

George Friedman's Thoughts: Geopolitical Determinism

by George Friedman - November 6, 2019

Having written a great deal on space and enchantment, it is time to come down to earth. I want to return to the central thesis of geopolitics as I practice it: the idea of geopolitical determinism. I differ from other people who write on geopolitics in two senses. While I regard geography as a fundamental determinant in human behavior, I don't regard it as being the sole determinant.

For me, Greek philosophy is pivotal in defining what it means to be human. I am not sure that Plato or Aristotle could have written in any place but Greece, or at any time other than they did. But regardless of that question, we are all, in the global civilization that has emerged, shaped to some extent by them as by the highest moments of all civilization. But this could not have come about without the European imposition of a global system on the world, so we are back to geopolitics. My point here is that geopolitics is far more complex and subtle than simply the physical reality of the globe, but also that the subtlety of the world constantly circles back to that physical reality.

More controversial is that I'm a determinist. I do not believe that we are shaped merely by mountains and deserts, but it is evident to me that each of us is shaped by both place and the forces emanating from place. In the simplest example, the life of an Indian born in the slums of Mumbai is profoundly different from the life of an American born in a wealthy Dallas suburb like Highland Park. Both are constrained. The Indian is not likely to become a partner at a private equity fund. The Highland Parker is not likely to become a petty thief. The former must resort to his or other related modes of living, and everything he knows, including the culture of his slum, leads him there. Similarly, the Highland Parker is going to live a very different life. (Of course, since thievery is part of the human condition, he may become a thief – but at a far more exalted level.)

The existence of Mumbai's slums is shaped by the land, the climate, the surplus of people and the minimal existence of resources. All of this places constraints on the life of someone born there. The existence of Highland Park is shaped by the vastness and relative underpopulation of Texas, the generous flow of oil, and the investments made in Texas infrastructure and higher education as a result of that oil. Put those conditions and wealth in Mumbai rather than Texas, and while the two people might not change places, they would each likely have different lives. The very wealthy like to say that you are what you make yourself. Even that isn't true, since you are surrounded not only by

wealth but cultural expectations that grow from it. An individual might escape his fate, but the statistical likelihood of divergence is limited. The sheaf of practical policies might expand or contract, but life is lived within that sheaf.

The place in which you are born makes it possible to escape. As I write this, I am in Dubai and am surrounded by an Indian underclass made up of people who clean hotel rooms and drive visitors to and from the airport. If anyone from Highland Park is here, then he is likely the recipient of these Indians' services, as I am. I don't know where they come from, but if it's not from the slums, then it's likely near them. The point is that even when you change your place in the world, you change it within the constraints of who you are.

Andre Malraux, the French writer (and forgive me if I repeat myself, but I value this very much), said that men leave their countries in very national ways. The American expatriate who has learned perfect Bulgarian is still an American expatriate living in Bulgaria. You can recognize an American student on their junior year abroad, with Columbia University emblazoned on their souls. I was born in Hungary, and when I go back to Hungary, I shock my wife with how quickly I become Hungarian even though I left as an infant. Hungarians, on the other hand, know by whatever sense that I am American, and therefore that I should be sold a fake diamond.

The degree to which our lives and our souls are shaped by where we were born and where we live is astonishing. I lived in a neighborhood in the Bronx and went on to get a doctorate. The Puerto Ricans with whom I lived and fought for the most part had no conception of the value of a doctorate and no desire to have one. I lacked their understanding of the street but they had other needs, which I couldn't fathom. It's not obvious which was more important. But my parents were shaped by the first half of the 20th century, by World War II and by the Holocaust. The Puerto Ricans were shaped by their families' backgrounds, often impoverished, on a tropical island. Their imaginations and appetites were different from the moment of birth, and so I went one way and they another, and I could imagine no other path – with important exceptions on all sides. But we were both fleeing lives that we couldn't bear, and fled them in very different ways.

The idea that place does not create constraints and imperatives that few can overcome is, I think, naive. This is the foundation of determinism, and we have no trouble imagining this in the markets. In economics, the assumption is that you predict the appetite for or revulsion of good or bad stocks. I get endless emails from advisers who promise to make me wealthy (side note – if someone can amass vast wealth, why is he hustling me for few bucks?). The assumption is that markets have a degree of predictability. This is true even of market disruption. Amazon founder Jeff Bezos

understood what the internet would do, and he aligned himself with what was inevitable.

Our lives are filled with forecasts. When you step off the sidewalk with a “walk” light, you are forecasting that the car approaching will stop. When you choose your profession, you are forecasting that it will serve your needs. When you marry your spouse, you do so based on expectations of happiness. That these may not occur does not change the fact that forecasting is inextricably bound up with human existence.

The argument I am making is twofold. First, that it is impossible to avoid forecasting but that the greater the risk and reward, the more your forecast must be refined. Second, since the behavior of nation-states can give you the greatest reward or risk, forecasting the behavior of nations is indispensable, and refining the forecast into a reliable guide is indispensable.

It seems impossible. But for the most part, the oncoming car stops at the light. Your reading of the situation is correct. In the same way, I will argue that forecasting how nations will behave is possible, if you begin with an understanding of how the forces of that nation define how individuals will behave. Geographic determinism can be a form of superficial vulgarity. But if it is part of a general understanding of the manner in which humans see the world and their own souls, then predicting the movement of 330 million people becomes possible. In predicting what the United States will do, you must begin with the fact that Americans are human, that they differ from other humans based on where they are, and that like all humans, they experience imperatives and constraints the same way. Doing this allows you to predict the direction a nation will take both internally and toward other nations.

This is the foundation of Geopolitical Futures and what I am doing. It is imperfect, but all things are. It is not simplistic modeling based on geography. It is an attempt to consider how the geography of Greece forged the Greeks, how the Greeks created an extraordinary moment in human thought, and how they gave way to Rome.

You can predict, on the whole and with exceptions, the trajectory of someone’s life by where he was born and to whom he was born. You can describe what he will believe, who he will love, and who he will hate. And taking them together, you can see them crack under pressure, or stand astride their enemies. It may not be perfect, but life is far from random.

I will go from Dubai to Calgary to New York and Istanbul. I am sure there is a common thread that makes this necessary, and traces back to the Magyar tribes east of the Carpathians. I will find it.

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