



Posted on Tue, Sep. 07, 2004

To understand radicalism, we must know geography

By David J. Keeling

A growing and dangerous paradox of globalization is the tension between an ever-shrinking and integrated economic world and an increasingly fragmented cultural and political world.

The number of sovereign states has grown from 56 at the height of European imperialism in 1900 to nearly 200 today, and the list continues to grow.

There are also nearly 5,000 discrete culture groups, many of whom yearn for a distinct political or national identity. In recent years, the Basques, Kurds, Palestinians, Tamils, Chechnyans, and Timorese all have gained notoriety for pursuing a separatist or nationalist agenda that has resulted in bloody conflict or spurred terrorist acts.

Woodrow Wilson's concept of the "right to self-determination" continues to plague those who have a vision of a harmonious world bound together by free trade, open borders and Western democratic ideals.

The American-led war against terrorists is a stark reminder that radical nationalism and terrorism are fast becoming hallmarks of a globalized yet fragmented world.

Control and influence over territory and resources, both practically and symbolically, have never been more important. Tensions still exist between friendly states over territory claimed long ago or over land subject to competing interests.

Witness the diplomatic fuss between Spain and Britain over Gibraltar's celebration of 300 years of British rule, or the ongoing tensions between China, Vietnam and the Philippines over control of the Spratley Islands in the South China Sea. And tensions between Greece and Turkey over tiny uninhabited islands in the Aegean Sea have simmered for decades.

Old hatreds die hard, and new hatreds can explode quickly into violence.

The United States has long failed to understand the importance of attachment to territory and identity when shaping its geopolitical policies. Witness the outcomes of strategies applied in Vietnam, Nicaragua, Yugoslavia, Iran, Afghanistan and now Iraq.

History tells us that geography matters today more than ever because disparate people from profoundly different cultures are interacting in ways that position territory, resources and cultural identity at the very heart of nationalistic struggles.

Politicians, policy-makers and pundits in the post-9/11 environment continue to gloss over or ignore completely the root causes of radical nationalism and terrorism: unequal economic, social and political conditions.

Viewing the world as an ever-shrinking, homogenous, integrated economic space, where political boundaries are much less important than trade relationships, is problematic. Indeed, we are far from the demise of the nation-state or the elimination of geography as a barrier to globalization. Rather, many national borders continue to harden.

The 1,950-mile U.S.-Mexico border, for example, has become the most militarized boundary on Earth between two democracies, a visceral faultline between developing and developed nations.

Today's terrorists are developing a deep and intense hatred of U.S. political influence in the Middle East and elsewhere, of Western culture's sweep across the globe and of neo-imperialistic policies that seem to value resources, such as oil, more than people.

Tomorrow's radical nationalists are being shaped ideologically by today's terrorists, and today's radical nationalists are nurturing tomorrow's terrorists.

There can be little disagreement that those who commit atrocities against innocents must be brought to justice, either through international war crimes tribunals or national courts of justice.

However, there also should be little disagreement that our increasingly fragmented world desperately needs policies that recognize the root causes of radicalism and terrorism.

To do that, we must understand its geography.

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