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Book Review, ‘Geopolitics and the Clash of Ideologies: Dawn of a New Order’ by Rein Müllerson

Marija Đorđeska
Malgosia Fitzmaurice, Queen Mary University of London

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Marija Dordeska and Malgosia Fitzmaurice

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‘Geopolitics and the Clash of Ideologies: Dawn of a New Order’ is a provocative account of events that have – and still are – shaping current international relations. From United States vanishing dominance, to Russia’s annexation of Crimea, Kosovo’s ‘independence’ and the war against ISIS, Müllerson, a post-Cold War era Estonian international lawyer who worked on both sides of the Iron Curtain, is straightforward and personally impersonal in his expert narrative of international crises. How does the American dominance translate for the rest of the world? Is there any better way forward? What is the new order whose dawn we are all awaiting? ‘Geopolitics and the Clash of Ideologies’ craftily answers some of these questions and gives food for thought for further intellectual (and practical) exploration of our common and, hopefully, civilised future.

In Chapter 1 Müllerson explains his (social science) research methodology. He begins by confessing his personal biases of an Estonian, educated in Russia, who served as a professor of international law in Moscow, London and now in Tallinn. His experience at the United Nations and post-Cold War academic and advisory work lend credentials for what is meant to be objective research against the sea of misinformation. He does not take sides in current conflicts and prefers considering international actors as equal molecules (albeit different in size) that allow for a rational and logical analysis.

Müllerson explains his view on the world and the international relations developments through a prism – or rather a triangle – of (i) ideology, (ii) geopolitics and (iii) international law. International law provides a bridge between geopolitics and ideology, while geopolitics contributes to the effective functioning of international law. But what is geopolitics? According to Müllerson, geopolitics is a crucial layer or a central feature of international relations that contains several elements, geography and politics only few among them. Geopolitics is also a tool through which researchers and analysts can consider international developments from a bird’s perspective. For example, in analysing the role of China in the South China Sea, a research devoid of geopolitics would yield the results that the tensions in the area are due to China’s relations with its neighbours. However, geopolitics reveals – according to Müllerson – that the most important relationship in the South China Sea is actually that between China and the United States.

In Chapter 2 Müllerson discusses ideologies, in particular to the dominance of the American ideology. After the collapse of the USSR, of the two then-existing ideologies – liberal-democracy and the free market on the one hand, and communism on the other hand – only the former remained. (As a side note, Müllerson considers China as a capitalist country in disguise.) The now-dominant Western liberal democratic ideology is the only ‘correct’ one that determines who is on right side of history. Hence, the United States is attempting to assert its ideology and dominance over Russia (and the rest
of the world). In fact, according to Müllerson, the United States dreams the American dream for the entire world regardless of its (often non-beneficial) effects on non-American States.

The dominant Anglo-American narrative presupposes that there is only one correct way of life, that is, free markets and liberal democracy, which attempts to homogenise the world. “The freer market, the greater the economic inequality; the greater the economic inequality, the lesser democracy” (p 84), writes Müllerson. There is much chaos and turmoil in the world precisely because of America's attempts to blindly transplant its system to other parts of the world, without considering other States' context. What would really benefit the world is the realisation on the part of the United States that the world is too big and too complex to be governed from one centre – Washington D.C.

It is, actually, the West that is in dire need for political and economic transformations. Instead of exporting its homogenous ideology, Müllerson suggests that West should borrow practices from the East or, even better, find novel ways in turning away from extreme individualism. Having an ideology is good, and having diverse and equal (i.e., heterogeneous) ideologies that coexist is even better, if not essential.

In Chapter 3, titled ‘West versus Russia – or vice versa’?, Müllerson transitions from considering the ideology(ies) to geopolitics. He writes about the America’s application of its dominant ideology to the world, and why this approach is not working. Exporting the American (elites) dream to the world negatively affects the invisible strings attached among the various players in different regions.

Like Russia, Müllerson observes, the West has its own propaganda. Much quieter in comparison to the Russian one and more sophisticated, but nonetheless effective, and going by the name of ‘public relations’. The Western-created Russophobia – where the United States are making Russia its number one enemy and turning Russia's neighbours into America’s allies – is in Müllerson's eyes only a brainwashing method. Müllerson compares Crimea to Kosovo, the only difference between the two situations being that Kosovo had not been annexed after declaring its independence. Russia annexed Crimea for geopolitical reasons, Müllerson observes, because it did not want the Americans to have a base in Sebastopol. Having an American base in Sebastopol would equal to having a Russian or a Chinese naval base at Guantanamo Bay.

Kosovo’s declaration to independence and the subsequent wave of States' recognition of its independence was the first triumph of geopolitics over international law. As an international lawyer, he advises that although Kosovo’s declaration independence was not illegal per se, the third States' recognition of its independence violates international law. Regardless of potential repercussions on the international level, so many States have chosen to recognize Kosovo's independence due to geopolitics. The conflict in Kosovo, according to Müllerson, also shows how those who resist liberal expansion (in this case, Serbia) are confronted and, sooner or later, crushed.

Another ‘gem’ of this chapter is Müllerson’s view of NATO. Not only does he refer to it as to a ‘relic' of Cold War, but it also classifies NATO as the greatest geopolitical nonsense of the 21st century that
operates in violation of international law. NATO has become anti-European and is an obstacle to cooperative relations between Europe and Russia and a better world order.

Müllerson concludes Chapter 3 by considering terrorist threats around the world and the American double standards when it comes to considering ‘humanity’ confined only to the West. Müllerson compares the American rhetoric after the 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris, with its responses to the attacks in Pakistan, India, Iraq, and after the downing of the Russian plane over the Sinai Peninsula. What is the biggest threat to the United States? Russia and China. What the United States considers as its biggest threat is not related to the ‘small fish’ terrorists, but is aligned with what the American political, economic and military elites understand as the most significant threat to their geopolitical aspirations.

After considering ideology and geopolitics – the first two elements of Müllerson’s prism – he dedicates Chapter 4 to international law, which represents the third and last prong of his analysis. According to Müllerson, one of the most controversial areas of international law is the regulation of the military use of force. Müllerson devotes a major part of this chapter to the principle of the non-use of force, which is a *jus cogens* norm, also codified in Article 2(4) of the United Nations Chapter. In this context, Müllerson addresses the right to self-defence and the use of force by non-State actors. How can States address terrorist threats when the terrorist organisations are conducting activities from their territories? Müllerson identifies the solution in three principles, identified in an article by Daniel Bethlehem. Another ‘hotspot’ that Müllerson touches upon is the unilateral use of force for humanitarian purposes (*i.e.*, without the United Nations Security Council’s authorisation), which may be legally justified only in extreme circumstances.

Müllerson expertly analyses foreign interventions in Syria against ISIS and notes that using military force against ISIS in the territory of Syria without the consent of the Syrian government – at least until the adoption of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2249 (2015) – violated Syria’s sovereignty. In this scenario, only Russia had the permission to intervene because it had been invited to do so by the Syrian government. The fact that the Syrian government did not extend a similar permission to the United States (and its Western allies), meant that the United States conduct amounted to interfering with the internal affairs of Syria and was, consequently, violating international law. According to Müllerson, this shows yet again that the United States is prioritising geopolitics over international law. Müllerson follows up with a ‘kind’ suggestion that the United States finally learns its lessons (to begin with the 2003 invasion of Iraq) and demonstrates some humility in relation to other States. The United States has squandered much money for what turned out to be mediocre military results with destructive political consequences.

Müllerson in this Chapter also addresses the problem of power (usually concentrated in one centre) and normative uncertainty in international law by providing a three-steps solution. In his view multipolar balance of power will be consolidated and legitimised when we (i) reach the conclusion that any system of permanent military alliances is a threat to peace and break the alliance mentality; (ii) strengthen the principle of respect for the sovereign equality of States and to make States central to a
new international order; and (iii) strengthen and reform the United Nations Security Council so that it should work as the principal organ of the balance-of-power world in matters of international security.

Far from being a dry legal test, this Chapter informs and depicts vividly current ever-changing developments in international relations. The central principles of international law and the United Nations Charter remain relevant and (to a certain extent) stand unchanged against the tide of time.

Instead of concluding, Müllerson acknowledges his ‘subtle’ bias against the current globocop, the American Empire. Admittedly, he is disappointed that the United States missed its opportunity in the late 1980s and early 1990s to ensure a peaceful world free of rivalries. Perhaps – he notes – others in its position would have done the same. Müllerson is, however, only moderately pessimistic. His vision for the better future of the international community is a concert-based order based on a multipolar balance of power. No order is forever and the liberal order we had so far was not as liberal for the majority of the world. The new world order that Müllerson envisions as rising is much more liberal and democratic – liberal in the sense of embracing the differences not only within societies but also among societies (and States).

This very (thought) provoking book contains bold assessments of the current (and past) international developments by an expert international lawyer. It is as much suited for anyone interested in a more profound and a different account of international events than those provided by the Western mainstream media. However, far from shunning the press, Müllerson often quotes journalists’ opinions to substantiate the architecture of his views.

A tale of American dominance is nothing new. What is novel, however, is Müllerson’s honesty in his assessments. He does not wear gloves – Müllerson’s objective and reportedly unbiased account takes aim at everything and everyone equally – and predominately at the United States’ policies. Neither pro-Russian neither pro-American, Müllerson’s patch of land in Estonia seems to be a safe ground for fearless independent thinking, human errors and subconscious cultural conditioning on the side.

‘Geopolitics and the Clash of Ideologies: Dawn of a New Order’ is a rich book of political science that is not an easy read for those who are not initiated in international relations. Müllerson had posed himself a complex task of merging of ideologies, geopolitics and international law into a prism through which one may observe the current and past global crises. The dynamic philosophical discussion, with gems of his legal advice thrown here and there, is sometimes dense and with no end of his thought in sight. What international lawyers – like ourselves – might want to know more about is what does Müllerson have exactly in mind with homogeny and heterogeny, with concrete examples we may apply in our own assessment of the current state of affairs. What will the new ‘concert-based order based on a multipolar balance of power’ be like, how would it concretely manifest and is the dawn of the new order already upon us? Perhaps such questions dispel the mysterious nature of the future to come.

Overall, ‘Geopolitics and the Clash of Ideologies’ is an illuminating and thought provoking work that covers substantial geographical, political, philosophical and legal ground and describes international conflicts from an unconventional and very personal yet expert point of view. Although
his narrative is sometimes outrun by President Trump's changes to his cabinet and beyond, Müllerson's work is timely and timeless – at least for the time being.