

The Geopolitics of Security in the Americas

*Hemispheric Denial from
Monroe to Clinton*

MARTIN SICKER

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Introduction

The writing of this book was undertaken as part of an effort begun by me more than a decade ago to explore the geopolitical factors behind the foreign policies of the major powers. An earlier work, *The Strategy of Soviet Imperialism: Expansion in Eurasia* (1988), focused primarily on Russia's perceived need to establish frontiers that would inhibit the repeated invasions that plagued it throughout its history. A second volume, *The Bear and the Lion: Soviet Imperialism and Iran* (1988), dealt with Russia's long-standing perceived need to break out of its continental confinement and gain direct access to the warm seas of the Indian Ocean. The present work directs its primary attention to the situation of the United States within the Western Hemisphere and the geopolitical and geostrategic factors that have helped shape its policies toward Latin America.

The geopolitical approach taken in this work is still controversial in U.S. academic circles because of the misuse of geopolitical analysis by Germany to justify its program of expansion that triggered World War II. Geopolitics, the relationship between geography and power politics, thus came into disrepute and is only lately emerging from the shadows as a valid approach to understanding the realpolitik of international relations. At the same time, it should be noted that geopolitical thinking and writing has prospered in South America, particularly in Argentina and Chile, where it has appar-

ently exerted a notable influence on strategic policymaking. This work will argue, however, that geopolitical thinking, albeit largely unacknowledged, has always underlain much of U.S. foreign policy toward the nations of the Western Hemisphere.

The reasons for this begin to become apparent once one considers how a nation goes about determining why it should have a foreign policy and then proceeds to formulate one in response to that question. The process by which this is done usually takes the form of challenge and response. Nations do not normally come into being imbued with a fervent desire to share their good fortune with others. Quite to the contrary, emerging nations tend to want to preserve and secure their blessings, and where these are not adequate for their perceived needs, to take the steps necessary to obtain them. In other words, scarcity of desirable goods, whether material or psychological, has typically led neighboring nations (and what constitutes a neighbor will change with technological developments in communications and transportation) into conflict with each other.

The critical question then becomes how one proceeds to resolve or prevent such conflicts. In this regard, the modern liberal paradigm for our perspectives on the world asserts that man, through the intelligent application of his rational faculty, is capable of imposing his will on many aspects of his social as well as physical environment. In the study of politics and international affairs, this notion is reflected in the appealing thesis that virtually every intranational or international conflict can be resolved peacefully by the conscious application of man's will and reason. It suggests that what it takes is the willingness of the protagonists to sit down around a conference table, to argue their respective cases, and to reach a principled compromise. What those inclined to accept the validity of this premise frequently ignore is the fact that a nation's control over its physical and political environments is at best a qualified one. It may be constrained by factors over which its leaders have little or no control, which in turn may limit the practicable options available to them. Indeed, such factors may effectively predispose their probable choices, and there is no assurance that objective reason alone will carry the day under any given set of circumstances.

The central underlying thesis of this work is that there are a number of relatively constant environmental factors that have helped *condition*—not *determine*—the course of the political history of the Western Hemisphere over the past two centuries. It is men and not environmental factors that ultimately determine the course that a nation will take in pursuing its self-perceived interests. Nonetheless, this work will demonstrate that environmental factors, which are primarily but by no means exclusively geographic and topographic in nature, have contributed heavily to

establishing the patterns of state development and interstate relations in the Western Hemisphere that have remained remarkably consistent throughout the modern history of the region.

The geopolitical environment of the Western Hemisphere over the last two centuries has been conditioned to a large extent by the emergence of the United States as the unquestionably dominant power in the extensive region. It is important to recognize, however, that that status did not exist at the time of its achievement of independence. It was brought about through almost incessant conflict with, and expansion at the expense of, other states, nations, and peoples for more than a century. As a result, the concerns and interests of the dominant power become, of necessity, factors that states beyond the borders of the United States must take into consideration when pursuing their own national interests and policies. Indeed, as will amply be demonstrated in the chapters that follow, failure to do so will often produce undesirable consequences for the offending state.

This is not to suggest that the interests of the United States have been and remain so pervasive that the other states of the Western Hemisphere have been reduced to nothing more than U.S. satellites. That is, there is no valid comparison with the situation of the central and former East European countries during the heyday of the Soviet Union. Nonetheless, it would be counterfactual to suggest that any hemispheric state could with impunity take actions that affected significant U.S. interests negatively, particularly with regard to matters concerning national security, as they may be defined by Washington. As one analyst recently put it, "Stripped of the rhetoric of collective security, the U.S.–Latin America security relationship up to the present is best described as hegemonic."¹ And it is with the issues of hemispheric security that this book is primarily concerned.

At the same time, it is important to bear in mind that the states in the Western Hemisphere each have their own geopolitical interests and concerns independent of the presence of the United States. As will be seen throughout this work, and especially in the chapter devoted to inter-American conflicts, many of the nations of Latin America have unresolved territorial conflicts with their neighbors that date to their very origins as independent states. Following their liberation from Spanish colonial rule in the early nineteenth century, many of these new states found that the administrative divisions from which they evolved had ill-defined borders, and in some instances borders that threatened their economic and political viability. Because of this troubled geopolitical legacy, there have been numerous conflicts among the states of Latin America, some of which the United States has attempted to mediate or arbitrate, and some that seem impervious to a permanent negotiated settlement.

Put simply, the geopolitical history of the Western Hemisphere is as complex as that of any other region of the world and does not lend itself to simple analysis and generalization. One of the more significant conceptual problems encountered in a consideration of the geopolitics of security in this hemisphere is the lack of a common perception among the actors involved regarding the motivations behind U.S. security policies that affect relationships to and among the states of the region.

It should be noted in this regard that it would prove useful, in considering the history of those relationships, to draw as clear a distinction as possible between rhetorical policies and real policies. Most states—including democracies, and the United States serves as an exemplar of this—tend to justify their actions with often high-sounding moral rhetoric that may have little or, more often than not, nothing to do with their actual motivations. Of course, one could argue that moral considerations should have great weight in the foreign policy decisions of states and nations, particularly democracies. Indeed, as Hans Morgenthau has suggested, when we consider what statesmen and diplomats are capable of doing, but do not actually do because of moral concerns, we should not casually dismiss the impact of moral considerations on political decision making. Thus, in some instances, “they refuse to consider certain ends and to use certain means, either altogether or under certain circumstances, not because in the light of expediency they appear impractical or unwise, but because certain moral rules interpose an absolute barrier.”²

Morgenthau penned these words shortly after the end of World War II when there was still a widespread sense of revulsion against the horrors perpetrated during that period. Unfortunately, since then this moral desideratum has been more noticeable by its absence than by its presence as a determining factor in foreign affairs decision making. It therefore behooves us to bear in mind that man is not only a rational being, but also one endowed with an extraordinary capacity for rationalization. As history has repeatedly shown, one can morally justify virtually anything, making it extraordinarily difficult to dissect any particular policy to determine its moral pathology.

Because of this, no study dealing with international geopolitical realities can put much stock in declarative policies such as those aimed at instituting or restoring democracy in a particular country. This is especially the case when the declaring country simultaneously renders unconditioned support to other nondemocratic countries. Such rhetorical policies may serve as fig leaves for otherwise questionable decisions; they do not as a rule significantly influence them. Accordingly, it is not the purpose of this study to vindicate the appropriateness of U.S. policies toward the hemisphere and

its nations, nor is it my concern to challenge their validity against some ephemeral standard of international morality. This book is neither an apology for nor a polemic against U.S. policy in the Americas. What is of primary concern is how the United States has in fact exercised its considerable power to serve its geopolitical interests in the Western Hemisphere over the effective course of its history.

I would suggest that the character of the actual policies pursued by Washington may perhaps best be grasped by applying the definitions proposed by Morgenthau in his classic *Politics among Nations* (1949). He argued, especially in the context of international affairs, that all national policies could be reduced to three basic types, “to keep power, to increase power, or to demonstrate power.” Accordingly, he asserted:

A nation whose foreign policy tends toward keeping power and not toward changing the distribution of power in its favor pursues a policy of the status quo. A nation whose foreign policy aims at acquiring more power than it actually has through expansion of its power beyond its frontiers, whose foreign policy, in other words, seeks a favorable change in power status, pursues a policy of imperialism. A nation whose foreign policy aims to demonstrate the power it has, either for the purpose of maintaining or increasing it, pursues a policy of prestige.³

It is noteworthy that in this scheme there is no provision for power projection based on nonpolitical factors such as those usually reflected in the often cynical but ostensibly pious justifications offered by statesmen.

It seems quite evident that, during the course of its history, the United States has pursued each of these types of foreign policies, occasionally two or more of them at the same time. Thus, it proclaimed the Monroe Doctrine, a clearly status quo policy with respect to Europe, at the same time that it was pursuing a policy of imperialist expansion in North America. However, it is worth bearing in mind, as Morgenthau argued, that territorial expansion does not in itself necessarily imply a foreign policy of imperialism as long as the territory acquired does not fundamentally alter the balance of power between the states concerned.⁴ An example of this was the U.S. acquisition of Alaska from Russia in 1867, which did not change the relative power balance between them because of the relative inaccessibility of Alaska to Russia under the prevailing state of communications and transportation in the nineteenth century. Similarly, the acquisition of the Virgin Islands from Denmark in 1917 did not change the status quo between the United States and the Central American states; however, it did significantly improve the U.S. strategic position with regard to the defense of the Panama Canal.

Nonetheless, this approach to understanding the foreign policies of nations, and particularly those of the United States, does not correspond very closely with the understanding of the matter by many in Latin America, who define the concept of “imperialism” rather differently. An example of such an alternate understanding of the concept is the assertion made in 1923 by the Argentine writer Manuel Ugarte:

Imperialism begins at the point where the combination of homogeneous elements ends, and a sphere of military, political, or commercial oppression by extraneous bodies begins. . . . Whether it be a question of coercion and military conquest, or of infiltration and indirect penetration; whether the intervention be solely by means of diplomacy or commerce, or whether the appeal be to arms, imperialism always exists when a people turns aside from its course to invade, directly or indirectly, lands, interests, or consciences which have no antecedents or bonds of similarity drawing them to it.⁵

Seen through the prism of this definition of imperialism, virtually all the policies and actions of the United States in the Western Hemisphere may be seen as essentially imperialistic in character, including the acquisitions of Alaska and the Virgin Islands. Moreover, this Latin American perspective on what constitutes imperialism goes far beyond merely territorial expansion to include even what is sometimes called cultural imperialism. Accordingly, the use by Latin Americans of the epithet “imperialist” when speaking of the United States should not simply be dismissed as a meaningless slur—it also represents an alternate perception that differs widely from that commonly held in the United States.

These sometimes diametrically opposed perceptions of U.S. policies and actions with respect to its own security as well as that of the hemisphere have continued to plague relations in the region to this day. Given the preponderant power of the United States, and its history of seemingly little reluctance to throw its impressive weight around as it sees fit, it is little wonder that it is more often respected than revered for the protective security umbrella it has attempted to hold over the hemisphere.

As indicated, the aim of this book is to explore dispassionately how the problems of both external and internal security in the hemisphere have been articulated and dealt with over the past two centuries, focusing particularly on the role of the United States as the dominant hemispheric power. Because of its delimited focus, the work does not deal with the extensive diplomatic history of intrahemispheric relations or with the issues of economic relations, except insofar as they have significant geopolitical ramifications.

It is my hope that this study will further illustrate the utility of a geopolitical approach to understanding and evaluating the foreign policies

of major as well as minor powers as they continue to interact on the global stage of international politics. If political developments around the world, including those taking place in Latin America and the Caribbean Basin at the turn of the twenty-first century, are any indication, the years ahead will bear witness to the geopolitical dimensions if not underpinnings of the still unresolved and newly emerging challenges confronting the United States and its hemispheric neighbors.

NOTES

1. David R. Mares, "Inter-American Security Communities: Challenges and Concepts," p. 271.
2. Hans Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, pp. 174–75.
3. Ibid., pp. 3–4.
4. Ibid., p. 25.
5. Manuel Ugarte, *The Destiny of a Continent*, p. xix.

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The Doctrine of Hemispheric Denial

The Treaty of Paris of 1783, which ended the war between Britain and the United States, awarded boundaries to the new state that clearly encroached on Spain's interests in the region. Because Spain had seen it as in its geopolitical interest to weaken the British presence in the hemisphere, it had rendered some aid to the struggle of the North American British colonies for independence. With the conclusion of the struggle, Britain took the opportunity to retaliate against Spain by simply ignoring its interests in North America. Thus, Britain and the United States agreed that both states were to have the right of unimpeded navigation on the Mississippi. However, since Spain was not a party to the bilateral pact, it felt no obligation to recognize either the southern or western boundaries of the United States as specified in the treaty, or to grant the freedom of navigation on the Mississippi that it proclaimed.

To complicate matters further, a separate treaty concluded between Britain and Spain awarded the Floridas to the latter, but did not specify the boundaries of the awarded territory. It seems clear that the British intended that Britain would hem in the United States to the north and that Spain do likewise to the south and west. In effect, notwithstanding the tensions between Britain and Spain, the new nation would be subject to an Anglo-Spanish stranglehold. Thus, it came about that, not long after Britain's

formal recognition of the independence of the United States in 1783, the new country began to take a significant interest in the sentiment for independence from European colonial rule, especially that of Spain, taking root in Latin America.

At the same time, Spain became determined to keep the newly emerging country from expanding its sway to the Mississippi River, as well as to assert undisputed Spanish control over the Floridas, which were to be transferred to it from Britain. Neither of these aims was perceived by the fledgling American republic as being in its interest, immediately placing it on an ultimate collision course that would reach its climax a century later.

In compliance with Spain's policy to contain U.S. expansion inland from the Atlantic coast, Bernardo de Gálvez, the governor of New Orleans, refused to grant the United States the right to unrestricted navigation of the Mississippi. Moreover, he also denied it free access to the port in New Orleans, effectively denying the United States a maritime link between its western reaches and its major centers on the Atlantic coast through the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean. Subsequently, the Spanish took control of the region of the Mississippi both north and south of Natchez to forestall the possibility of a British seizure of territory along the river. They also took control of Mobile and Pensacola to secure their access to Florida.

The situation changed dramatically in 1789 because of the French Revolution and the geopolitical turmoil involving both Britain and Spain that attended it. Further compounding the problem was the untimely transformation of the United States from a weak confederacy of states to a federation with a strong central government. As a result, neither Britain nor Spain was in a position to commit much of its energy to the Americas at the time. Because of this, the 1783 boundaries for the United States set forth in the Treaty of Paris were reaffirmed in the Jay Treaty of 1794 with the British, and in the Pinckney Treaty of 1795 with the Spanish.

It is perhaps somewhat surprising that the first venture of the United States into Latin American affairs placed it on a collision course with France, the country that had supported its own bid for independence from Great Britain. A flourishing trade had developed between New England and the French colony of St. Dominique (Haiti) during the eighteenth century. Of particular significance to the United States was the fact that the colony had become a key base for the transshipment of French-originated military supplies during the American Revolutionary War. The commercial ties between the new republic and St. Dominique were further expanded after the war, with the latter supplying about half of the U.S. demand for coffee and sugar.

The island colony subsequently undertook its own violent struggle for independence from France in 1791, inspired to a large extent by the turmoil that accompanied the French Revolution, which had created political instability in the island. Initially, U.S. support for the Haitian independence movement was minimal because of the resulting sharp drop in exports of coffee and sugar. However, once the United States began to encounter its own problems with France on the high seas near the turn of the century, the situation changed dramatically.

U.S. concern about France's ambitions in the hemisphere became heightened in 1800 as a result of the retrocession of the Louisiana Territory from Spain to France, from which Spain had received it in 1769. The geopolitical implications of this transfer for the United States were clearly spelled out by President Thomas Jefferson on April 18, 1802, in a long letter to his minister to France:

There is on the globe one single spot, the possessor of which is our natural and habitual enemy. It is New Orleans, through which the produce of three-eighths of our territory must pass to market.... France, placing herself in that door assumes to us the attitude of defiance. Spain might have retained it quietly for years. Her pacific dispositions, her feeble state, would induce her to increase our facilities there...and it would not perhaps be very long before some circumstance might arise which might make cession of it to us the price of something of more worth to her. Not so can it ever be in the hands of France.... The day that France takes possession of N. Orleans fixes the sentence which is to restrain her forever within her low water mark. It seals the union of two nations who in conjunction can maintain exclusive possession of the ocean. From that moment we must marry ourselves to the British fleet and nation. We must turn all our attentions to a maritime force...and having formed and cemented together a power which may render reinforcement of her settlements here impossible to France, make the first cannon, which shall be fired in Europe the signal for tearing up any settlement she may have made, and for holding the two continents of America in sequestration for the common purposes of the United British and American nations. This is not a state of things we seek or desire. It is one which this measure, if adopted by France, forces on us, as necessarily as any other cause, by the laws of nature, brings on its necessary effect.¹

Jefferson went on to suggest that an alternative to such a dramatic response to the French initiative might be to reach an accommodation that would allay his concerns. "If France considers Louisiana however as indispensable for her views, she might perhaps be willing to look about for arrangements which might reconcile it to our interests. If anything could do this, it would be the ceding to us the island of New Orleans and the Floridas. This would certainly in a great degree remove the causes of jarring and irritation between us."

At the same time that negotiations were underway in Paris, the United States concluded a trade agreement with the Haitian independence movement and began to provide assistance to the rebel leader Toussaint l'Ouverture, who was captured by the French and soon died in prison in France. Nonetheless, the French were unable to suppress the rebellion in the colony and were effectively compelled to withdraw in 1803, their army decimated by yellow fever. With the help of the United States, which was provided primarily for commercial rather than ideological reasons, Haiti finally proclaimed its independence from France on January 1, 1804, under the leadership of Jean-Jacques Dessalines, who subsequently crowned himself as emperor but was assassinated as a tyrant in 1806.

Having been forced to withdraw from Haiti, and faced with a renewal of war with Britain, France decided to sell Louisiana to the United States in 1803. This not only helped provide additional resources for that conflict, it also effectively precluded the anti-French alliance between the United States and Britain that Jefferson had threatened. The net result for the United States was the virtual doubling of its territory and consequently a more intense interest in obtaining control of Florida from Spain and thereby enhancing the security of the frontiers of the now vast country from intervention by the European powers. This interest was soon coupled with developments in Latin America that were placing heavy pressure on the Spanish position in the hemisphere.

For the decade 1798–1808, U.S. interests in Latin America and its independence movements remained primarily commercial in character; U.S. actions and policies were not fundamentally political and were determined more by the merchants of New England, Philadelphia, and New York than by the central government. However, this approach to Latin American affairs was already beginning to undergo a significant change toward the end of Jefferson's presidential term. The politicization of U.S. interests in Latin America began to take clearer form as a consequence of the Napoleonic Wars. Napoléon Bonaparte's invasion and occupation of the Iberian Peninsula in 1807 and 1808 brought about a severance of commercial relations between Latin America and Europe and a subsequent transfer of those commercial ties to the United States.

Napoléon also dramatically altered the political situation of the overseas colonies of Spain and Portugal in the Americas. He drove the royal house of Braganza from Portugal to Brazil, ousted the Spanish Bourbons, and put his brother Joseph Bonaparte on the throne in Madrid. However, he was unable to extend his conquests to the Americas because of the virtual destruction of his navy by the British at the battle of Trafalgar in 1805. The net result was a significant weakening of Spanish control over its empire in the

hemisphere, which now faced prospective revolts by its several colonies. This gave the United States a much greater stake in the success of the emerging Latin American independence movements that were beginning to attempt to fill the power vacuum that had developed throughout the Western Hemisphere.

There had been notable concern in the United States about the power vacuum in the region and that the relatively weak rule by Spain not be replaced with that of more powerful France or Great Britain. These concerns were well founded. As early as 1797 the British seized the strategically and economically important Spanish island of Trinidad, off the coast of Venezuela, tried to take control of the Río de la Plata region in South America in 1806, and occupied Buenos Aires and Montevideo for some time.

Accordingly, on October 22, 1808, in response to overtures for support from Mexican and Cuban independence leaders, Jefferson and his cabinet agreed that they be told:

If you remain under the domination of the kingdom and family of Spain, we are contented; but we should be extremely unwilling to see you pass under the dominion or ascendancy of France or England. In the latter cases should you choose to declare independence, we cannot now commit ourselves by saying we would make common cause with you but must reserve ourselves to act according to the then existing circumstances, but in our proceedings we shall be influenced by friendship to you, by a firm belief that our interests are intimately connected, and by the strongest repugnance to see you under subordination to either France or England, either politically or commercially.²

A week later, Jefferson further elaborated his emerging hemispheric policy to the governor of Louisiana: “If they [the Spanish patriots] succeed [in their resistance to Napoléon] we shall be well satisfied to see Cuba and Mexico remain in their present dependence, but very unwilling to see them in that of France or England, politically or commercially. We consider their interests and ours as the same, and that the object of both must be to exclude all European influence from this hemisphere.”³

Although the U.S. government now displayed a greater political interest in and sympathy for the struggle of the Latin American peoples for independence from colonial rule, the United States having only recently achieved its own independence was constrained to render its support to the independence movements informally. Revolutionary agents were able to arrange for the purchase and shipments of arms from the United States, and U.S. privateers operating in the area of La Plata assisted José Artigas in the struggle for the independence of Uruguay. Officially, however, the United States adopted a policy of neutrality.