Interview – Colin Flint

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Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

First, I should tell everyone that I am a geographer by training. All three of my degrees are in the discipline of geography. For many people, geography is a quiz category, a list of facts about mountains, capital cities, etc. How can you get an advanced degree in that?! Academic geography is a theoretically based social science, with some overlap with the humanities, that sees the social construction of places, territories, regions, networks, and scales as inseparable from the processes studied by political science and international relations scholars.

I don't mean to give a lecture, but this understanding of who I am and what, as a geographer, I do is important to get at the term "field" in the question. I am a political geographer who is informed by world-systems analysis writing on the topic of the relative decline of the US as a hegemonic power, and the rise of China as a challenger, with a focus on seapower. Relations between the Global North and Global South play a big role in how I approach this topic.

Having said that, I see the most exciting development in my field as not a "what" but a "who." The perspective on political geography, especially global scale changes, was once dominated by European and US voices. In fact, British and Irish scholars led the revival of political geography in the 1980s, though often based in US universities. Japanese scholars played a key role too. Now voices from China and the Global South are playing an increasing part in knowledge production. As we face a period of geopolitical competition, it is important that these different voices come together in dialogue. It is also the responsibility of senior scholars and journal editors to facilitate that dialogue. Now scholars, such as those in Iran, remain wedded to the theories of classic geopoliticians (such as Mackinder). Western scholars can learn from this focus on older theories, usually discredited by critical geographers, without dismissing them, while introducing scholars from the Global South to new theories. Putting pre-prints on ResearchGate and in articles on sites like E-Internaional Relations can help as scholars in the Global South struggle for access to journals.

In terms of approaches in the field, I sense a swing back to global and structural arguments that were criticized with the emergence of post-modernism and post-structuralism and the rejection of meta-narratives. For good or bad, we are experiencing change on a global scale. The global has to be seen as a system. I feel the onus is upon political geography scholars who focus on contingency and assemblages to say how smaller scale settings fit into the bigger picture.

Finally, I see exciting opportunities in the conversations between geographers, political scientists, and scholars in related fields around topics of peace that require consideration of the social construction of places and scales. Most

critical peace scholars seem to "get" what academic geography is all about. I'll expand on that in my response to the next question.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I was fortunate in the way that my undergraduate and graduate education blended very different but complementary approaches. I was a non-traditional student and was trepidatious entering the Geography program at the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. My eyes were opened by the teaching and scholarship of Peter J. Taylor who introduced me to world-systems analysis. He also gave me the courage to pursue graduate degrees and, ultimately, a career in academia.

I did my Master's and Ph.D. degrees at the University of Colorado-Boulder with John O'Loughlin as my advisor. In a dizzying switch, I was soon learning spatial statistics and applying the techniques to the electoral geography of the Nazi party. I learned an analytical and deductive approach, and my ability to conduct statistical analysis got me my first two jobs.

Lynn Staeheli, a pioneer of feminist geography, served on my graduate committees. She insisted I look beyond structural imperatives and the rigidity of statistics. Her influence allowed me to think across the discipline. That made me a more rounded scholar and enabled me to take on roles such as journal editor and putting together edited volumes that included a variety of theoretical perspectives. In combination, I've retained my interest in "thinking big" with global and structural approaches while considering research design and inference, and non-deterministic categories.

Throughout that process I have engaged the scholarship of world-systems analysis – the foundation of my approach. Hence, I am indebted and in awe of the contribution made by Immanuel Wallerstein. I found Giovanni Arrighi's work to be particularly useful for my thinking on geopolitics, and Andre Gunder Frank's approach to what we call today Global North-Global South relations. The scholarship of Christopher Chase-Dunn and Bob Denemark helped me see the benefits of blending an analytical and historical approach with the world-systems framework.

More recently I've been invigorated by a discussion with peace studies scholars (geographers and non-geographers). Working with Kara E. Dempsey on an edited volume of geography scholarship helped me engage younger geography scholars. Collaboration with Annika Björkdahl, Gearoid Millar, and others has shown me how geography can contribute to cross-disciplinary debates, and how geographers can learn from others. It also helps me be more positive: Thinking about how peace is, and can be built, and divert me from my tendency to think about conflict.

To what extent has China's Belt and Road Initiative strengthened its geopolitical influence since its launch in 2013?

The BRI is the necessary infrastructure for China to seal its position as the world's largest trading nation. The BRI should not be thought of in narrow terms – as just roads, railways, airports, and ports. It is also a set of agreements that tie countries into engagement with China. It's often seen through a geographic lens – the connection of nodes through the BRI, and the corridors that partially constitute it, that spread across oceans and continents. The BRI should also be seen through a temporal lens. World-systems analysis identifies a hegemonic country as one that gains global dominance first in manufacturing, then trade, then finance. The BRI plays an important role for China, as a conduit for exports that mitigate what would otherwise be domestic overcapacity. The outstanding question is whether dominance in global trade will lead to China gaining financial dominance, with the Yuan eclipsing the US dollar as the currency of global commerce. We are a long way from that and many doubt that will happen. Yet China has managed to ensure some payments are made in Yuan. Simply, watch this space…

These economic processes and connections are geopolitical. My approach is not to divide (geo)economic and (geo)political processes. They are dual strategies in a single political-economy logic. Commentary on the BRI often

gets most animated when China builds or appears to build, military installations in ports. Or focus is often on military muscle and island building in the South China Sea. However, these manifestations are just the clear military element of a process in which China is seeking economic ties that enable the import of inputs and the export of finished goods to build its economy. The result is "interests" in other countries (a term we barely consider when it comes to US "interests." These "interests" – sites of investment and production need protection, as do the trade routes to and from China. Hence, the militarization of the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean region.

The other point about "influence" is not what but where. Classic geopolitics has a tendency to focus on great powers and ignore the rest of the world. This is a mistake. The influence China has gained is, to date, primarily in the Global South. Throughout history this has been the strategy to becoming a hegemon; gain dominance in the poorer countries to access inputs into your economy, at the expense of competitors. For obvious reasons, great powers want to avoid direct conflict, so competition often takes the form of proxy conflicts in faraway places. These conflicts often take place to defend "interests" with the help of friendly governments, not necessarily acting in the best interest of their citizens.

The BRI has enabled China in these processes, and the trend seems to be in their favor. On the other hand, many BRI projects remain incomplete or even seemingly abandoned. There is no fait accompli, but the BRI has given China the competitive edge.

What key factors have led to greater economic and political cooperation among countries in the Global South in recent years?

I find this moment of Chinese cooperation with the Global South very interesting. I'm tempted to say that it is old wine in new bottles, but that is not quite the whole story. First, let's look behind the rhetoric. China is establishing Global North-Global South relations that have remained broadly consistent since the end of formal imperialism. These are the relations described within the ideas of dependence between metropoles and periphery. Investment and the creation of debt conditions are part and parcel of these relations. That's why the wails of indignation from Western countries about Chinese created "debt traps" should be approached with cynicism: These relationships (managed by the IMF and World Bank) have been a dominant and persistent feature of the post-Second World War. Deborah Brautigam and her team have done an excellent job of documenting Chinese loans and providing evidence to counter geopolitical representations that suggest China is doing something unique, rather than establishing relations modeled on previous connections.

The same can be said of trade relations. The consistent model of unequal exchange remains. The differences are two-fold. It is now China that is the dominant trading partner, and sustainable energy and super-computing/AI technology have made the mining of and trade in new super critical minerals the new frontier of trade. Different stuff, same unequal relations.

Second, is what could be different in China's relations with the Global South, and for that, we should think about the actions and concerns of the countries of the Global South – or why do many seem eager to build relations with China? The reason is that the Rostowian model of developmentalism has failed. It has not failed in the minds of the UN or IMF and is still hailed faithfully in publications like The Economist. But the idea that pursuing "the right policies" imposed upon Global South countries by Global North countries will lead to growth in national wealth rings hollow for much of the world. The messages of connections that are "mutually beneficial", "South-South cooperation" and "win-win relations" sound like a promising reset, though rhetoric that can be easily exposed. For countries of the Global South, why not try to engage those new ideas, especially when they're connected to investment in infrastructure? And let's not forget, China's strategy of not worrying about a regime's human rights record and not preaching the benefits of "democratization."

Hence, it is a fascinating moment in which the Rostowian ideology of Global North-Global South relations seems to be on its last legs, a new rhetoric has appeared, but the relations that maintain Global North-Global South relations are likely to continue. The tensions that arise from persistent inequality suggest that China will be forced to steadily increase its military presence in the Global South to "police" its "interests" just as the US did post-Second World

War, and the British before them.

Are ports regaining their strategic importance in geopolitics, or have they never lost their status as critical geopolitical assets?

They have always been important but come to the fore at periods of geopolitical transition. The ability to control ports across the globe enables trade across oceans and reach into continental hinterlands. I grew up in Dover in the southeast of England. At the time (the 1970s) it was, I believe, the busiest passenger ferry port in the world. Some classrooms in my school provided a nice view of the ferries coming and going, a ready distraction. Dover was a key port for the Romans, and ruins of a Roman lighthouse remain. Dover was one of the Cinque ports of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, a network of ports in southern England with special responsibility for the defence of England. It was a key port in the Napoleonic era wars, and French prisoners of war were housed in tunnels dug into the chalk cliffs; their graffiti can still be seen. Crucial also in the world wars, where bunkers in the cliffs (using the Napeonic era tunnels) were used as the command control post for the Dunkirk evacuation. Though the relative importance of Dover as a port has now waned, the example shows that a port is likely to retain its importance over the centuries.

Why? Because ports enable defence of home waters, and the ability to project power over the horizon, and even across the globe. Controlling ports in other countries through investment and management deals enables a country to extend these port functions into extraterritorial locations, or ports in other countries. The ability to control ports across the globe is what Hassan Noorali and I have called "Port Power." As with most things geopolitical, there is little attention to such phenomena in a period of stability, or a geopolitical world order. It is when things change that we take notice. And that is happening today with China's development of the BRI requiring the establishment of a network of ports; some primarily economic in function (such as Piraeus in Greece) and others with clear military intention such as (Ream in Cambodia). The important function of ports remains constant, but they are currently focal points of strategic competition.

Why should we focus on the geopolitics of sea power today?

Because similar contexts of competition between sea powers have led to global war. In my book*Near and Far Waters: The Geopolitics of Seapower* I trace the history of Dutch seapower in (roughly) the 1600s, British seapower in the 1800s, and US seapower in the 1900s to the present. The goal is to understand the contemporary context of, seemingly, declining US and rising Chinese seapower. The geopolitical process is one in which a country that controls its near waters (those close to its coast) is able to project power into far waters (the near waters of other countries) for economic and strategic gain.

Of course, history does not give us simple or perfectly transferable comparisons. And there are some positive takeaways, notably the transfer of British to US seapower without the two fighting each other. Yet this transfer occurred over the span of two world wars as British seapower was challenged by Japan and Germany. The loss of British seapower occurred as it was simultaneously challenged in its Asian far waters by Japan and coastal near waters by Germany. The contemporary context is one in which China is challenging only in US far waters. However, that was the situation that the Dutch faced, and much of the Thirty Years War was fought in their far waters.

There is a second reason to consider the geopolitics of seapower, and that is the need to rethink geopolitics itself. Seapower is a matter of global reach, especially into the far waters of the Global South, to nurture and protect economic "interests." The definition of geopolitics becomes a political economy question with Global North and Global South relations at its core. This is in contrast to the Great Power competition bias of classic geopolitics that can focus on dyadic political interactions.

How has the rise of China in the 21st century rekindled the debate about sea power in contemporary geopolitics?

The work of Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan has become re-animated: it is the Frankensteinization of the US's classic geopolitician. Mahan wrote his classic text *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* (1890). It was a call for the US

to move from the politics of state building in the North American continent to become a seapower and seek global power. The argument was backed up later, in more academic and less strident tones, by the academic geographer Isaiah Bowman in his nationally hubristically titled textbook *The New World* (1922).

The difference this time is that Mahan wrote for an offensive strategy, the expansion of US seapower, without provoking a war with the British. Now, the reference to Mahan is defensive. It is concerned with how China is adopting a Mahanesque strategy and developing its own seapower. The bias of classic geopolitics is exposed. What was good for the goose is apparently unacceptable for the gander. Or, our seapower good, their seapower bad. It is a moment in which we need to challenge all classic geopolitical assumptions. They are not objective historically-informed theories that may have relevance to "our" country. Instead, they are thinly veiled policy recommendations hiding under a veneer of scholarly arguments. They are suitable for justifying policies, but in a way that will most likely lead to war.

Instead, I propose a geopolitics that understands the world as an integrated system. Global North-Global South relations are key, as is understanding how and why Global North countries compete against each other to define and dominate in far waters of the Global South. I believe that such a framework that encourages us to see the system as a whole, enables us to take the responsibility of trying to avoid another round of global war.

Looking past China's growing influence in the South China Sea, do you expect to see additional relevant emerging players clashing against each other over maritime territories in the coming years? If so, what effect could this have?

Yes, let me give you three examples and one non-example. First, the non-example. Contrary to the challenges faced by the Dutch and the British in the final years of their era of seapower, the US is unlikely to face a challenge in its near waters. The eastern and western seaboard of the US will not come under threat from a hostile country as were, for example, the English Channel and the North Sea coastline for the British when facing the challenge of Germany. It is possible that the seas around the Aleutian Islands will face increased Chinese and Russian naval presence, and China could mine the seabed southeast of Hawaii, but this presence would not affect the major ports of the US. Where there is emergence, already ongoing, is in three arenas: the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf, the Arctic Ocean, and the Black Sea.

The Red Sea and the Persian Gulf have been US far waters since it replaced Britain in that role through its role, with the British, in a 1953 coup that established the monarchical rule of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in Iran, and became the dominant power after the Suez Crisis of 1956. But this presence is no longer taken for granted. Iran and its support for the Houthis in Yemen have led to a situation in which a non-state actor is the immediate physical threat to shipping. China is playing a long game in the region. The combined impact is the current disruption of the oil trade, and the emerging strategic ability of China to enable the flow of the oil that it depends upon. Iran's influence is likely to increase in that scenario, with implications for the security of Israel. The process also shows the role of non-state actors (though with significant state support) in the ability to disrupt sea traffic in sea lines of communication close to shorelines.

The Arctic is already a region of competition, and that is likely to increase as global climate change makes sea routes through the North Pole region more feasible. Claims to the ocean bed, notably by Russia, are part of this dynamic. The implication is greater Chinese and Russian naval presence in the region (sometimes cooperatively) and the need for NATO to focus its naval presence in the Arctic Ocean and North Atlantic, and maintain the militarization of the Greenland-Iceland-UK gap. It's a return to Cold War scenarios.

The Black Sea is of interest for two reasons. First, whatever happens on land in the Russia-Ukraine war, Russia has already encountered a strategic defeat. It no longer has control of its Black Sea and Sea of Azov near waters. It cannot project uncontested power in that sea, and threaten its neighbors. It cannot disrupt the trade of its adversaries. And it is at risk of being unable to protect its coastline and the seized Crimean peninsula. Second, the means of Russia's loss of control of its near waters is noteworthy. Ukraine, not a recognized seapower, has ushered Russia out of the region with innovative drone weaponry. It shows that any country (and many non-state actors) can

develop and use such technology. The implication is that non-state actors in the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf will more readily disrupt ocean traffic.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

Be eclectic in the way you develop your framework for understanding the world, and then stick with it. Don't be fadish. But don't be arrogant or defensive about your approach. Recognize that all explanations are partial and that you can (and probably should) tune up your own approach throughout your career. Use conference panels and fora in journals to have conversations around a topic from differrent perspectives. The aim should be to recognize the value of engaging diverse perspectives, and the humility to know that all social science explanations are partial. Hopefully, your efforts will lead to more people in your field recognizing the partiality of their own perspectives!