



June 28, 2017

Annual Conference Transcript

The Return of Marco Polo's World and the U.S. Military Response

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Begin Transcript

ROBERT KAPLAN: Well, good afternoon. My name is Robert Kaplan. I'm a senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security. And, as we know, geography has been more and more in the news or in people's minds over the past few years. And I'm going to talk about Marco Polo's journey as a geographical and geopolitical framing device in order to put in context many of the conflicts around the globe – not all of them, a few of them.

In the late 13th century, Marco Polo, a Venetian explorer, went from the Adriatic Sea in Venice – and the Adriatic, as you know, breaks off – divides Central Europe from the Balkans – and he journeyed all through Turkey, all through Iran, north and south, all through Afghanistan, all through what is now Pakistan, through parts of Northern India, into Central Asia, what is now the former Soviet republics of Central Asia, and into Western China until he reached Cambulac, which is today called Beijing.

And so if you think of the geopolitical world today, where Marco Polo went really encapsulates many of the conflicts. And what did he find on the Silk Road? What did people find on the Silk Road of the late 13th century?

The more they discovered about the East, the more that Europeans learned about China and Central Asia through this increasing transportation artery, rather than the smaller the world seemed, the more overwhelming and large it seemed. And that's very much like the world we live in today. The world we live in today, we're closer to everywhere, yet geopolitically we're more and more overwhelmed about it.

Now, there's this illusion that technology has defeated geography. That's just not true. What's happened is that technology has shrunk geography. It's made it smaller. It's made our world smaller, more anxious and more claustrophobic and more overwhelming at the same time. And so think of the world today as being a web work. If you pluck one string, the whole network vibrates so that crises or rivalries in the Baltic Sea Basin, the Black Sea Basin, the East

Bold.

Innovative.

Bipartisan.

South China Seas, you know, each is interconnected to the other to a degree unimaginable a few decades ago. Roads, bridges, railways, ports, fiber optic cables all make it easier rather than harder for crises to migrate from one zone to the other.

You know, the U.S. government divides up the world bureaucratically into sections, but that's not how the world is becoming. And that's my message to you today. It's the very integration through globalization which leads to more nodal points of contact that in turn leads to more stress and more chances for flare-ups and instability.

Let me give you just one example of this, one small example. Take India and China for a moment. India and China developed more or less throughout history as two great, very different world civilizations that were separated from each other by the high wall of the Himalayas. Yes, Buddhism spread from the Indian subcontinent to China in Middle Antiquity and the Opium Wars brought the two countries, two areas together in the mid-19th century, but those were exceptions. More or less, India and China developed completely separately.

Look at the world today: India and intercontinental ballistic missiles can hit any major city in China. Chinese fighter jets in Tibet can include the Indian subcontinent in their arc of operations. You have Indian warships periodically in the South China Sea. You have Chinese warships increasingly in the Indian Ocean. And you have China either building or helping to build or finance state-of-the-art port projects in Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Tanzania and building even a military facility in Djibouti, all surrounding India, so to speak.

So it's precisely because of the defeat of distance through military technology that India and China are now linked in a new rivalry, a new strategic geography that brings them together that never existed before in history. And you can play that out around the world. So the more integrated we are, the more unstable we are, the more crises from one area can flow to another area.

Let me – all right. So let's go from Central Europe from the Adriatic all the way to China along Marco Polo's route in a way. Take Europe. Europe is disappearing while Eurasia is cohering. That doesn't mean Eurasia is becoming united. It means Eurasia can be thought of and talked about as a coherent system of conflict and rivalry that never existed before even 10 years ago, whereas what's happening in Europe is – you know, you have Europe, you have Central Europe, Poland, Hungary, which are – you know, which have new right-wing populist regimes. You have the Balkans, where the former Yugoslavia with the exception of Croatia and Slovenia and the rest of the Balkans, Bulgaria, Greece, with the exception of Romania, all are either semi-failed states or states going nowhere and is unstable as ever.

So the idea that Europe is going to have one freeze frame uni-state of the same bold color extending from Iberia to the Black Sea, which people thought of as recently as a decade ago, doesn't exist. Europe is separating out. You know, the migrating crisis is leading to different solutions and different policies in each countries. That combined with the surge of populist nationalism is making Europe less and less united.

Now, in the mid-19th century – I mean, in the mid-20th century, excuse me – there was a French – great French geographer, Fernand Braudel, who said that Europe does not end at the Mediterranean. The Mediterranean, Greece, Spain, Italy are not the southern borders of Europe. The southern borders of Europe is the Sahara Desert. It's only where the Sahara begins that Europe really ends, meaning that all the great Islamic cities of North Africa are ultimately part of the same destiny as Europe.

And we see this playing out with the collapse of states in North Africa and the Middle East, with the surge of migrants from wars in the Middle East, and with the demographic imbalance between Europe and sub-Saharan Africa. Sub-Saharan Africa will go from 1.1 billion people to three billion people or more by the end of this century, where its indigenous European population growth rate is zero. You know, it's stable. So the migration through sub-Saharan African into Europe is going to continue and to continue. So Europe is dissolving so to speak, you know, into the Near East, into other regions.

Let me talk about the Middle East now as we move east along Marco Polo's paths. I see two kinds of states in the Middle East. There are age-old clusters of civilization and vague geographical expressions. The age-old clusters of civilization we can say are Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco; in other words, places that in addition to Islamic identity, in addition to Arab identity, have a particular state identity that is secular, institutional, bureaucratic, that often goes back to antiquity. Tunisia is the heir of ancient Carthage. Egypt is the Nile River Valley civilization. Morocco has many clusters of former Roman cities.

So that these places had real authentic identities so that when the Arab Spring came about and there was regime upheaval, et cetera, there were all these debates, and, you know, questions about these countries, what kind of system it will have, what are its values, but nobody ever questioned whether the state itself would continue to exist, because the state was a given. And because it was a given, it had – you know, it had an identity. And because there was such a strong state identity, places like Tunisia and Egypt only required modest levels of authoritarianism in order to govern.

But what about the vague geographical expressions? Libya, Syria, Iraq – these were places with much less of a secular state identity and, therefore required much more extreme forms of authoritarianism in order to be held together in the first place. And in those places, between the regime at the top and the tribe and the extended family at the bottom, there was no intermediary levels of civil society because of the extremity, the suffocating nature of the totalitarianism. And the result is that when the regime was weakened in the case of Syria or toppled in the cases of Libya and Iraq, there was nothing but dust and chaos left essentially. And that is the ultimate kind of – you know, the fundamental reason why we're seeing the continuation of fighting there.

Now, in addition, you have two even more well-developed, articulated civilizations in the Middle East: Turkey and Iran. I can tell you from traveling through Iran, when Marco Polo was up and down Iran is that Iran has a civilizational sense of itself that only the Indians and the

Chinese have. And that you will not find to such a deeply articulated, sophisticated degree in almost any part of the Arab world.

So Iran may be an adversary, but keep one thing in mind: there will always be an Iranian state and it will always be formidable, whether it was Parthian, Median, Achaemenid, Sassanian, you know, one-Persian language civilization after another on the same Iranian plateau going back 2,500 years. So Iran is here to stay. It's permanent.

I cannot say the same thing about Saudi Arabia, which has probably reached its geopolitical high point, it's reached peak geopolitical projection power because Saudi Arabia is no longer the swing producer of hydrocarbons thanks to the Texas – you know, to the Texas-centered shale gas boom and so on. Saudi Arabia just as you know, you know, has started an embargo against Qatar – you know, led an embargo against Qatar. Twenty years ago, Saudi Arabia would never have to have done that in the first place. It would have gotten cooperation it needed from a country like Qatar without having to go to this much trouble. So the very fact of this Saudi move against Qatar is in my opinion a show of Saudi weakness, not Saudi strength.

Turkey too is like Iran – Seljuk, Ottoman, going back to the Middle Ages, there was always a Turkic state on the Anatolian Plateau and the Turks also have a strong civilizational sense of themselves. So think of Turkey and Iran as two imperial systems with an imperial mentality that exists right up until today.

But there's a question, there's an irony here, which is if you go throughout former Soviet Central Asia – again, we're moving east now – with the exception of Tajikistan, where there's a Persianized (sp) language spoken, all the other languages of former Soviet Central Asia are Turkic. And Azerbaijani is very close to Turkish itself. Yet the Turks have very little influence there. You know, given the cultural affinity, the size of their economy, you know, their influence should be much greater than it is.

The same with Iran. If you're in Ashgabat, the capital of Turkmenistan, or you're in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, the closest big city that is a real mega-city with a pulsing cultural ambiance is Tehran. And you would think, normally – and, remember, because of where Iran is located, it is as much a Central Asian country as it is a Middle Eastern country. Yet Iran exercises relatively less influence in Central Asia than one would normally expect.

So what's causing all this? It's because the more Islamic Turkey becomes, and because of Iran's already developed Islamic religiosity, this is not attractive to the very secular, former Soviet societies throughout Muslim Central Asia, where alcohol is consumed in reasonable amounts, where the whole culture is different.

So, actually, ironically, if Iran were ever to reform and become a more moderate, normal state, with less of an emphasis on Islam, you would see then Iranian power magnify in Central Asia rather than where it is now.

So Iran and Turkey are not exercising the influence that they should be in Central Asia. Who is? Well, it's the Chinese versus the Russians. And in short order, the Chinese are beating the pants off the Russians out there in terms of – the Chinese have been building roads, railways, pipelines throughout Central Asia to bring oil and natural gas directly into Western China because despite all of the technology of the last 1,000 years, the Strait of Malacca is no wider than it was then. And because of that, Chinese oil supplies are vulnerable coming through the Strait of Malacca, and, therefore, China needs alternative pathways into there.

And this is where I get to one belt, one road, or belt and road, China's new silk route. I'm going to talk about one belt, one road in a way that it has not been discussed I don't think previously.

And that is, number one, one belt, one road is a branding operation. It's branding what China has in fact already done in former Soviet Central Asia with the building of roads, railways and pipeline which are already a decade old in many cases. So it's giving a name to what China's already done.

Another thing, one belt, one road is a Chinese grand strategy of sorts. It's aspirational more than declarational. There's no promise that China will achieve it, will achieve even 50 percent of it, but it sets a goal for China, you know, a direction that they could hope to achieve part of. And in that sense, it's a far more articulated grand strategy than anything the United States has.

And if you look at the math, the pathways of one belt, one road, what you will see is it almost duplicates exactly the Tang dynasty in early medieval period and the Yuan dynasty in the high middle ages, which was the dynasty that Marco Polo encountered when it came to Cambulac, or Beijing.

The other issue about one belt, one road is that, remember, China actually does not have much of a naval or maritime tradition, with the exception of the early Ming Dynasty. So China's ability to go to sea, to concentrate so much on the South and East China Seas is mainly because China has the luxury to do so and it has the luxury to do so because China is more secure on land than at almost any time in its past. And China, therefore, needs to stay secure on land in order to continue to emphasize the South and East China Seas.

And one belt, one road helps them do that because China has an ethnic problem: the Turkic Uighur Muslims, because Western China is really East Turkistan, which Marco Polo went all through. And the Chinese are afraid, have been afraid of increasing Uighur terrorism, uprising, et cetera. So one belt, one road is a solution to this or a partial solution.

First of all, it ties in China diplomatically, economically with the Uighur's fellow Turkic republics in former Soviet Central Asia so that the Uighur Muslims never have a rear base in case – in any future (morrow ?), you know, they launch some kind of a rebellion against Han Chinese rule. And also, one belt, one road, by going west into Central Asia develops Western China and develops the standard of living of Turkic Uighur Muslims who live there, and this

makes them less likely to rebel in the first place. So it's China's internal demons which are driving its external grand strategy of one belt, one road, and beyond.

Then there's another area of Marco Polo's pathway was Afghanistan. And what's interesting about Afghanistan is that there's a spur line to one belt, one road that will create roads, railways, pipelines going south from Western China, the city of Kashgar directly south, all through Pakistan, all the way to the Indian Ocean. And the Chinese-built port of Gwadar.

Now, competing with that Chinese-Pakistan project is an Indian-Iranian project going all the way through western Afghanistan, south to the Iranian port of Chabahar. Chabahar is in the southeastern tip of Iran. Gwadar is in the southwestern tip of Pakistan. They're only about 150 miles apart, two competing pathways linking oil, gas-rich Central Asia with the Indian Ocean. And China is going to spend \$46 billion on this Pakistan spur. And I'm skeptical about it, but the Chinese are doing it or claim they're going to do it because they have buy-in from the Pakistan Army who apparently will help stabilize Pakistan, which I don't believe will happen. But, anyway, that's one of the plans of one belt, one road.

So, finally, what does all this boil down to? It boils down to the United States of America has the same challenge in Eurasia that the British had in early modern and modern history on the mainland Europe. British grand strategy on mainland Europe, whether it was under Castlereagh in the 19th century Napoleonic era or Churchill in World War II was to prevent any one power on the European mainland from dominating Europe. And it should be American strategy to prevent any one power or group of powers, like China linked with Iran through one belt, one road, from dominating the Eurasian supercontinent.

So what mainland Europe was to British strategists, Eurasia should be to American strategists. And there are all kinds of American military responses to this – more coaling stations for the Navy operating below the battalion level. It's all in my essay on this, which is on the CNAS website. And thank you very much for your time. (Applause.)

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