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“The Emerging Pattern of Geopolitics”

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Bio: Peter W. Rodman is now a Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution. He has served as Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (2001-2007), as Deputy Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs (Foreign Policy)(1986-1987), and as Director of the State Department Policy Planning Staff (1984-1986). In the Nixon and Ford administrations he was a member of the National Security Council Staff and special assistant to Henry Kissinger. He is the author of a history of the Cold War in the Third World (More Precious than Peace, Scribner's, 1994) and of numerous monographs and articles in scholarly journals, newspapers, and magazines.

I'm honored to be here. I congratulate the sponsors of this 18th annual Strategy Conference. It could not be more timely or necessary.

There's a story I like to tell about the Moscow Zoo. It seems the Moscow Zoo advertised one day that it had a lion and a lamb living together in the same cage. People came from miles around to

see this miraculous thing. And, sure enough, there they were, a lion and a lamb, lying down together side by side, apparently in perfect bliss. Someone asked the zookeeper how they had accomplished this miracle. “No problem,” he said. “Of course we have to put a new lamb in several times a day.”

I consider this a conservative parable – a rebuke to those who have too much faith in the perfectibility of man or the natural harmony of international relations.

The theme of this conference is especially important. Iraq and Afghanistan, important as they are, don't exhaust the strategic landscape. There is a global strategic environment, which presents many challenges, in many different regions of the world, that bear close attention in their own right. In fact, that global environment forms the context in which we should be thinking about Iraq and Afghanistan. One of the reasons it's so important how well we do in Iraq and Afghanistan is its impact on American credibility – a precious commodity that will affect our success in these other theaters.

I have chosen for my topic the phrase “The Emerging Pattern of Geopolitics” – because I do see a pattern emerging:

- For a long time, it wasn't clear what to call the post-Cold War world. I still don't have a name for it, but we can see already, in my view, two dominant features of the world we are in:
- One is what we call the **Global War on Terrorism**, but it's really an assault against the West by Islamist extremism, which is a virulent political ideology feeding on centuries of historical and cultural resentments. I would also argue that this ideological challenge is taking on a new geopolitical form, as Iran attempts to make itself the leader of it.
- The second challenge lies in the traditional dimension of relations among the major powers: I see the re-emergence of **Russia** as one important feature of the current scene, but over the longer term the emergence of **China** represents probably a more dramatic change in the strategic landscape. It is the classical problem of a new great power appearing on world stage, raising some complicated challenges of adjustment, for us and for them.

War on Terror/Islamist Extremism

First, let me talk about what we call the "war on terrorism."

John Abizaid calls it the “Long War,” and I think he’s right about that. It will be with us for a while.

We say “war on terrorism,” but the heart of the problem isn’t terrorism as such -- terror is a weapon -- but an ideologically-driven assault not only against the United States but against the West. It’s important always to say that this is not “about Islam” or “against Islam.” What has come after us is not Islam but a warped political ideology which invokes some aberrant strains of Islam. The word “Islamism”, indeed, was coined by scholars to distinguish the political phenomenon from the religious faith.

In the modern period, this Islamist radicalism has been with us since the Iranian Revolution of 1979. There was fear, at that time, that this virulent ideology would spread around the Middle East. It didn’t spread, at first – among other things, Arabs don’t trust Persians -- but it did begin to spread at the beginning of the 1990s. I think there were two reasons why it did:

- The collapse of the Soviet Union led to a certain discrediting and demoralization of the Marxist-Leninist Left worldwide. The collapse of the radical Left in much of the Third World contributed to a wave of democratization in those countries: In

Latin America, in some countries in Africa, and elsewhere, the absence of a radical challenge to the established order permitted a kind of “normal” politics to develop. The tragedy of the Middle East is that the weakening of the secular, “socialist” Arab radicalism left a vacuum that was filled by a radicalism from a different direction, Islamism. (I have a Palestinian friend who told me about a friend he had: The guy was a Marxist agitator on the West Bank. Many years later, my friend ran into him again and he was wearing the beard and the robes of an Islamist agitator.)

- The second new factor was the Afghan war against the Soviets: The Sunni Islamist radicals think they brought down the Soviet Union by themselves -- and they now think they can replicate the achievement against the second superpower.

So, in this sense, the spread of this radicalism in the Sunni world is a phenomenon of the end of the Cold War.

Thus, we see the rise of Islamism in Algeria and Egypt in the 1990's : I don't think it's an accident that these pressures rose against two countries whose revolutions had been in the name of the now discredited secular, “socialist,” ideology. Also in the 1990s we

saw the rise of al-Qaida, and its attacks on our Embassies in East Africa, on the *USS Cole*, and of course 9/11.

Iraq is today a battleground in this struggle, but is hardly the cause of it.

This ideology, as I said, is fueled by centuries of resentments – by the conviction that the West is corrupt, evil, and doomed like the Soviet Union. And of course it is so fanatical that mass murder is acceptable to them as a means. I'm sorry to say that there is a certain euphoria among these extremists in recent years: They think they're on a roll; they think they can win, that they can defeat the West. It's crazy, but they believe it.

The good news is that millions of people in the Muslim world agree this is crazy. These people want to be part of the modern civilized world, not overthrow it. Speaking from my experience in the Pentagon, I can tell you that just about every government in the Muslim world, from North Africa to the Gulf to Central Asia to Southeast Asia, is a partner with us, or wants to be, including in the defense field. The key to our strategy is supporting them, because they are on the front line.

I mentioned Iran, because in a sense we are coming full circle since 1979. Ahmadinejad sees Iran as the leader, the champion of all this. In his open letter to President Bush last May, and his open letter to the American people last November, it was interesting that he set himself up as Bush's counterpart, as Bush's equal, as the spokesman for all of Islam.

The good news is: the Arabs don't want this either. In their eyes, reasonably enough, Iran's nuclear ambitions and its conventional military buildup point to a bid for regional hegemony. Sunni Arab governments are, if anything, drawing closer to us now. They saw the Hezbollah crisis in Lebanon last summer as an Iranian power play.

The US has responded to this Arab concern by a variety of means. I was part of a joint State-Defense diplomatic initiative that we called the Gulf Security Dialogue, which was about intensified cooperation in such areas as air and missile defense, counterterrorism, counterproliferation, and so forth. The US also sent a second carrier strike group into the Gulf, to strengthen deterrence and reassurance. These countries have other options: They could try to go nuclear themselves (which they are flirting with); alternatively they could

revert to appeasement of Iran. The preferable option is that they have confidence in us as their ally and protector.

What are the long-run prospects? From the Soviet experience we know that militant ideologies can be discredited by failure. And I would say that the rich diversity in the Muslim world is a barrier to Iran's ambitions and to al-Qaida's ambitions. It's not just Sunni –vs.- Shia, or Arabs-vs.-Persians. Read some of Zawahiri's tirades against nationalism and national identity: He complains of "hateful nationalism" as a parochialism that diverts from the duty of global jihad. He denounces the Iraqi people and the Palestinian people for being seduced by elections and democracy, which, again, lead them away from the transnational cause he is espousing. He has repeatedly denounced even Hamas for participating at all in the political process.¹ So there are barriers to this transnational ideology.

The moderates are showing courage, but they need our support.

Relations among the Major Powers

¹ E.g., Zawahiri video messages of January 22, 2007; March 4, 2006.

Let me now shift back to the other dimension of today's global environment, relations among the major powers. This is the traditional dimension of international politics, and, while the Global War on Terror is an understandable preoccupation, the laws of geopolitics have not been repealed.

With **Europe**, I have to say that I think our relations are getting better. The current German Chancellor is far better disposed to the US than her predecessor; the forthcoming election in France could produce a French President who is the best disposed to the US of any President of the Fifth Republic. Look at the NATO engagement in Afghanistan, which is an extraordinary step in the history of the North Atlantic Alliance. On the other hand, there are long-term demographic trends that will weaken Europe, with unpredictable results.

Next, **Russia**: I was in Munich in early February, at the *Wehrkunde* conference, and heard Putin's famous speech. But if Putin's goal was to split Europe from the United States, I think it backfired badly with the Europeans. The anti-American stuff in his speech was stale; what struck the Europeans was his threat to pull out of the INF Treaty – which concerns them a lot – and his insulting

the OSCE (and its election-monitoring) as a “vulgar instrument of American domination.” The OSCE is headed by a Frenchman, who was not amused! All this was shocking to the Europeans. Meanwhile, Russia is squeezing Ukraine and Georgia, using energy as a weapon of pressure against everyone; it’s also trying to push us out of Central Asia.

The bottom line is: We have a Russia problem. But the Putin speech may have been a wake-up call in Europe. An attempt by Russia to undo the outcome of 1989 and 1991 cannot be accepted. This has to be on the agenda of the US and Europe, and we have to present a common front.

With respect to other important major powers -- Japan and India -- US relations with them are literally better than ever. In the security field, Japan has never been as committed and as close to us as it is now. And I was happy to have been part of the growth of the US defense partnership with India, which is a significant new strategic development.

Now, **China**: It was my office that published the annual reports to Congress on China’s Military Power. These were, we hoped, factual and descriptive, not beating any drum. But they were sobering:

China has achieved a first-world military capability in some areas (modern mobile ICBMs; modern submarines; jet fighters; anti-ship weapons they are purchasing from the Russians). We have taken note of the lack of transparency in their defense programs – we believe their real spending is two-to-three times what they announce. And the defense budget they announce has been growing at 17-18% every year in recent years. This represents a patient, systematic, long-term commitment to build up what they call their Comprehensive National Strength.

We also see signs of a global foreign policy – a more active diplomacy in Latin America, Africa, and elsewhere.

This may be a natural thing, and a tribute to China's ability and economic success. But, nonetheless, China's rise is a potentially transforming event in the international landscape.

China, in my view, should be seen not as a military problem but as a geopolitical problem. In the military dimension we should be able to maintain a deterrent balance in the Taiwan Strait and head off any miscalculation. We and our allies can shape the strategic environment in the Asia/Pacific region into which China is emerging, and to which China will need to adapt. And there are other

dimensions of US policy – economic, diplomatic – which can help shape China’s evolution in constructive directions.

Nothing is foreordained. It is certainly within our means to manage overall relations with China in a reasonable way. And with Russia.

Conclusions and Implications

Now, I’ve discussed the Islamist challenge, and relations among the major powers, as separate dimensions of policy. But one might reasonably ask: In what ways do they – or might they – interact?

For one thing, the US, Europe, Russia, and China all face similar challenges from Islamist extremism. If these challenges grow, they may loom larger in all these countries’ relations with each other.

For example, I read an interesting piece on a radical Islamist website denouncing China – for its ties with Israel, for its alleged repression of Chinese Muslims.² The piece also speculated that, after al-Qaida brings down the United States, China will replace the

² “China under the Microscope of the Salafi Jihadist,” [Al-omh.net](http://www.al-omh.net), 13 January 2007, 23 January 2007 <http://www.al-omh.net/vb.showthread.php?t=11437>.

United States as al-Qaida's main rival for world domination. So, there are all sorts of possibilities!

A second point that has occurred to me: Everything I have discussed highlights the renewed importance of energy as a strategic factor in international politics, and as a weapon. I don't have the solution, but I can visualize a tremendous strategic payoff if we can reduce the world's dependence on energy from unreliable suppliers.

A third point: In the nearer term, the clear implication of what I have discussed only points to the absolutely critical role that the United States plays as the bulwark of international order.

- In the Middle East, all our friends, Arabs and Israelis, tell us this: "Don't abandon us." They all see Iraq in this context. They worry about Iran, and we're trying to reassure them we can shield them against Iran. But they see Iraq as a test of our credibility: "Don't abandon us."
- In Asia, it's not an accident that our relations are growing tighter with many countries, such as Japan, India, Australia, Vietnam, Indonesia, Singapore, Mongolia, to name a few. They too count on American staying power, to maintain the equilibrium of Asia.

In fact, to be blunt about it, as we look around the world and look at the potential sources of instability, potentially one of the most destabilizing factors in the world today is the fear of American weakness. So much depends on us. The fear that we might be abandoning significant commitments, or that we may be turning inward, could seriously erode global confidence in the face of these challenges. This is something all Americans need to bear in mind, as we conduct our national debate.

As I said at the beginning, the premise of this conference is correct: We can't neglect the global and regional context. The world's challenges are interconnected in an important sense: It will not be so easy for us, if we let ourselves be weak in one part of the world, to appear strong everywhere else. Credibility, once lost, has to be re-earned, the hard way.

The United States has the skill and resources to do what is necessary, I have no doubt. What we also need is the will.

Thank you.

