What is Geopolitics and Why Does It Matter?

July 29, 2015

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Robert Strausz-Hupé

As we celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of the Foreign Policy Research Institute, this is an appropriate time to consider the intellectual foundations of our organization, how they inform our approach to the study of international relations, and what they have to tell us about the future of both the organization and the world in general. FPRI prides itself on basing its approach to
international affairs on the concept of Geopolitics, as developed and expressed by its founder, Ambassador Robert Strausz-Hupé. I have been giving a lot of thought to the meaning of geopolitics, the legacy of Strausz-Hupé, and what we at FPRI hope to accomplish in our efforts to encourage our particular approach to the study of international relations and current events. In our time together now, I hope to sketch some of the ideas that led to the creation of FPRI, and also to discuss what they have to tell us about the world of today and, to borrow a line from our founder, about the “balance of tomorrow.”

Let’s begin with the most basic question: what is “geopolitics” anyway? Today, representatives of FPRI would tell you that geopolitics is an approach to studying contemporary international affairs that is anchored in the study of history, geography and culture, or as my brilliant colleague Dr. James Kurth has put it, it is the study of the “realities and mentalities of the localities.”

That formulation emphasizes FPRI’s efforts to make international relations understandable through encouraging a deeper appreciation of longer-term forces. None of the crises that splash across today’s newsfeeds came out of nowhere. Even if they have specific contemporary sparks or special immediate resonance, they are rooted in the flow of history, spring from the legacies of local culture, and, of course, are embedded in the concrete reality of geography. There are deeper reasons why the contemporary world faces conflicts and rivalries between Russia and Ukraine, between Turkey and Syria, or Iran and Saudi Arabia, or even between the United States and China. Relatedly, there are reasons why we rarely discuss the possibility of tensions between Madagascar and New Zealand or Kazakhstan and Chile. Geopolitical analysis starts with a map but doesn’t end there. Through its approach to geopolitics, FPRI aims to illuminate and elucidate international affairs. Not to make the world appear simple, for it most certainly is not, but rather to provide insights that will allow educated citizens to grapple confidently with global complexities.

Such is FPRI’s current understanding of geopolitics. At the same time, however, the word geopolitics itself has a specific historical/cultural background that we should take a moment to understand if we hope to appreciate how it has developed as a concept and a school of thought, as well as how it relates to other efforts to understand international affairs.

The concept of geopolitics has its roots in the decades between 1880 and 1910. This was an era of “big think,” when scholars and popularizers, combining a sense of awe at the technological and social accomplishments of the century coming to an end with a deep sense of foreboding about the new century, attempted to draw conclusions from the broad sweep of world history in search of the “one thing that explained it all.” This was a great era for the development of world history and the search for systemic explanations, the atmosphere that gave us not only the further development of Marxism but also such gloomy works of transnational synthesis as Brooks Adams’s The Law of Civilization and Decay and eventually the Prussian Ur-Großvater of them all, Oswald Spengler’s Der Untergang des Abendlandes.
One such work of historical/strategic big think was Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan’s *The Influence of Sea Power on History* 1660-1783 (1890), which, as the title suggests, argued that the source of Britain’s rise to world power in the early modern world (and, by extension the potential key to dominance of his native America as a rising world power in the twentieth century) was control of the seas.\(^1\) Mahan’s navalism appealed as both description and prediction not only to the Anglo-Saxons but also to other naval enthusiasts such as Kaiser Wilhelm II, who allegedly had a copy placed on board every ship in his new navy, which he hoped would plow the seas and plant the seeds of a new German *Weltpolitik*.

For Mahan, a state’s ability to support and interdict commerce was crucial to success in the struggle for global dominance, and naval success explained how some powers had risen while others had failed. Even as his book remained a bestseller, however, other scholars questioned whether the emphasis on control of the sea, so important in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when overland travel was arduous and expensive, would still hold true in the era of the railroad. Thus, Mahan’s stab at “Big Think” inspired a counter-movement, embodied by Halford Mackinder’s

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January 1904 paper before the Royal Geographical Society, entitled “The Geographical Pivot of History.” Mackinder turned Mahan on his head. Accepting that sea power had indeed been important for the great powers of the past, Mackinder argued that industrialization and new technologies made the conquest and exploitation of the land more effective. Furthermore, since such developments could now occur far from the seacoast, geographical realities placed greater emphasis on control of the Eurasian “Heartland” as the main prize in international politics. Controlling the Heartland, with its enormous resources and industrial capacity, would, according to Mackinder, make an empire unbeatable, able to hold out against even the strongest sea power.

Mackinder’s ideas were not completely new, but his new synthesis provided the foundation for geopolitics as an area of study in the English-speaking world, with its emphasis on the influence of geography on history and politics. This effort to reduce strategy and history to one factor was in its own way as problematic as Mahan’s, and is definitely an artifact of its origins in the big think era. But that does not make it completely illogical, nor did its reductionism keep it from having profound practical consequences for the intellectual and political life of the decades that followed.

This idea that control of the “world island” would mean world power had special appeal for Germans in particular who had long dreamed of an empire built on Mitteleuropa. Prominent in those circles was Karl Haushofer, who had been developing such ideas on his own and whose lectures on Geopolitik (as he called it) enthralled a young Rudolf Hess. In the 1920s, Hess then established contact between his teacher Haushofer and his emerging political hero, Adolf Hitler. Haushofer’s development of Geopolitik merged with already existing ideas of the need for Lebensraum current among the proto-Nazi and nationalist movements of interwar Germany to lend a degree of intellectual cachet to an ideological and ultimately genocidal program.

It is not completely clear how much direct influence Haushofer had on the Nazi leadership outside of his connection to Hess. Nevertheless, his reputation did not go unnoticed by academics in Allied countries, who were (and are) wont to attribute political influence to academics abroad they wish they enjoyed at home. An appreciation of the appeal and the threat of Geopolitik motivated Austrian émigré, former stockbroker and aspiring strategic thinker Robert Strausz-Hupé to publish a critique of Haushofer in 1942. In Geopolitics: The Struggle for Space and Power, Strausz-Hupé pointed out the danger of Haushofer’s ideas, but accepted the importance of some of his premises.²

Strausz-Hupé argued that the Germans had developed/embraced Geopolitik as a new approach to international relations because they found congenial its focus on the importance of conquest and domination of an autarchic space rather than simply working within a European system. German desire for Eurasian expansion

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meshed with Mackinder’s suggestion that conquest of the Heartland would bring permanent global dominance. Strausz-Hupé saw the simplicity of the equation as both its strength and weakness—offering the clarity necessary to shape policy, but also an illusory sense of ultimate control over international affairs. In a critical jab at both Mackinder and his German fans, Strausz-Hupé asserted: “There is in Mackinder’s dogma just the kind of finality for which the Wagnerian mentality yearns.”

Even as he warned of the intellectual flaws and practical dangers posed by German Geopolitik, Strausz-Hupé also saw the world it envisioned as a plausible, threatening, and perhaps unavoidable reality. Charting the emergence of “an epoch of a new and global struggle for power,” he foresaw a “new world divided into power blocs dominated by the strongest surviving nations.” Power depended upon the control of space, since new technology and economic development required ever more space within which to operate. The result, Strausz-Hupé warned, was “there could be no stable order… there is only one certainty: everlasting struggle.”

Strausz-Hupé wrote his book hoping to spur an isolationist United States to understand the need for a global outlook, and to understand that what happened in the Heartland had consequences for the United States that could not be wished away. Thus, his work had both a descriptive and a prescriptive side. After describing the nature of geopolitics, he argued for an approach to international relations that assimilated these new geographical realities and understood the new power politics that did not respect the existing borders of states and nations. The United States, he argued, could not stand by while the Germans and Japanese seized control of Mackinder’s Heartland. Isolation might delay immediate conflict, but offered no long-term security. On the contrary, the United States needed to help organize a counter struggle, in concert with the British and French, to push back this threat of world domination before it was too late. “Even if geopolitics were simply the German blueprint for world conquest and nothing else, it would be worth studying,” he declared. “But it is far more than that. Granted in full all of its sinister aberrations, it remains a challenge to our conception of world policy.”

Indeed, by recognizing the contours of this new world, the United States and its Allies could turn the German conception back upon the Nazis. “With their vast space and power potential,” he concluded, “the United Nations have only to organize, by planned and concerted effort, their space and power to win the Second World War.”

Strausz-Hupé’s geographical focus, and his attempt to trace new laws in international relations, made it relatively easy for him to transition from World War

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II to the Cold War. The adversary had changed, but the contest was the same. From a geopolitical perspective, the vast Soviet Union posed at least as much of a threat to the United States and its allies as Nazi Germany ever could. Soviet control of Eurasia, and the possibility that such control could be extended further into Europe, therefore required an American response that would organize its part of the world, to meet and possibly roll back the Soviet challenge. As Strausz-Hupé and his colleagues put it in one of FPRI’s first major publications, the United States had to prepare itself for a “protracted conflict” with the Soviets extending across the globe and over a long-term unforeseeable future, until a new global balance could be established.7

Strausz-Hupé made it his life’s work to guarantee that the United States would not lose sight of its new international role. His appointment to the political science department at the University of Pennsylvania, and eventually the founding of FPRI in 1955, depended upon the contacts and support he could draw from those who shared his conviction that the new world required a sustained American commitment to build and lead an Atlantic Community in that protracted conflict.8

This effort was not uncontroversial, especially as disagreements over U.S. foreign policy intensified in the 1960s, highlighted by the debate over the Vietnam War. By the time these differences led FPRI and the University of Pennsylvania to sever their formal relationship in 1970 both Strausz-Hupé and FPRI were criticized for an overly hawkish and pessimistic approach to world affairs. Some critics blamed the geopolitical focus itself for this tendency, as its assumptions about protracted conflict perpetuated the idea that peace was an illusion and conflict a constant.9

Such criticisms are not unfamiliar today either, though over the years FPRI has striven to encourage clear-eyed, well-researched, and multi-layered analyses of the world.

The parallel biographies of Geopolitics and Strausz-Hupé are fascinating subjects even when viewed in isolation. The larger question however, is what use we make of geopolitics, or more broadly, what the point of any intellectual approach to international politics should be. It is natural for those who hope to influence policy to want to construct intellectual frameworks that will not merely describe the past or the present, but offer models for the future. As Christopher Fettweis recently wrote in Orbis, a worthwhile theory must be descriptive, prescriptive, and predictive to have real value.10 But can we truly expect any model to do all of those things equally well?

Here we venture into dangerous territory, a bloody crossroads more strewn with victims and marked by conflict than any between states—the conflict between historians and political scientists over control of the intellectual high ground in the

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study of international relations. Historians like to claim their emphasis on the specific and the particular makes them better able to describe the world as it has been, and by extension, the world as it is and is likely to be. Through the collection and analysis of specific examples, historians emphasize complexity and the particular. Political scientists, however, often dismiss the historical fixation on the specific and particular as dangerously antiquarian and a barrier to effective analysis. For them, historical facts are of value not in themselves but primarily as the building blocks of theoretical models.

There are dangers in the extreme version of both approaches. Historians can become hypnotized by the particular and become unable to draw larger conclusions. The mere accumulation of information, however, followed by the claim that nothing is exactly like anything else, and thus no comparisons are possible, helps no one. It threatens to create vast and unwieldy projects like the work of old Mr. Causabon in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*, whose compendium of world mythologies, not only consumed his own life but also threatened that of his long-suffering widow, Dorothea.

Political scientists, for their part, are susceptible to the Procrustean temptation, where the desire to justify a theoretical argument leads them to trim this or that piece off of historical examples so that things better fit into a pre-existing analytical framework, just as the ancient hermit Procrustes lured travelers to relax on his bed that would fit every man.

It is long past time for peace to prevail in this long-running frozen conflict.

What all those who want to understand the contemporary world need is an approach that emphasizes both the variety of human experience and the natural tendencies of human action. This would be a historically informed theory that seeks to explain political action while remaining aware of the uncertainties of the future. What we need, both in our own approaches and in the theories that we develop from them, is a sense of humility, and recognition of limits.

Geopolitics, as articulated by Strausz-Hupé and as practiced by FPRI, reflects an initial effort at such a synthesis. Through the careful balancing of the material and intellectual realities of geography and history and the larger verities of human nature, we can understand how the world works in ways that will enrich us all.

Strausz-Hupé, whose personal background and his varied professional career provided plenty of reasons to be skeptical about the inevitability of progress or the predictability of human events, was realistic, but he was not necessarily a realist, as that concept is understood in the formal study of international relations. This is worth noting, since some terms are thrown around in the public with little understanding of their intellectual roots or implications. This is especially true of Realism—or more appropriately, Neo-realism, an international relations theory most

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closely connected to the work of the legendary Kenneth Waltz, and continued to be advanced by intellectual heirs such as John Mearsheimer and Steven Walt. Realism emphasizes the competition between states as the primary actors within an anarchic international system and their constant search for power and advantage.\textsuperscript{12} Even though its codification as a school of thought is a product of the specializing twentieth century, realism can trace its roots to a long tradition of practical and cynical statesmen who focused on advancing the interests of their particular realms, from Cardinal Richelieu’s focus on French raison d’état to Otto von Bismarck’s Realpolitik with its references to “blood and iron.”

Realism’s focus on power and system-level analyses often means that it emphasizes the commonalities between sovereign states across space and time, allowing for comparisons of case studies that allow for better modeling. As a result, realists tend to treat the domestic arrangements of particular states, or the ideologies they claim to defend, as more or less dishonest fig leaves for their “real” interests. Too much emphasis on such ideals, realists warn, can obscure both the making of foreign policy and proper analysis of it. George Kennan, for example, an early realist theorist, placed himself in this camp in his classic Walgreen Lectures of 1950, where he postulated that the primary problem with American foreign policy was in its naïve emphasis on moralism and legalism.\textsuperscript{13}

Realism can feed a special sort of contempt for domestic political interests. Especially when dealing with democratic states, where foreign policy is subject to (admittedly often uninformed) political debate and can be influenced by short-term tactical considerations as much as any deeply conceived grand strategy, realists can fall into the trap of imagining that they are the only rational actors. They also flirt with the dangerous assumption that alternative approaches to international problems advanced by domestic interests are inherently corrupt or self-interested as well as unrealistic.

Kennan himself ran into this problem in his later years, when he shocked readers by revealing himself to be more deeply cynical about the United States and democracy in general than anyone had expected.\textsuperscript{14} Kennan’s realism reinforced his skepticism about the values and society of the American republic he had worked to defend. In the case of Mearsheimer and Walt, who have produced so much brilliant analysis of world affairs, it can lead to the disproportionate result of raining anathemas upon domestic American pressure groups such as the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), who act within a vibrant democratic debate but stand accused of blinding the United States to its real interests, while offering bland


\textsuperscript{13} George F. Kennan, American Diplomacy, 1900-1950 (New York: Mentor, 1952, paperback ed.).

abstract justifications for the actions of an authoritarian oligarch such as Vladimir Putin, whose behavior is considered perfectly rational within a realist framework.\textsuperscript{15}

As the name suggests, realism remains a favorite posture among those who consider themselves hard-nosed enough to see the world as it is and who wish to distinguish themselves from their less rational fellow humans, even if many pundits who claim the mantle have less than a nodding acquaintance with its intellectual foundations. But even realism has its blinders, and can find its abstractions distract from real world factors. An emphasis on the sovereignty and independence of states not only leaves discussions of the relative merits of their domestic arrangements out of the equation, but also can be blind to the very different motivations behind state activity. Although they are all sovereign states, there are significant differences between Richelieu’s France and, say, Nazi Germany, or even the United States of Barack Obama. Each state may indeed be pursuing power, but definitions of power and appreciations of the practical and intellectual limits of power are not always identical across space and time.

Strausz-Hupé foresaw such problems with theories that reduced diplomacy and politics to the pursuit of power as he developed his approach to geopolitics, and this shaped his approach to the balance of history and political analysis. In his 1956 book-length essay \textit{Power and Community}, Strausz-Hupé questioned whether power in the abstract made sense as an organizing principle for either intellectual study or political practice. He concluded that power only makes sense within the larger context of a society’s principles and intentions. To assume otherwise, or to hope to make understanding of complexities of politics easier by focusing on power in itself, was an example of the “single-factor fallacy”: whenever power is removed from the context of legitimate authorities—authorities which people accept as divinely ordained or stemming from a freely entered contract—it cannot effect social change. It cannot build. It cannot secure its own foundations. It can only destroy and must ultimately destroy itself.”\textsuperscript{16} According to Strausz-Hupé, developing insights that have motivated FPRI scholars in the decades since, power’s significance lies in what one does with it, and in the ideas that animate social action. Strausz-Hupé rejected philosophies that “profess to shun metaphysics, that is to take ‘things as they are,’ …and to substitute ‘know how’ for philosophical insight.” To place too much emphasis on efficiency “is the supreme boast of totalitarianism”; to “substitute know how—skill in the management of men and things—for truth is to strip human life of dignity and meaning.” Modern societies need technological competence, just as societies need to understand the workings of power. “But no amount of technical competence can


take the place of that element which raises an assembly of men and tools to the dignity of the community. This element is moral solidarity. The quest for community is the quest for spiritual values, the ageless ideas of all men and all cultures” and it is “futile, if not pernicious, to apply scientific methods which are not informed and guided by an encompassing moral vision.”

Strausz-Hupé recognized the centrality of states in the current international system, but was skeptical about the value of nation-states as the pinnacle of political organization. In the context of the Cold War, Strausz-Hupé argued that power only made sense as a “confederal” project, in which the states of the West overcame national divisions and worked together to defend common values. “The creative force of nationalism has been exhausted for a long time,” he wrote in a famous essay for the inaugural issue of Orbis on “The Balance of Tomorrow.” In its provocation of conflict, nationalism was “the greatest retrogressive force of this century.” Instead, he argued for the establishment of a true Western community of nations, led by the United States. As he concluded Power and Community: “In this age, the counsels of national interest and national security are false counsels. For Western nations, the use of force is justified to no other purpose than the defense of human liberty. The use of force for any other purpose is a craven blasphemy. Human Liberty is the indivisible possession of all Western people. None can defend it behind national frontiers. None can abridge it without abridging it everywhere. The defense of freedom is thus a fraternal, a federative enterprise. That enterprise confers justice and nobility upon the uses of power.”

Strausz-Hupé’s notion of the defense of freedom being a federative enterprise reflected his belief in the Cold War as a protracted conflict, which required the United States to overcome its allergies against alliances to lead the world over the long term. Furthermore, as an extension of his vision for an American-led world order, Strausz-Hupé saw a great value in European integration. Unlike many contemporary skeptics—including many of today’s soi-disant Realists—who believe that recognition of power politics means a rejection of the European idea, Strausz-Hupé saw them as natural complements. He expressed both his hope and his confidence that global realities would “compel the rulers of the one-time Great Powers of Western Europe to exchange their precarious claim to independent policies for a general European policy.” An integrated Europe was “most consistent with the American ideal, American declaratory policy, and American security.” Such a Europe “would fill a strategic vacuum,” and would also provide the United States with an economically and politically strong partner in the world. This is very far from the ostentatiously amoral realism of academic and journalistic theorists, who view culture as a sideshow and domestic politics as a distraction from world realities.

17 Strausz-Hupé, Power and Community, pp. 79-81.
19 Strausz-Hupé, Power and Community, pp. 127-128.
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His efforts to link history and culture to the study of power make geopolitics as developed by Strausz-Hupé and his colleagues at FPRI rather different from the Realism practiced elsewhere. From his writings we can learn that simply attributing all explanations to power may be a beginning but is far from the end of our understanding of the international arena. Context matters, and that means those who want to understand the world need to put in the effort to understand the context—cultural and social as well as political, linguistic as well as economic.

What does all this mean for us as we consider concrete cases?

Let’s look at contemporary Ukraine, a conflict raging precisely in the middle of Mackinder’s Heartland. From a purely Realist perspective, current Russian policy in the region makes perfect sense. A great power always wants to extend its sphere of influence. One should therefore not be surprised about Russia’s actions, nor should one expect that anyone could do much about it. Indeed, the Realist argument has consistently been that the United States should focus, as a great power, on its relationship with Russia as another great power, which means that the interests and desires of smaller states in the region, from Poland or the Baltic Republics to Ukraine and Georgia, are less significant than that great power relationship, and should not be allowed to get in the way. For that reason, the expansion of NATO, even if it was at least as much the result of Eastern European pull as of American push, was always a bad idea. Similarly, any reservations about the nature of the Russian state, or the kind of states it hopes to develop along its periphery, are at best irrelevant distractions from the realities of power.

This Realist interpretation is not necessarily inaccurate, but it is incomplete. It offers parsimony, which is ideal for any respectable theory, but lacks depth. A geopolitical/FPRI perspective would include an awareness of the historical tensions between Russia and Ukraine (not to mention among their neighbors), but would also consider how the type of regime in Moscow shapes Russian assessment of the international system. A repressive and oligarchic regime, for example, feels threatened by the expansion of the EU in ways that a confident and democratic regime would not. A richer approach should also consider the nature of American commitments within the context of broader American intentions, including the desire to see the development of vibrant free societies. If power only has significance when it is related to a society’s highest aspirations, then no responsible analyst should try to make decisions about its exercise by factoring those aspirations out of the equation. It may very well be that the policy prescriptions would be similar no matter how one gets there, but decisions based on a richer understanding of the situation are both intellectually preferable and politically more sensible.

The discussion of spheres of influence also gets us back to the issue of geography, which plays a complicated role in the FPRI conception of geopolitics. Of course it is an essential component. FPRI and its scholars are often in the forefront whenever anyone decries the weaknesses of contemporary understanding and teaching of geography, or when urging reflection upon its crucial role in international
relations. To say that geography is important, however, is not to say that it is everything, and none of FPRI’s authors on the subject would argue otherwise. The danger with reducing geopolitics to geography is the temptation to assume permanence and inevitability. After all, outside of the Chicago River made to flow backwards by the Army Corps of Engineers to build the sanitary canal, and the reclamation of land from the North Sea by determined Dutch, there have been few examples of societies being able to reverse the geography of their states in any substantial way. But there are many examples, from the railroad to the jet engine to the Internet, in which human ingenuity has reduced the significance of physical distance. It is wise to be humble in the face of the physical limitations the world places before us. Nevertheless, if we believe we can never change the board upon which we play, we run the risk of surrendering to pessimism and thus undermine our ability to develop creative approaches to policy at all.

No doubt, an appreciation of geographical realities and their significance is important to help us appreciate the looming possibility of conflict—think of the Straits of Hormuz or Malacca, or the crowded South China Sea, or even access to the oil and gas fields of the Bakken shale, each of which in their own way can be the source of significant conflict. But as with a single focus on the abstract notion of power, a focus on the simple reality of geography leaves out important consideration about the nature of the states in question, their relations with each other and the possibilities they present. Oil fields may be valuable potential sources of conflict, for example, but no one expects North Dakota and Saskatchewan to go to war with each other over it anytime soon.

The point here is not that power relationships are irrelevant, or that geography doesn’t matter. Far from it. Rather, it is to remember that rushing to reduce the factors to study limits our understanding. When we study international relations we must resist a reductionism that either tries to isolate the one factor that will explain everything, or which throws up its hands at understanding anything.

The greatest constants in international affairs are of course human folly and weakness. But the nature of those constants and their actual impact on human life changes over time and space. Human beings are rather inventive in finding things to be wrong about. And they do occasionally (very occasionally) get things right. As frustrating and sometimes depressing as human life can be, we should not give up the effort to understand our surroundings, or to try to forecast and build a better future. Perhaps there is no purpose in human activity, or that purpose is so abstract and banal—the search for power and dominance—that it offers no inspiration or meaning. I certainly hope not, and do not think an approach to studying international relations that relied on such a purely nihilist vision of human purpose can lead us to greater understanding. We can do better.


22 This is largely the argument of Fettweis, “Heartlands and Chessboards,” which reductively critiques the reductionism of geopolitics by in turn reducing geopolitics to geography.
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Human beings are certainly weak and awful enough that there are plenty of reasons to despair. But considering the imagination and creativity that has overcome so many limitations in the history of mankind, that has crossed the seas that Mahan considered essential and the mountains and rivers of Mackinder’s Heartland, any approach to international relations that suggests permanence or inevitability is refuted by our own human experiences.

Furthermore, we should not hope that any particular approach to analyzing international affairs could relieve us from the responsibility to think about specific circumstances. As H. L. Mencken famously wrote, “Explanations exist; they have existed for all time; there is always a well-known solution to every human problem—neat, plausible, and wrong.” The challenge is to overcome the desire for the quick, neat, plausible, and wrong response, and seek understanding instead.

This is all why FPRI considers its contribution to geopolitics to be expressed in the effort to instruct and discuss rather than simply categorize and assert. Everything we do, from our sponsorship of research projects to our history institutes for teachers, aims to help our members and the general public appreciate the complexity of the world which will then help them interpret what they see and act accordingly.

Robert Strausz-Hupé was a practical thinker. His initial warnings about the threat posed by Nazi Geopolitik, and his sober warnings about the nature of the protracted conflict the West would face with the Soviets clearly reflect that. But he was also a cultured man, who understood and valued the beauty of human existence, as one would expect from a Viennese.23 He understood culture as “vital belief” that gives meaning to human physical accomplishments. “Tools and forms serve man to attain his purpose on earth, a purpose that is not in these objects themselves nor in their making but in the fulfillment of the cultural mission.”24

FPRI has long used as its tagline Strauz-Hupé’s comment, “A Nation must think before it acts.” Thinking must come before decisions, and decisions before actions. The value of any approach lies not with how well it pre-determines actions, but rather in how well it trains the mind to be able to process the welter of information that bombards any responsible citizen.

There are no magic formulas that guarantee wisdom or success. Any approach to international relations is a tool. Any tool is only as good or bad as the person who wields it, and a wise person understands that possessing a variety of tools is better than relying on only one. Geography, history, and culture are some of the tools FPRI combines in its approach to geopolitics. Our relative success in how we use those tools has brought us together as a community of scholars and learners. It has brought us together tonight, and, we hope, will bind us together into the future.

Let us work together to learn and understand, to think before we act. We must begin by understanding the world as it is and as it has been, before we can hope to build the world we want to see.