

# Geopolitics: Scope And Limitations

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Politics among nations has been occurring since ancient times. Ever since one government needed to interact with another—whether because of a boundary dispute, rival claims to a resource, or fear of a powerful neighbor—some kind of intergovernmental relations have sought means to forge solutions for mutual benefit. These relations take various forms: exchanging diplomats, signing treaties, making alliances, voicing accusations and threats, or perhaps dispatching a hostile army or navy.

Philosophers have been studying such relations for many centuries. For instance, Plato's *Republic* is his vision of the perfect society and in part deals with how rulers should conduct the affairs of state. Scholars of every major empire and nation have weighed in on the subject, from Sun Tzu's *Art of War* to Machiavelli's *The Prince* and Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations*. Today, a steady stream of books and papers on foreign policy flows from the minds of pundits, politicians, and academics the world over.

While there are many theories of international relations, perhaps the most pragmatic and even scientific is what is known as *geopolitics*. The central idea of geopolitics is that geography—along with demography and economics—is the determining factor of any nation's relations. In other words, *where* a nation is, along with the composition of its population and its natural resources, will indicate how it will act and react on the world stage. In some cases, a nation will have no choice but to behave in a certain way simply because of its location on the globe.

Japan is a prime example of geopolitical reality. It is a mountainous island nation with a relatively large, well-educated population and a high standard of living. However, it is resource-poor, especially in mineral resources that form the basis of its high-tech industries. To feed and supply its people, then, it must rely on other nations to provide a great deal of food and resources.

Japan thus has two alternatives: It must either use force to take what it needs or trade peacefully with its neighbors. Imperial Japan tried the former method early in the twentieth century and ultimately failed, seeing two of its large cities evaporated by atomic weapons. Democratic Japan since World War II has been far more successful in employing peaceful trade. While the pendulum could swing back to militarism, it is far more likely that Japan's foreign policy decisions will continue to favor peaceful trade as long as it remains a viable means of prosperity. This is especially true due to its security guarantees with the United States and its formidable navy.

Biblically, the land of Israel is another example of practical geopolitics. In essence, it stands at the center of the world. The great Western civilizations of the past—Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome—ranged about it, and in order to expand their territories, these empires had to cross the narrow land-bridge of the land of Canaan. There, they would encounter the descendants of Israel.

Israel's history is in many ways a record of the rise and fall of these empires and their impact on God's people. When the dominant empire of the time was weak, Israel could strengthen itself and expand, but when the empire was strong, Israel usually suffered humiliating defeat and subjugation. In their carnality, many Israelite kings were trapped by geopolitics to reveal their real loyalties. God

used this ebb and flow of international power to great effect in leaving good and bad examples of faithfulness for us.

Geopolitics even constrains a global superpower like the current United States. Despite having an overwhelmingly powerful military by several orders of magnitude, it can only project its power along the lines of its geopolitical advantages. As alluded to earlier, the United States is primarily a sea power—even its vaunted air power is dependent on the reach of its naval strength. This means that long-term military actions far from American shores pose a significant problem for shapers of U.S. foreign policy.

The geopolitical limitations of this became apparent in the Iraq War in 2003. American firepower made quick work of the Iraqi army and air force, but the subsequent Iraqi insurgency revealed the Achilles' heel of U.S. power. It was terribly effective at invasion but embarrassingly unprepared as an occupying force. Ultimately, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld lost his job due to miscalculating the geopolitics of invading a turbulent Middle Eastern nation like Iraq from 6,200 miles away.

Such geopolitical constraints help to predict the foreign policies of different administrations. In effect, policy differences will be minor from one President to another because the nation's geography, demography, and economy are either fixed or vary only marginally. In reality, basic American foreign policy has changed little since the Truman administration, no matter which political party happened to control the Oval Office.

Every Chief Executive is forced by geopolitical reality and entrenched State Department policies to protect and expand American power throughout the world against the same rogues' gallery of nations. Hence, only so much leeway to act exists, and it is usually revealed, not in policy, but in a President's resolve, as can be seen in the stark disparity between Jimmy Carter's pacifism and Ronald Reagan's intransigence. As this example indicates, a President's personality can make a huge difference.

Geopolitics, then, gives us a starting template to view the world and to attempt to predict the actions of nations. It is not perfect, and exceptional personalities can arise to shake the assumptions of even the most experienced observers. True Christians await the rise of just such a dominating and paradigm-shifting individual in the Beast (Revelation 13:1-10; 17:9-17). We can be certain that he will turn today's geopolitics on its head.