

Reimagining Angell's Great Illusion

Why Globalization is Not Rendering the Concepts of Geopolitics and Great Power Competition
Obsolete

Sebastian J. Veneziano

School of Government and Public Policy, University of Arizona

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Dr. Mikhail Beznosov

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Introduction

In 1909 Norman Angell, an author, economist, a British Member of Parliament, and a later Nobel Peace Prize recipient published the book, *The Great Illusion*, whose premise held the argument that armed conflict or war between states does not improve the economic conditions of the victor in that “the costs of wars had become so high as to outweigh any prospective gains” and in addition, “nations... had become too economically interdependent to make war between them a profitable exercise” (Rühle, 2019). While Angell had disciples of this theory he also had his detractors. A notable detractor, Alfred Thayer Mahan, while conceding the notion that states found wars unprofitable, noted that there were more factors at play than merely economic ones. Among the additional factors Mahan listed that made war a global presence were “ambition, self-respect, resentment of injustice, sympathy with the oppressed, and hatred of oppression” (Rühle, 2019). But Angell’s assertions on the unprofitableness of war and economic interdependencies of states were misconstrued; many took Angell to say that because of interdependencies between states forged by the industrialization age, that war would never exist. To reiterate, what Angell asserted was that war was unprofitable (Rühle, 2019) and “the likelihood of war is (not) the *illusion* (emphasis added), but its benefits” (that is imagined to be obtained through war) (Wyne, 2014). In the three decades that followed, Angell’s theory nonetheless revealed itself to be woefully discredited, two world wars devastated Europe and Asia and affected non-theatres of war in other ways. But the economic devastation that resulted in the aftermath and the struggles for all parties involved propped up “Angell’s thesis that war no longer made economic sense” (Rühle, 2019). In the immediate post-war years, however, Angell had a geopolitical epiphany of sorts. Peace in Europe (and in a broader sense globally) found the value of security pacts amongst like-minded states to be an invaluable vanguard in future aggression of states. As such he supported such military-minded initiatives like a North Atlantic security pact (later to be named the North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO]) to counter what he and others in Europe felt to be a growing threat of Soviet aggression, which in turn prompted a policy of containment led by the United States that eventually turned into a 40-year ideological struggle and proxy conflicts of the Cold War.

Energy Security: The Lynchpin of Geopolitics

While it took Russia and its Warsaw Pact states nearly to the end of the 20th century to become a part of the global commons after WWII, the U.S. and its allies immediately began to build upon its security alliances and to economically globalize. Even non-NATO members took part in the effort and if not directly connected to the U.S. in globalization, they existed in networks that eventually did connect to the wider U.S.-led global network. Even communist China quietly began its rapprochement with the U.S. in the 1970s that over time seen it become an economic powerhouse through globalization despite its political position as an outlier. Once Russia and its former republics along with the Warsaw Pact states integrated into the global economy, many observers felt that the interconnectedness and interdependencies of state economies would resurrect Angell's hope that wars and conflict would be averted because of the high cost to conduct them, and that table diplomacy would take place to settle such quarrels between states which all acknowledged would never go away. That hope, however, was fleeting; underlying the interdependencies between states has always been the ability to establish energy security, the "life blood" that keeps a nation's economy running and involved in globalization. This finite resource that some states have the fortune to possess in large quantities has historically been used by these same states as a type of leverage, or in some ways a weapon with which to further its foreign policy initiatives. The United States experienced this weaponizing of energy in the 1970s when members of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) cut oil production that caused price shocks that starkly revealed the dangers of heavy oil dependency through imports. As a result, the U.S. embarked on a journey to become energy secure through energy independence so as to not be held subject to a foreign oil producer's ability to hold its economy hostage by the withholding of vital oil supplies. Its efforts appeared to have paid off through the establish of a strategic oil reserve, increased production of its own reserves, creating new innovations that extract even more energy resources from seemingly difficult places, and diversification of energy through other suppliers and alternative energy sources; the U.S. for a brief moment had become energy independent and for a brief time became a net exporter in the 21st century.

Yet as Maria van der Hoeven, the one-time head of the International Energy Agency from 2011 to 2015 noted, "Optimism about U.S. energy security, which is rooted in the abundant

supply of fossil fuels alone, is misplaced” (Patel, 2014). While strong production and stocks do appear to denote strength, they also provide at best short-term energy security. Both Patel and Kaufmann (2014) note that not only U.S. tight oil production, but global production of oil has peaked meaning that in the future the U.S. may once again have to look toward the Middle East to satisfy its consumption of oil it is accustomed to, to keep its economy running at current levels and beyond. This requires a shift in U.S. foreign policy to once again be a prominent presence in the region and to exert its influence on Gulf states to secure their reserves for U.S. consumption and to avoid issues in accessibility and price. Kaufmann (2014) goes on to point out that “if we (the United States) achieve energy independence and our partners and allies don’t, we are still vulnerable – both economically and in terms of national security and foreign policy” because of the delicacy and fragileness of globalization. While the U.S. may want to try to secure energy to keep their partners and allies economies propped up to maintain healthy globalization, another issue arises. As mentioned above, the global oil production of oil has peaked, and oil is a finite resource. Every day there is a shrinking amount of known reserves that have been tapped and is no longer available for supply. Oil producing states in their own self-interest for economic viability and survival are beginning to hoard their own supplies while at the same time causing available stocks for export to increase in cost. Importing states begin to see this strategy as a weapon for these states and as a result the source for conflict. The hope for Angell’s disciples is that table diplomacy will address these issues, but Kaufmann’s (2014) realism view appears to be the more probable; “as oil supply tightens, economies will struggle and nations will do what they can to solidify their access to remaining resources. This will cause tensions and create opportunities for conflict” ...thus, the “greatest threat, then, is not American dependence in a world of growing oil supply, but global interdependence in a world of shrinking supply.”

Geopolitics and Great Power Competition Influencing Globalization Initiatives

The potential for conflict resulting from geopolitics and Great Power competition will unfortunately be a serious option at to how states interact even in a world of globalization and increasing interdependence between states in the economic realm, and it will be more so in the quest for continuing energy security. Thus, the assertion that “globalization is rendering the concepts of geopolitics and Great Powers obsolete” does not fit the current paradigm the world

finds itself in today. Bremmer (2022) provides an alternative view that while grim because of the uncertainty that accompanies it, it is also not fatalistic; but it does require geopolitics and the assertion of the United States to assume its role as a Great Power to prevent further regression of globalization. In witnessing the seismic events that shook confidence in globalization and threatened the fragility of interdependency between states like the recent Russian invasion of Ukraine, the crippling domino effects that the COVID pandemic imposed on global supply chains and logistics, rising nationalism and populism that seeks to secure the survival of state economies, the increasing tensions in the Taiwan Strait, and rising powers seeking regional hegemony, notably Iran in the Middle East, many observers fear that globalization has receded or has had its moment with individual states either receding their dependency with other like-minded ally states or seeking autarky in certain economies altogether, which includes energy. But Bremmer (2022) observes that globalization is not dead, but rather that “the world is experiencing a geopolitical recession that has left globalization adrift” due to the vacuum created by the United States to lead the globalization initiative and the inability of other powers like Russia and China to step in due to their lack of capacity to do so (though their *desire* to is *not* lacking). But Bremmer argues, and which this author is in agreement with, globalization is not receding but is creating a new paradigm in which geopolitics and great powers will have more influence in, which is a fracturing of globalization resembling more like regionalization or what IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva has termed as “gloeconomic fragmentation.” (Bremmer, 2022) which echoes similarly to Angell’s revised outlook of collective security arrangements where such arrangements “could only work between like-minded powers” (Rühle, 2019) and why the U.S. and Western Europe did not consider having the Soviet Union join NATO in the years after WWII because of the geopolitical threat the Soviet Union posed to the fragile states of Europe after the war.

But the void left by the United States to lead the globalization initiative and the desire of other states to step in and take the lead has resulted in heightened geopolitics and Great Power competition, especially as it relates to energy security between the United States and China. Despite both nations’ acknowledgement that their economies are intricately too intertwined to suddenly rip apart and decouple both know the salience of the future of energy which is vital to both economies. But owing to differences on how each view the world through their domestic and foreign policies, their economic interests are being wedged by “bipartisan U.S. hostility

toward China, Chinese “Wolf Warrior” diplomacy, the politics of the (COVID) pandemic, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and rising tensions over Taiwan have all made the U.S.-Chinese relationship more dangerous and harder to manage” (Bremmer, 2022). China knows at this time it does not have the ability to fill the vacuum that was left by the U.S. as taking the lead in globalization, but China is opportunistic where it can be. A recent start of diplomatic normalization of relations between Middle East rivals Iran and Saudi Arabia that was brokered by China shows China’s attempts at soft power in an energy-rich region that is ripe for the taking since the U.S. changed foreign policy positions in the Middle East. This soft power displayed by China may be the key for the Chinese to open the door and move in the region while evicting the U.S. and causing them to be on the outside looking in.

Conclusion

Examples like current U.S.-Chinese relations, the COVID pandemic, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Chinese attempts at reunification of Taiwan and its recent soft power efforts in the Middle East has shown that geopolitics are a very salient issue in world affairs and often overshadows the fact that globalization and interdependency among states still exists. But this does not mean that this is the end of the globalization paradigm; however, because of the change in U.S. foreign policy and vacating the lead role of moving and directing globalization ahead in the future, it does mean that the world is becoming multipolar, fractured, and a little more difficult to navigate. As such, “geopolitics will (continue to) increasingly creep into economic calculations” (Bremmer, 2022) more and more. So, it is safe to argue that globalization will not render the concepts of geopolitics and Great Powers obsolete but rather influence globalization where for the near- and medium-term we may see a regression from total globalization to regionalization or smaller network interdependencies of like-minded states *a la* NATO. It is the safer route to take at this point until a nation takes the legitimate lead to reintroduce the values of globalization where armed conflict will once again be argued as what Angell preached as unprofitable and could inflict far more damage for all than if parties in disagreement sought table diplomacy instead. Matters like energy security lie in both the realms of globalization/interdependency and geopolitics, but the interests of states in a realist paradigm of international relations will seemingly always choose to take the harder path to solution and

resolution through contentious geopolitics which often relies more on armed conflict than handshakes.

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