

ARE THERE NATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN GEOPOLITICAL KNOWLEDGE?

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Farewell speech on leaving the University of Amsterdam

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In 1943 Salvador Dalí painted the birth of '*the new man*' as an event observed by '*a new man*', the latter represented in the forefront and aptly named '*Geopoliticus child*'. Obviously I am not going to dwell on the esthetic qualities of paintings. Moreover Dalí considered his own artistic capabilities mediocre: he attached more value to being recognized as a visionary genius! My interest is of course in his vision, but let me nevertheless linger an instant over the esthetic aspects. Dalí seems to revert to artistic conventions from the 18th century. According to these conventions the onlooker had to be guided into a painted landscape by something in the forefront: a human figure, a walker or a path. Here, in this painting, we see an adult person and a child in the forefront. Later on, artists like Caspar David Friedrich (see his *Shipwreck* from 1823) shocked the public by omitting such details, by slinging the onlooker smack down into the wilderness. For them nature had to be experienced as an awe-inspiring reality, opposed to the human world. In Dalí's painting the shock is produced by something different: *human* nature, in this case the birth of a new geopolitical world order. It expresses the shift from European (mainly British) world power to American hegemony. We are faced here with relations between states but particularly with our misplaced idea that the world will always remain as it is now. Accordingly, it is not a bad idea to *involve* the onlooker by means of a human step as the old-fashioned pictorial rule recommended but now in the shape of (two) generations.

Today it is difficult to recognize the visionary quality of the 1943 claim that world power was disappearing from Europe because we tend to describe the advance of American hegemony as something that started even earlier. Nothing is easier than the wisdom of hindsight but I am rather thinking about geopolitical theories (or views) conceiving of world hegemony as a generational phenomenon that coincides with entire centuries. George Modelski and other writers described the sequence of world powers in history from Portugal in the 16th century, the Netherlands in the 17th century, Britain in the 18th and 19th centuries to the US in the 20th century. The idea of countries that leave their mark on a century became a hot topic of course at the close of the 20th century. Americans to whom the end of their hegemony was foretold, optimistically referred to the British who also could boast of two centuries. Around the turn of the century many conferences raised the question of America's hegemony in the near future. One of them, organized in Loughborough in 1999 by David Slater and Peter Taylor, was devoted to possible challenges to American world power. The conference didn't particularly produce forecasts (although one speaker promised the US a Chinese-American 21st century at most) but rather attempts to identify the principles that had enabled the US to attain world power with the consequent question if such principles had become less powerful in the current global system.

Few participants in that conference were probably aware of the fact that neo-conservative intellectuals in the US already engaged in a *Project for a New American Century* aiming at realizing the *second* American century by means of a new worldwide military strategy. Their thoughts underlay the reckless American invasions after September 11 in Afghanistan and particularly in Iraq. Today's evaluation is often that these strategies have helped to hasten the end of American hegemony rather than securing the start of a new American century.

What lessons can we learn about geopolitical knowledge? The important message is not that once in a century the world arrives at a turning point and that we cannot resist it. The message is rather that *we should always start looking afresh at the way power is realized in a terrain*. Being the biggest or militarily starkest does not mean much if you are blind to the terrain, the pattern of human and natural resources. As the German father of political geography, Friedrich Ratzel, established in 1897: "one can only transcend the natural advantage of an adversary by entering his terrain with the tools with which he himself survives". Applied to the rockets fired from drones at supposed Al Qaeda leaders at the frontier between Pakistan and Afghanistan this would imply a complete rejection of American (or NATO) military tactics.

The language of terrain, strategy and power doesn't come easily for the Dutch. That is not a very daring proposition. Dutch international politics has always stressed human rights, justice, development or ethical principles. I don't have difficulties with that but rather with the fact that ethical ideals ultimately become frustrated when they are accompanied with poor geopolitical analysis. This may reduce such ethical principles to hypocrisy or, worse, produce the reverse of what has been aimed at. Let me immediately give a dramatic example from

the ethnic war in Bosnia where an explicit ethic principle (“choosing for life”) was pronounced in the context of the Dutch UN (UNPROFOR) operations . It is taken from an interview in the daily *de Volkskrant* from January 21, 1995:

[General] Couzy has returned [from Bosnia] extremely satisfied. “The men are still motivated and professionally engaged. This is the new Royal Army as I have in view. Over there we belong to the top of the premier league. UNPROFOR commander Rose has confirmed that it consists of the UK, France and the Netherlands.” (...)

Up to now three soldiers have been killed on the Dutch side. Two soldiers have been seriously injured. Those are strikingly low numbers. According to Couzy, this is not merely a matter of good luck, training, equipment and discipline of Dutchbat have certainly contributed. (...)

Dutchbat has a hard time in Srebrenica. The enclave, closed off from the outside world by Bosnian Serbs, is encircled by Serbian artillery and mortars. “They are trapped like rats. Therefore it makes no sense, to shoot firmly back during incidents like the freely moving British do. We have to do that well-balanced and deliberate” (...)

The commander of the Bosnian Serbs, general Ratko Mladic, drives around in a Mercedes-jeep stolen from Dutchbat. Couzy: “That just sticks in your throat. Yet, it is one of the many harassments that one has to endure. Even if you were able to liquidate some robber captains then it would cost too many human lives. I choose for life. ”

The sentence “I choose for life”, as ethically as it sounds in January 1995, would get a horrifying implication when these tactics permitted the murder on 8000 Bosniaks half a year later. In view of the genocidal impulses that already had manifested in the decomposing Yugoslavia, it was naïve to think that the symbolic presence of the much-harassed UNPROFOR troops would cast some weight in the balance with the ‘robber captains’. Even if we establish that the Dutch (military commanders and policy makers) were not to blame (which is disputed) than the mere presence on the spot casts a slur on anyone’s reputation. Could it have ended otherwise? A sharper awareness of the realities in the terrain might have induced the Dutch government to negotiate more heavy military guarantees from other NATO members when considering UNPROFOR participation. If the result had been negative, the absence of the Dutch on the scene or a more traditional conception of UN peacekeeping might at least have prevented the false sense of security that safe havens now induced in the Bosnian refugees.

Such a way of thinking that weighs capabilities against chances of success in a ‘battlefield’ is not the international approach of Dutch politicians who will never reconcile themselves to lack of power. The Dutch have replaced geopolitical analysis of success and failure with the primary goal to act in such a way that other members of the international community take account of them. Even the most senseless contribution to the Western engagement with Afghanistan (the training of police officers that according to the agreement with the Afghan authorities have to abstain from military action in their further career) is accepted if it just helps the Netherlands to be recognized as a player on the international scene.

The interesting question behind these observations is to what extent a certain geopolitical myopia has settled in the Dutch genes or in those of whatever nation. There are nations or countries like France where geopolitics can traditionally account on some reverence. My

own experience in a French village of 200 souls is that you can actually stumble upon someone who is engaged in writing a geopolitical thesis, even the lady next door. The presence of geopolitical journals (*Hérodote, Le Monde diplomatique*) and the emphatic self-presentation of experts as geopoliticians is telling, certainly compared with the Netherlands. Strangely enough the US also has been reproached of missing a geopolitical tradition: by none other than Henry Kissinger. The US would know a legalistic, pragmatic and idealistic but no geopolitical tradition. One may indeed say that the tenacious American tradition of dividing the world in good and evil is not the hallmark of sound geopolitical analysis.

This discussion may easily fall back into small talk if we do not move over to empirical facts, in this case media research. For that purpose I want to take you to a battlefield that I have already mentioned briefly: Afghanistan. A true geopolitical analyst will never look at the struggle in Afghanistan as isolated, as something that is relevant within its border and for the rest perhaps only in terms of countries that may help or obstruct certain war aims. From the early beginning the struggle with the Taliban could not be detached from the geopolitical nature of the region: Iran, Central-Asia, India and particularly Pakistan. These are not merely unitary players but states that have local groups of citizens with loyalties that overstep state boundaries and their international policies are multidimensional in such a degree that they easily appear paradoxical to the one that sees the struggle against the Taliban simply as a matter of liberating the Afghan people. Pakistan was from the beginning (in 2001) on the screen because its support was essential in the logistics of war but when the Taliban was not defeated and Osama bin Laden not caught, attention automatically shifted to a new dimension: the wild frontier area between Pakistan and Afghanistan inhabited by equally wild tribes. These tribes would offer hospitality to the Taliban and Osama bin Laden because they have a tradition of autonomy and do not accept interference from outside, a situation even characterized as lawlessness. At that time the word 'tribal' had acquired a special connotation in the Dutch public opinion because in domestic politics the 'multicultural society' was under attack evoking the specter of a society in which each group could make its own laws and rules. Here tribal clearly means dysfunctional.

The autonomy of the tribal regions, officially Federally Administered Tribal Regions (FATA), was not that deeply desired by the local people. Federally Administered indicates that they are under direct supervision of the central government and do not have the right to choose their own (provincial) government which itself is represented in central government (this is the *North-Western Frontier province* or *Khyber Pakhtunkwa* as it is recently renamed). Authority in the FATA areas, that means administration of justice, is exercised by a political agent appointed by Islamabad who acts according to a colonial rule book, the Frontier Crimes Regulation. In the FATA no elementary freedoms apply like freedom of speech and association, no laws to which one can appeal and consequently no access to justice and no protection of life and property. These are all results of a historic situation in which this region, and particularly Afghanistan, was a frontier, a buffer zone, between the British colonial empire and the Russian empire.,

The description of FATA is prototypical of imperial frontiers. It is an instable situation that characterized the historical frontiers of America (the Wild West), the region that separated the Austrian Empire and the Turks in the Balkans, and the back and forth between the Chinese Han dynasty and the Mongolian 'barbarians'. After a period of British military pressure the then ruler of Afghanistan, Amir Yaqub Khan, concluded a treaty with the British (1879) in which important parts of Afghanistan like the FATA were ceded to British India. The new borderline was officially demarcated in 1893 by the British-Indian Representative in Kabul, Sir Mortimer Durand. The treaty was concluded with British India and not with Pakistan that only burst on the scene in 1947. That is why Afghan governments have never recognized the 'Durand-line' after the secession of Pakistan. The use of the word Durand-line in our times indicates with a high degree of certainty that someone is referring to a *contested* border.

In view of the fact that Afghans claim Pakistan territory one could imagine that it would be helpful to Pakistan if the border was endorsed in a multilateral agreement. Yet, and this the heart of the matter, Pakistan has never pressed toward such an agreement, not even at the time that such a thing would have been a logical extension of an international conference like the one held after the termination of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in 1988-'89. The deeper cause was that Pakistan, or in any case groupings around the power elite, deemed it useful to control an area to which international organizations or media did not have access. In this way they could exert influence across the border through the Pashtun ethnic group that lives in Afghanistan but also in large areas of Pakistan. The organization that played a key role was the Pakistan intelligence agency ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence agency) that also had been an important tool in organizing terror against India in Kashmir. Some commentators have described these machinations as expressions of a country fighting to survive because Pakistan is threatened internally by a lack of national unity and externally on one side by arch-enemy India and on the other side by a very instable Central- and South-Asian region. Anyhow, Pakistan has always engaged in creating *strategical depth* in the direction of Afghanistan. You need to take account of these facts to understand why American attempts to put pressure on Pakistan – inciting them to take action in the FATA – were in vain. Let us now consider these facts as frame of a geopolitical outlook and see what we can recognize of it in the newspapers of three countries: Netherlands, France and the US. The content analysis was based on four (quality) dailies in each country over the years 2002-2010.ⁱ

The four Dutch newspapers published more than 1700 articles on the subject of Afghanistan (or the military operation in Uruzgan). These are all articles that mention the subject in their headlines. Many of these articles deal merely with political decision-making about participation in the war. Only less than 1000 articles pay attention to the terrain where the action is, that means experiences of the soldiers, the struggle against the Taliban and the attitude of the Afghan population. Among this category the number of articles that deal with

the regional context, the role of Pakistan and the FATA is negligible, 43. The question is whether the other two countries show a keener geopolitical gaze in the news.

Looking at the entries for autonomous tribal areas (Figure 1) , France does not cut a much better figure. In the first period (2002-7) French dailies even produced less news items than the Dutch newspapers. This may be caused by the fact that military operations on foreign soil are much more common in France. After 2007 French interest in the events in the border areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan surpasses the Dutch production of news. However, the US media are by far the most productive on this theme. This is not surprising since the issue of the autonomous tribal areas is closely related with the hunt for Osama bin Laden. As remarked above, the existence of this frontier zone is only a part of the geopolitical story. The significance of the Afghan struggle for Pakistan is more clearly elaborated upon when the role of the Pakistan secret service (ISI) is included in the story. Here the US cuts a rather poor figure compared to the other countries (green column).

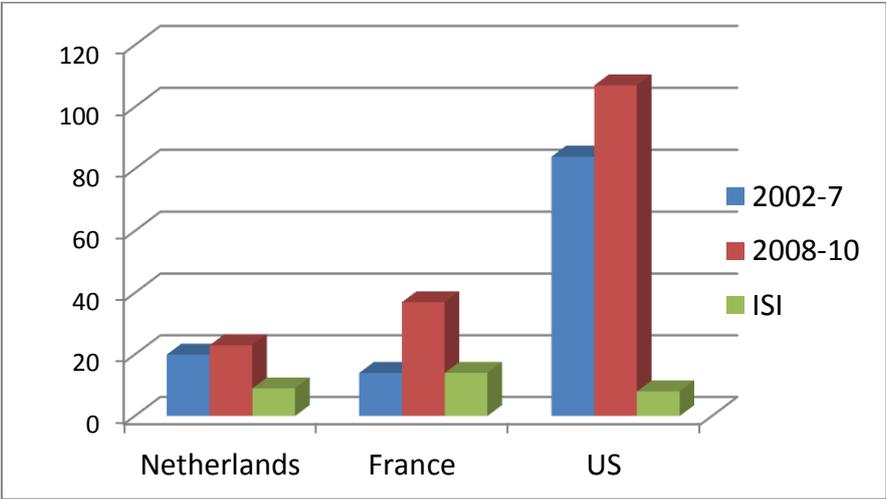


Figure 1 Number of articles that mention Pakistan, Afghanistan and autonomous tribal / federally (centrally) administered / FATA areas: Blue: 2002-7, Red: 2008-10, Green: number of this selection that also mention ISI.

France is superior, also when we look at attention for the historical dimension indicated by the number of references to the Durand line, the contested border (Figure 2). In the course of time the French media seem to focus more strongly on the geopolitical conditions of the war in Afghanistan whereas this theme gets less emphasized in the other two countries notwithstanding the penetrating analyses of the Pakistan journalist Ahmed Rashid whose book *Descent into Chaos* had just been published in 2008.

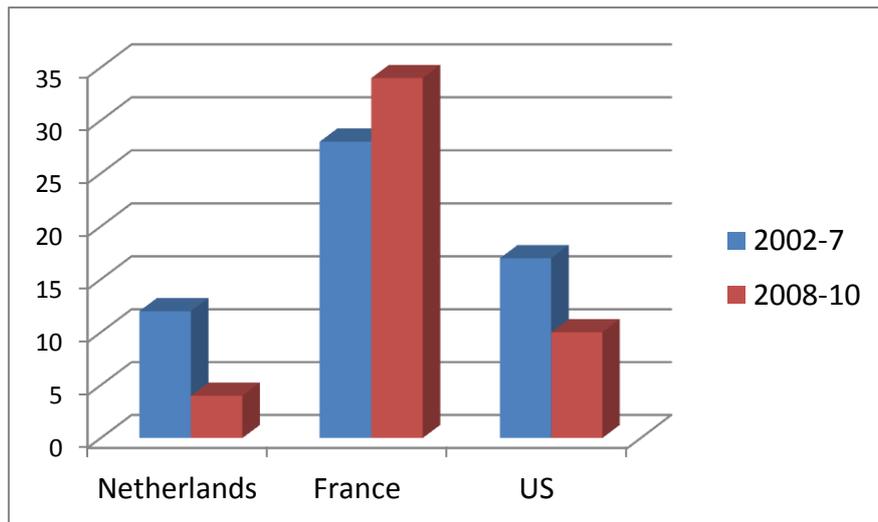


Figure 2 Number of articles that mention Pakistan, Afghanistan and Durand-line. Blue: 2002-7, Red: 2008-10

The French emerge from this analysis as a nation with a geopolitical gaze while the Dutch gaze is perhaps not completely blind for geopolitical detail but somewhat myopic. However, a computer analysis based on key words may itself be myopic particularly when we are judging the ability to tell a coherent geopolitical story. Such a thing can only be tested by a qualitative analysis: reading the entire article printed in a newspaper. This procedure yielded 5 articles in the Dutch press, 10 in the French press and 5 or 6 (depending on criteria) in the American press that could count as true geopolitical stories. This judgment is of course liable to criteria of this author but it is at least confirmed by the quantitative analysis. It is further striking that the articles in the Dutch press that satisfied the criteria were not written by well-known prolific writers on international relations. They were from journalists in the field, a professor of South-Asian studies, and a former general-major teaching at an academy for International Relations studies. This shows how much a geopolitical perspective is promoted by (intimate) knowledge of the terrain rather than by a general knowledge of international relations and conflicts.

ⁱ For the Netherlands: Nederlands Dagblad, NRC-Handelsblad, Trouw, de Volkskrant. For France: Figaro, La Croix, Le Monde, Liberation. For the US: Los Angeles Times, New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Washington Post.