

2008

Geopolitics and the Great Powers in the Twenty-first Century: Multipolarity and the Revolution in Strategic Perspective

Stephen B. Smith

C. Dale Walton

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Smith, Stephen B. and Walton, C. Dale (2008) "Geopolitics and the Great Powers in the Twenty-first Century: Multipolarity and the Revolution in Strategic Perspective," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 61 : No. 2 , Article 16.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol61/iss2/16>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

subs rather than aircraft carriers the “centerpiece” of its development.

Contributors are generally in agreement that “hard” evidence about what the PRC is developing is still rather spotty. Where evidence is solid the news is bracing, though hardly surprising. It suggests that the PLAN is rapidly building and buying naval capabilities with the concerted aim of deterring the United States—particularly from action in the waters surrounding Taiwan—and, in combat, of significantly damaging American assets. Although that story pertains to far more than the proliferation of nuclear submarines, the book explains how integral China’s evolving undersea capabilities are to that mission. Questions remain, though, about whether the PRC also intends its submarines to be deployed as part of a strategic retaliatory force—a far more menacing, though equally unsurprising, ambition.

Threaded throughout this volume is a debate about what Beijing’s increasingly assertive maritime doctrine means for the United States. While some contributors make evident the colossal technical and operational obstacles that the PLAN still faces in mastering the arts of submarine warfare, others caution against complacency. Andrew Erickson and Lyle Goldstein assert that Beijing’s program to develop nuclear submarines may offer “one of the best single indicators of whether or not China has ambitions to become a genuine global military power.” Rear Admiral Michael McDevitt, U.S. Navy (Ret.), observes that although the PRC is taking considerable strides toward the implementation of a more robust maritime strategy and appears to have the economic resources to continue along that path,

the United States also has the resources to maintain its formidable advantages over an evolving PLAN, if Washington remains determined to use them for that purpose.

ALAN WACHMAN
Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy
Tufts University



Walton, C. Dale. *Geopolitics and the Great Powers in the Twenty-first Century: Multipolarity and the Revolution in Strategic Perspective*. New York: Routledge, 2007. 160pp. \$125

C. Dale Walton, PhD, is a lecturer at the University of Reading, in the United Kingdom, specializing in strategic studies and foreign policy.

Over the past half-century the field of geopolitical studies has been void of scholarly works at the (Sir Halford) Mackinder and (Nicholas) Spykman level of inquiry. However, Walton’s *Geopolitics and the Great Powers in the Twenty-first Century* is a work of such foresight and ambition that it just might stand in such company. Unlike most of his fellow classical realists, who tend to limit their prescriptive endeavors to sensible warnings—or at best general policy recommendations—Walton pushes the prescriptive and predictive potential of history to its limit (in some cases possibly over the limit) as he uses history to formulate specific strategic guidelines for the making of policy in the future. Walton effectively merges the lessons from the past with the post-Cold War political, demographic, technological, and cultural patterns to explain the most likely geopolitical context of the near future.

Walton's message is quite simple: although it is hard to predict the future, it is possible to locate some trends that will heavily shape the future environment of international politics and that, combined with what we know about the past, will present useful criteria on what we should expect to witness in the future. His warning is also clear that security communities that "understand, accept, and encourage" such changes will have an advantage over those that do not. His two main arguments are, first, that eastern Eurasia will replace Europe as the most geopolitically important area of the world, an arena in which strategic competition will take place in a multipolar environment created by the rise of minor powers and the decline of major ones (especially the United States); and second, that the rapid pace of technological advancements will likely produce another "revolution in military affairs" of such significance that its importance will be second only to the ability of security communities to undergo a "revolution in strategic perspective" (RSP) that allows them to adapt effectively to the changing security environment.

Because much of the book focuses on the future role of technology and its likely impact on warfare, at times it appears as though Walton has abandoned classical realism and become a technophilic futurist. He warns that the American proclivity for allowing moral issues to blur strategic clarity could prevent it from embracing the RSP. This theme, while pervading, tends to get lost in the discussions about technology—one of the very few flaws in this work. Also, Walton tends to speculate in depth about the potential of biotechnology, nanotechnology,

and computer science but pays little attention to the likelihood that the future will witness an increase in competition over the strategic exploitation of space. Nonetheless, he more than makes up for these slight flaws with his thought-provoking geopolitical analysis.

Walton argues that the "Columbian Epoch" actually ended in 1991, and not at the beginning of the twentieth century as Mackinder argued. Although he delivers a sharp critique of the great British geographer, Walton actually endorses Mackinder's reasoning, recognizing that Mackinder got much more right than he did wrong and that his Heartland Theory still serves as the most useful guide for geopolitical analysis.

Geopolitics and the Great Powers in the Twenty-first Century should be mandatory reading for all American students of geopolitics. One should expect that military schools and other institutions of higher learning in Asia will certainly embrace its message, particularly as it is given by a Westerner who attempts in a reasonable and persuasive manner to make the connection between Asia's rise and history's geopolitical patterns. Although many of Walton's predictions are speculative, he has surely succeeded in constructing a new framework for students of geopolitics. Few will argue with his choice of questions, but ideally his answers will spark a much-needed high-level debate about the future path of geopolitics and strategy. A work like this invites challenges, but the gauntlet that Walton has thrown down will provide no easy opportunities for dissent. I would suspect that like Mackinder, Walton will be one of a very small group of strategists who in their

attempts to anticipate the patterns of future strategic history will be more right than wrong.

STEPHEN B. SMITH
University of Reading
United Kingdom



Schleifer, Ron. *Psychological Warfare in the Intifada: Israeli and Palestinian Media Politics and Military Strategies*. Portland, Ore.: Sussex Academic, 2006. 272pp. \$69.50

In the wake of the second Palestinian intifada against Israel (2002 through 2006), it has been easy to lose sight of the fact that the first intifada (December 1987 through October 1991) was largely nonviolent but highly successful. It achieved the primary goal of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO)—forcing Israel to recognize the PLO by initiating negotiations. In this work Ron Schleifer offers a unique, though logically flawed, perspective of the first intifada, which he describes as “political warfare.” That is, he examines how the PLO assumed control of what began as a spontaneous nonviolent uprising in December 1987 to produce a successful campaign that was based on a range of largely persuasive techniques and lasted more than three years. Schleifer analyzes the successful Palestinian tactics and compares them to the unsuccessful Israeli response through the components of “psychological operations” (PSYOP) as presented in the *U.S. Army Manual of Psychological Warfare*.

Schleifer’s book is based on research gathered for his doctoral dissertation completed at the University of Leeds. He chose the PSYOP manual and its

taxonomy as his theoretical basis, and he is at his best when using the components of the PSYOP manual to analyze and compare how both sides prepared their campaigns, determined and applied consistent themes or messages, chose and used dissemination techniques and tactics, responded to enemy messages, and applied countermeasures. He offers convincing evidence that within the first few weeks of the uprising, the PLO seized and maintained the initiative and dominated what we now call “the information environment,” while the Israelis, riven by internal ambiguity and dissent, floundered.

Unfortunately, this work is ultimately unsatisfying, because its organization and thesis have logical flaws. Readers interested in a more concise, better organized analysis of nonviolent conflict based on psychological operations can find it in Schleifer’s 2006 article “Psychological Operations: A New Variation of an Age Old Art: Hezbollah versus Israel,” published in *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, volume 29, pp. 1–19. For readers interested in the specific tactics used in the first intifada, this book will serve as a high-quality resource. This work has several critical shortcomings, one of them its title. A better title might have focused on the key concept and not the methods. Second, although he thoroughly reviews how “propaganda” and “psychological operations” acquired their negative connotations before and after World War II, Schleifer applies only a restrictive definition of PSYOP. The PSYOP manual, however, uses a different primary definition and categorizes different types. He analyzes a complete taxonomy in terms of his own different, limited, definition.