of world-systems theory and that some would be less subject to the above criticisms, world-systems approaches would still benefit from shifting the emphasis away from cyclical world-economic models and towards contextual interpretations that pay more attention to the agency of political actors and actual policy analysis.

Geoeconomic and geopolitical logics

This paper builds on Arrighi’s (1994), and especially on Harvey’s (2003, 2006a), twin concepts of the territorial and capitalist logics of power. In particular, the former logic has remained underdeveloped in Harvey’s work, Castree (2006: 43) arguing that in Harvey (2003) it “is given none of the attention it deserves.” Two important issues need to be addressed: How can those logics be specified? And what is their relative importance in explaining US foreign policy? Elaborating on Harvey’s typology, two modified logics of power will be presented, one geoeconomic and the other geopolitical, together with an argument that the former has been the main driver behind postwar American foreign policy. The discussion will be related to the emerging literature on “geoeconomics” and debates on the nature of the state.

For Arrighi (1994, 2005), both logics refer primarily to state policies (i.e., modes of rule), whereas for Harvey, the territorial refers to the political activities of states and the capitalist to the activities of firms and the processes of capital accumulation. In his words, the former is associated with “the political, diplomatic, and military strategies invoked and used by a state… as it struggles to assert its interests and achieve its goals in the world at large” and the latter with “the molecular processes of capital accumulation in space and time” which occur “through the daily practices of production, trade, commerce, capital flows” (2003: 26–27). As noted by Ashman and Callinicos (2006), one advantage of Harvey’s conceptualization is that it allows for a consideration of the influence of both state and private agents on American foreign policy, on which more below.
The discussion should be prefaced by noting complexity which leads to some ambiguity in Harvey’s use of the terms. The problem is that he does not always distinguish clearly between the “why” and the “how” of policy, or equivalently, between the causes of policy and the nature of the policies/strategies themselves, both of which can be economic or political. It is clear that the logics should refer to the causes of policy, not to the policies themselves, since the debate about their relative importance is about what drives policy, not about whether the American government enacts a larger number of political or economic policies. For example, Harvey’s definition of the territorial logic as “the political, diplomatic, and military strategies invoked and used by a state” embodies this ambiguity. Indeed, “strategies” are by definition actual policies and do not refer to what drives decisions (the same issue arises in Ashman & Callinicos, 2006).

Those problems are symptomatic of the difficulty Harvey faces in identifying specifically territorial or political factors at the root of foreign policy-making. The issue does not arise with the capitalist logic, defined as “the daily practices of production, trade, commerce, capital flows.” This again conflates actual policies/practices with their causes, but what the capitalist logic refers to is nevertheless understood through the concept of the “spatial fix.” One of Harvey’s key contributions to the study of capitalism, this refers to the physical fixation of capital in places or to the spatial expansion of capitalist activities (Harvey, 2003, 1982). It is the latter that is closely associated with the capitalist logic, as the “outer” fix resolves (although only temporarily) the tendential overaccumulation of capital and labor power. Overaccumulation threatens the devaluation of capital, and for this reason, capitalism has a tendency to expand geographically, through opening up new markets, expanded trade, or investment of surplus capital to build production facilities in new places (Harvey, 1982, 1985, 2001a: 304–306, 2001b, 2003). Consequently, capitalists seek policies which will help them to expand their economic activities overseas.

This paper accepts the broad outlines of this reasoning but refers to it as the “geoeconomic logic.” The term geoeconomics has been used to describe the alleged dominance of economics over politics in interstate relations in recent years (Luttwak, 1993), the unevenness of the global economy (Dicken, 2003) and European integration (Pollard & Sidaway, 2002). In general, geographers have conceived of geoeconomics in at least three ways: first, as referring to the natural resources contained within a region and the politics of controlling and exploiting such resources (e.g., O’Hara & Heffernan, 2006); second, as discourse closely linked to the economic imperatives of the global economy (Smith, 2002; Sparke, 2002: 217; 2007; Toal, 1997); and third, to point to the flows of trade, finance and capital over global space and across borders, taking into consideration the political aspects behind such movements (Agnew & Corbridge, 1989; Coleman, 2005; Corbridge & Agnew, 1991; Sidaway, 2005; Smith, 2003). This paper follows the third approach, as it seeks to understand the material significance for American officials of opening markets and investment outlets overseas, as well as planning for regional trade relationships. Using the term “geoeconomic logic” — in lieu of reference to Harvey’s capitalist logic — reflects the fact that the focus is on the broad political economic aspects of capitalist expansion as opposed to the detailed analytics of capitalism’s crises and tensions, although the latter has been fruitfully examined by others (e.g., Jessop, 2004, 2006).

Harvey’s two logics of power and spatial fix have been criticized for neglecting the significance of political factors (e.g., Jessop, 2006, 2004; Ward & Jones, 2004). Such concerns are related to the broader issues of the relative importance of economic and political factors in shaping policy, and of the relative autonomy of the state and officials of statecraft relative to economic actors and forces. A review of the large literature on the subject is outside the scope
of this paper, but suffice it to say that the questions are old ones and have been extensively de-
bated by (neo) Marxists and (neo) Weberians among others, the former emphasizing economic
factors and the instrumental nature of the state and the latter countering that power is distributed
more or less equally among various types (ideological, political and economic) (e.g., Mann,
1984; Poulantzas, 1973; Skocpol, 1977; Toal, 2006a).

In this respect, this paper follows Ashman and Callinicos (2006), Harman (1991), Block
(1987), and Miliband (1983) and argues that economic forces predominate in orienting the di-
rection of state policy, but also conceives of the capitalist state as enjoying a significant degree
of relative autonomy. It conceptualizes the relationship between economic and political factors
by considering the interests of two different groups of actors, namely capitalists and state man-
gagers (a distinction that may be grounded in Brenner’s (1986) concept of the rules of reproduc-
tion). Although conflicts may arise between state managers and capitalists, they may be thought
of as interdependent, acting in “partnership” (Miliband, 1983). This is so because the former
need the support of economic actors in order to maintain some reasonable level of economic
growth, as the state’s capacity to maintain itself through taxation depends on economic activity,
and as popular support for a government depends in part on the health of the economy. Con-
versely, capitalists (business) need the state for economic regulation, domestically and interna-
tionally, for instance, through organizations like the World Trade Organization. State agents
remain strongly committed to enacting policies that preserve the health of a capitalist economy
since they are dependent on it for their survival, but because state officials and capitalists some-
times examine economic problems from different perspectives, they may at times favor con-
flicting policies. For example, individual businesses may be concerned with short-term
profits and thus call for free overseas trade, whereas state managers may opt to erect tariff
barriers to allow certain industrial sectors to grow and become more profitable in several years’
time (Ashman & Callinicos, 2006; Block, 1987).

Based on those considerations, and returning to the discussion of the logics of power, the
task at hand is to identify and add to Harvey’s account a truly political logic, or else admit
that there are simply no political/territorial causes behind foreign policy. To be sure, Harvey
identifies some such territorial pressures, like elections, but his account can be extended. It
should be kept in mind that whereas the discussion of the relative autonomy of the state above
concerned political factors behind policy in general, what follows addresses the narrower, but
nevertheless significant, field of foreign policy. It will be useful to conceive of “the geopoliti-
cal” as referring to two different spatial scales, the international and the domestic, each of
which giving rise to specific political impulses influencing policy. The geopolitical logic
may refer to one or the other of those spatial scales. Domestically, state officials need to
take public opinion under consideration and face elections through which they can be removed
from office in a way in which business leaders cannot. Further, public opinion can inhibit
territorial expansion (e.g., current opposition to a war with Iran) or support it (e.g., the Israel
lobby’s pressures for strong American support for Israel).

But the geopolitical logic as it unfolds on the international scale is probably more important
in shaping American foreign policy, and may be equated in practice with state officials’ need to
maintain “credibility.” State managers and capitalists occupy distinct social positions (Brenner,
1986), leading them to follow different incentives when they act in the international arena: in
broad terms, the former mostly follow the “geopolitical logic” and the latter the “geoeconomic
logic” (although this is an obvious oversimplification, as in reality the line between the two
groups is often blurred). This discrepancy arises because politicians, in order to achieve their
goals in the international arena, require some approbation (coerced or not), from other
governments and political actors, in a way which capitalists do not (Ashman & Callinicos, 2006; Block, 1987). Indeed, capitalists establish relations in the international system mainly through price incentives and the demand for their products and services. However, politicians interact in the international arena through diplomacy, persuasion and argumentation and thus need to generate at least some consent (which may be coerced) for their policies. One important aspect of this is the need to maintain credibility, which means to signify to other countries that challenges to American hegemony will be opposed. There is an obvious symbolic element at play here: implicit messages are sent to would-be challengers, suggesting that they may face harsh consequences. This is a task which concerns mostly state managers, as it is related to obtaining some degree of consensus in the longer term for a government’s international policies.

This explains why although both state managers and capitalists agree on the need to maintain a healthy world capitalist economy, their actual policy prescriptions sometimes diverge or conflict. This arises because capitalists feel profit pressures in more immediate ways than politicians (if profits fall significantly, they will be outcompeted), and those short-term interests may sometimes trump the longer-term objective of preserving and protecting — sometimes through military threats to maintain credibility — a favorable economic climate, the role of state managers (Block, 1987; Miliband, 1983). Radical scholarship argues that postwar American foreign policy has mostly been driven by the geoeconomic logic, although the geopolitical logic has been significant on many occasions. A discussion of the Vietnam War, followed by a shorter interpretation of current American policy over Iran in the conclusion, will now illustrate those claims.

A radical geopolitics of the Vietnam War

This section provides an interpretation of the war based on the geoeconomic and geopolitical logics. Although a full radical geopolitics account would pay more attention to the way the war unfolded (the “how”), for lack of space the analysis concentrates on the “why” of American involvement and later withdrawal. It is argued that this account improves on other geopolitics interpretations of the war.2

It will be advanced that the geoeconomic logic largely motivated initial involvement, as Southeast Asia and Indochina were perceived by American planners as important to the recovery of allies along capitalist lines. In the 1960s, Kennedy and Johnson’s escalation of the war had much to do with preserving American credibility and prestige in the world, although at that time those geopolitical impulses supported involvement, not withdrawal. What makes Vietnam an excellent case to study the relative importance of geopolitical and geoeconomic factors in shaping policy is that from 1968 onwards, business opposition to American involvement grew and eventually a majority in the corporate world called for withdrawal, as the war had highly negative consequences for the American and world economies. The paradox is that Nixon nevertheless chose to remain in Vietnam for several more years, until 1973. Was this

2 Critical geopoliticians’ views on Vietnam were examined above (Toal, 2006b). Agnew’s (2003) interpretation is similar and downplays geoeconomics, just like Lacoste (1973, 2006). This author is not aware of any analysis of the war in feminist geopolitics, although there are some by feminist historians. Topmiller (2005) and Turner (2002) document women’s roles in the war, but are not concerned with the causes of the latter and fail to examine political economic factors. Cuordileone (2005) seeks to explain Vietnam in terms of gender, just like Dean (2002), but their interpretations remain incomplete, for reasons seen above. Finally, world-systems theory links wars to cyclical long waves, but those may be difficult to connect to the specificity of particular events, as in McCormick (1995), who presents such a framework in the introduction but then mostly drops it for the remainder of his book.
symptomatic of an antagonism between the two logics? Did it mean that geopolitical factors now dominated geoeconomic concerns? This would undermine the claims of radical political economy and bolster liberal explanations. However, it will be argued that although the antagonism was real, it should be interpreted as tactical rather than fundamental, *contra* Harvey, who claims that in the case of Vietnam, the two logics “frequently tug against each other, sometimes to the point of outright antagonism” (Harvey, 2003: 29–30). It will also be shown that the geoeconomic logic was prominent throughout the war and that geopolitical/credibility factors were crucial in determining how policy unfolded.

*Initial geoeconomic rationales*

Arguably the geoeconomic logic accounts for the initial American involvement in Vietnam, the geopolitical logic mostly following it during those early years. Indeed, expansion in South-east Asia was perceived as a solution to economic stagnation in Japan, France and Britain shortly after World War II, and this led the US to intervene to deny the region to the communist bloc and ensure that it would be aligned with the capitalist world and contribute to its economic needs. South-east Asia’s role in the recovery of Japan was crucial. In the immediate postwar years, American officials sought to restore Japan as “the workshop of Asia” and ensure it would replace China as the anti-Communist bulwark and economic hub of the Far East. As Eisenhower remarked, “If we don’t assist Japan, gentlemen, Japan is going Communist. Then instead of the Pacific being an American lake, believe me it is going to be a Communist lake” (quoted in Hearden, 2005: 50). The United States promoted a new economic regionalism that integrated Japan with Southeast Asia, as outlined in NSC-48/1:

> Japan can only maintain its present living standard on a self-supporting basis if it is able to secure a greater proportion of its needed food and raw material (principally cotton) imports from the Asiatic area, in which its natural markets lie... this will require a considerable increase in Southern Asiatic food and raw material exports (NSC, 1949).

Indochina and Southeast Asia were also important to foster economic development in Europe by providing it with markets and generate dollars to close their dollar gap. For instance, dollars generated by Malaya, a British colony, could be repatriated to the United Kingdom through a system of triangular trade (Rotter, 1984). Further, American assistance to Indochina reduced the drain on French funds and allowed France to use Marshall Plan aid for economic recovery at home and thereby deflect leftist attacks on its government — an important consideration, as it had one of the two largest Communist parties in Western Europe, along with Italy. But political instability in Asia was a serious obstacle to integration. There was thus a need to intervene militarily in the region to preserve it for the “free world,” as argued in NSC-48/5: “The loss of Indochina to communist control would greatly increase the threat to the other mainland states of Southeast Asia and to Indonesia... Therefore, the forces opposing the Viet Minh must rapidly increase their military strength” (NSC, 1951). Indeed, the strength of the Viet Minh grew over time, and the US correspondingly increased its involvement, up to full-scale intervention in 1965.

It is this geoeconomic logic to intervention which is neglected in conventional accounts explaining the American intervention through reference to “Cold War ideology” or the “strategic value” of Indochina’s territory in military and geopolitical terms. From a radical perspective, those explanations are not adequate as they beg the following questions: why is it that Indochina had such a strategic value for the “free world”? Why was it important to maintain
geopolitical control over its resources and territory? And why was an anti-communist ideology used to justify policy in Southeast Asia? The answers have much to do with geoeconomic factors that consisted in using the region for the economic recovery of important allies along capitalist lines. That is why Indochina became strategic and it was attempted to establish geopolitical/military control over it. It is in this sense that geoeconomics drove the United States into Vietnam.

The geopolitical and geoeconomic logics diverge

In the second half of the 1960s, the war began to take a serious toll on the American economy, which combined with the Vietminh’s Tet offensive in early 1968 triggered a shift in American elite and corporate attitudes towards the war, increasingly seen as intolerable. Whereas in late 1967, President Johnson’s “Wise Men” (a bipartisan group of statesmen, military officials and other elites close to the world of business and law) believed the campaign to be on the right path and fully supported it, Tet changed their views and they now argued that “we must begin to take steps to disengage” (Dean Acheson) and “work toward gradual disengagement” (Clark Clifford; Clifford, 1969: 613; Schmitz, 2005: 61, 145). In 1969, Fortune conducted a survey among American chief executives and concluded that “More than a quarter of the executives said they had converted from hawks to doves in the past year alone” (Louis, 1969: 93–94).

Therefore, the geoeconomic logic seemed to dictate withdrawal by 1969. However, President Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger pursued the war until 1973, expanding it to Cambodia and Laos. Does this point to a divergence, or perhaps an outright antagonism, between the geopolitical and geoeconomic logics? It is argued here that although there was a tactical antagonism, the geoeconomic logic should be regarded as predominant in shaping American policy in Indochina, although as the war progressed, issues of credibility, prestige and ideology definitely assumed greater importance in sustaining American involvement. First, the divergence between White House policy and the wishes of the corporate world needs to be put into perspective. There is a gap of about four years between the beginning of corporate calls for ending the war (1969) and actual withdrawal (March 1973). This is not so significant over two decades of involvement, strongly supported from the early years in the 1950s by business. From this perspective, it is difficult to claim that the Vietnam War is an example of “outright antagonsim” between the two logics of power. Moreover, whatever antagonism existed, Nixon did eventually withdraw from Vietnam, and the cost of the war dropped from $28.8 billion in 1969 to $9.3 billion in 1972, in line with the geoeconomic logic’s pressures and the wishes of American elites (Kolko, 1994: 347–348).

But the ability of business to shape state policy should not be exaggerated, as the geopolitical logic sometimes pushes policy in different directions than geoeconomics. Nixon and Kissinger’s goal in Vietnam was to achieve “peace with honor,” that is, to pull out without hurting American credibility and prestige (Herring, 1979). Failing in this task would have sent the wrong message to the world: if the Vietnamese resistance had succeeded in establishing a leftist government over a unified Vietnam, this could have encouraged nationalist movements elsewhere to challenge American hegemony and increase the communist bloc’s confidence in supporting them. In order to maintain American credibility, Nixon had recourse to his “madman” theory of increasing violence to appear irrational in enemies’ eyes (Hersh, 1983). This strategy was put into action several times, as in May—October and December 1972 when B-52 bombers attacked the North. Nixon (1972a) explained the bombing’s role in maintaining American credibility, showing that he paid considerable attention to the geopolitical logic:
If [North Vietnam] can invade another nation and succeed in conquering it, other countries will be encouraged to do exactly the same thing — in the Mideast, in Europe… But if, on the other hand, Communist aggression fails in Vietnam, it will be discouraged elsewhere.

And a few days later he declared that the credibility and respect of the United States were now the prime issues in policy toward Vietnam:

Let us imagine for a moment what the world would be like if the United States were not respected in the world. What would the world be like if friends of the United States throughout the non-Communist world lost confidence in the United States? … if the United States at this time leaves Vietnam and allows a Communist takeover, the office of President of the United States will lose respect, and I am not going to let that happen (Nixon, 1972b).

In short, although the geoeconomic logic eventually dictated that the United States end the war, this did not happen before the geopolitical logic could influence significantly the course of events. But what about the role of the geopolitical logic at the domestic level? Public opposition to the war reached a plurality for the first time in the fall of 1967 and then grew larger over time (Schmitz, 2005: 52). Until then, public opinion had been generally supportive of American involvement in Indochina, due to uncritical media reporting and government discourses that described the war as righteous (Herman & Chomsky, 2002). However, this official rationale could not be sustained indefinitely, and progressive groups became more critical of the war, culminating in major rallies in the early 1970s. Nixon reacted by withdrawing American troops and replacing them by Vietnamese ones (“Vietnamization”) and using air power to a greater extent. Towards the end of the war, congressional opposition increased and together with the evolving Watergate scandal, greatly constrained Nixon in his capacity to resist pulling out, as he was fighting for his political life and ultimately resigned in 1974 (Herring, 1979; Kolko, 1994). Therefore, domestic opposition to the war also played a role in moving policy toward withdrawal, along with the war’s negative domestic and international economic consequences for the corporate world and American elites.

In sum, an examination of American withdrawal from Vietnam underscores the significance of not only the geoeconomic logic behind political events, but also that of the geopolitical logic. The former mostly set the broad outlines of policy and the latter sometimes deviated from its general direction, but their opposition is more aptly interpreted as tactical, not fundamental, confirming the claims of radical scholarship. However, it needs to be emphasized that radical geopolitics should be usefully complemented by other approaches in geopolitics, resulting in richer accounts of political events. For example, representations produced by the Nixon White House in order to maintain credibility in the international arena may be analyzed through the lenses of critical geopolitics and the ways in which strategies to pull out of Vietnam unfolded may be assessed through Lacoste’s methodology. Also, insights into the militarization of civilians lives in Vietnam and the US, its impact on human security and the grassroots mobilization against the war can be provided by feminist analyses, just as the war can be aptly situated within larger geopolitical orders and time scales.

Conclusion

This paper presented a radical approach to geopolitics which was situated relative to current scholarship in the field. The main contribution radical geopolitics makes is, first, to
integrate political economy into its analyses; second, it seeks to address the “why” of policy, also neglected by current approaches; and third, it highlights the importance of geoconomics and of contextualized interpretations, with greater nuance than world-systems theory, studies of “geopolitical orders” and other mostly liberal methodologies. A critical discussion of Harvey’s two logics of power led to the conceptualization of a geoeconomic and geopolitical logic. The former refers to the determinants of policy which arise out of capitalism’s tendency to expand geographically. The latter refers either to officials of statecraft’s concerns for credibility and the symbolic meanings of their policies vis-à-vis other political groups and governments in the international arena, or to the constraints of popular opinion and elections within domestic political space. This theoretical framework was used to interpret the Vietnam War and comment on some of Harvey’s claims. It was argued that postwar American foreign policy has geoeconomic underpinnings, but that the geopolitical logic, and especially the need to maintain credibility, played a very significant role as well and should not be underestimated.

Radical geopolitics may also be applied to post-Cold War events. For instance, a brief sketch of how it could be used to interpret the current Iranian crisis may be suggested. Since the 1979 “Islamic revolution” which moved Tehran outside of Washington’s sphere of influence, the theocratic regime has been openly defiant of American hegemony. However, Iran remains an important economic player in the Middle East, and could establish fruitful trade relations with the United States, whilst its abundant energy reserves provide an obvious incentive to create economic partnerships (Keddie, 2006). Since the 1980s, American state officials have tightened economic sanctions against Iran, labeling it as a pariah state. Nevertheless, important sectors of the American business community have voiced opposition to such policies and called for increased trade with Iran (Cummings, 2007; Thomas, 2006). A most interesting example in this respect is Dick Cheney, who opposed sanctions at the time he worked for Halliburton, but now supports them in the White House. What accounts for this state of affairs?

First, American interest in Iran is shaped by geoeconomic logics. Iran currently has the world’s third and second largest reserves of oil and natural gas, respectively, making it an important player in the provision of energy for the world economy. As argued by Klare (2006), American control of those reserves would meet important goals, such as the possibility to regulate the world economy’s energy requirements and opening them up to American energy firms (see also Le Billon & El Khatib, 2004). But if this is so, why then do the interests of a significant number of American business groups who would rather engage with Iran economically clash with state managers’ decisions to endorse sanctions? This is where the geopolitical logic comes into play. It suggests that state officials are concerned with maintaining American credibility in the international arena and translates into an attempt to make it clear to Iran that challenging American hegemony is not acceptable. This started in 1979, and in recent years has taken the form enacting new rounds of sanctions to force Iran to suspend uranium enrichment. Although coalitions of business groups like USA*Engage (Cummings, 2007) have called for increased trade with Iran, state managers are concerned that this would damage American credibility in the long-term if Iran was to be fully included in the world community and suffer no negative consequences for its almost three-decade long defiance of American hegemony. For instance, a Washington-based European diplomat commented on the purpose of the sanctions,

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3 It should also be noted that relations with Israel play a role in this.
which he supports, explaining that “It’s not that you think hitting Bank Melli [an Iranian bank] will reduce the financing of proliferation,” rather, “It’s part of the shaming game”.  

Finally, domestically, about two-thirds of Americans are opposed to military action against Iran, as reported in recent opinion polls (see http://www.pollingreport.com/iran.htm for a survey, accessed 15 January 2008). This restrains the Bush administration in contemplating military strikes on Iran, although the overextended resources of the American military in Afghanistan and Iraq also act as an impediment. Once documents outlining the rationale behind policy-making become declassified, it will be easier to assess the extent to which public opinion influenced the White House’s decisions.

The fact that sanctions have been enacted over the wishes of some business groups does not mean that the geopolitical and geoeconomic logics display an “outright antagonism.” Indeed, Bush administration officials, whose close ties to the energy industry are well known, surely share the same ultimate goals as important segments of the American business community, namely, to ensure that Iran’s energy reserves are in the hands of friendly leaders and contribute to the smooth expansion of the world economy. However, as discussed above, although capitalists and state officials may share the same long-term goals, their short-term policy prescriptions may at times conflict. One reason for this mostly tactical antagonism is that, as in the current crisis with Iran, business interests often seek immediate profits in the energy sector, whereas state officials tend to pay greater attention to the long-term ramifications of policy-making, especially the need to maintain credibility by signifying to would-be challengers that defiance will be opposed.

In sum, by providing critical, political economic, and contextualized interpretations, the radical geopolitics sketched in this paper is promising. Further, although this paper has focused on American policy, the argument could certainly be extended to other cases exploring variations in the balance and tensions between geopolitical and geoeconomic logics.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank John Agnew, Robert Brenner, James Sidaway and three anonymous reviewers for helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.

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