I am not a neo-realist

In his review ‘A New Focus on the Caspian Region: Turning the Periph- ery into the Centre’ in IIAS Newsletter 31, Dr Frédéric Graise asserts that my book ‘does not really distance itself from a neo-realist perspective’. I dis- agree and would like to explain why.

Globalisation, Geopolitics, and Energy Security in Central Eurasia and the Caspi- an Region (The Hague: CIEP, 2003) analyses global power relations and the geopolitics of conflict and co-operation among state and non-state actors for the control of oil and gas resources in Central Eurasia. It employs a new the- oretical approach: critical- or neo- geopolitics.

The main ideas of traditional geopolitics are related to the neo- realist school of international rela- tions, based on the Westphalian con- ception of the international system. According to this view, the nation- state is paramount; international rela- tions can be explained by the balance- of-power among competing states. This body of theory emerged in the nineteenth century and developed in the first half of the twentieth cen- tury. Globalisation (the transnationalis- ation of production and finance, the internationalization of trade and state functions) and the end of the Cold War forced traditional state- centric geopolitics.

One new approach attempts to syn- thesise traditional geopolitics with the geo-economics of the global political economy. Critical- or neo-geopolitics holds that geographic arrangements are social constructions that may change over time with changing human eco- nomic demography. It does not consti- tute the world as a fixed hierarchy of states, cores and peripheries, spheres of influence, flashpoints, buffer zones and strategic relations, but conceptual- ises world politics as a system of states, economic and technological developments, and non-state actors including ethnic-religious movements, international organizations, transna- tional energy companies, and interna- tional crime syndicates.

Critical or neo-geopolitics further dif- fers from orthodox geopolitics, neo- realism, and world-systems theories in its scepticism to claims of objectivity. Instead, neo-geopolitics holds that any study of world politics carries concep- tual and methodological assumptions that skew analysis; it calls for a method- ological and conceptual re-evaluation of political geography.

Contrary to Dr Graise’s assertion, Globalisation, Geopolitics, and Energy Security in Central Eurasia and the Caspian Region, in applying the neo-geopo- litical framework, goes beyond the neo- realist approach in analysing conflict and co-operation among state and non- state actors for the control of oil and gas resources in Central Eurasia.

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Kunming under siege

A s a long-term resident of Kunming, China, I was pleased to read ‘From Muslim Street to Brilliant Plaza: Constructions of Urban Space in Kunming’ by Leeke Reinder in IIAS Newsletter 31. The physical changes in Kunming are indeed drastic, as Reinder notes. But I disagree that these ‘drastic physical transformations bring about relatively small social changes’. On the contrary, I suggest they have profound social impact.

Over the past decade the city of Kunming has been torn down and rebuilt – old wooden buildings, low-rise apartment blocks and narrow streets have made way for new apartments, shops and office struc- tures of seven stories or more, and much wider roads. These changes are the result of economic and social change (reform and marketisation) and have produced further change.

Many residents have experienced the speed and extent of change as a crisis in material life. There are two major shifts, from low to high-rise dwellings and from city centre to suburban life. Though most people welcome new flats with running water and private toilets and baths, others lament the loss of old buildings and streets (the Muslim street noted by Reinder is one of the few old streets left). But the broader social impact of the new spaces is more widely felt and doubted.

Older people and children are especially affected. The elderly have suffered abrupt changes in lifestyle through their removal to the suburbs (although they may retain their previous neighbours, having been moved together). An outdoor social life, in courtyards and in doorways of their homes, was previously part of daily life for older people, but is now hardly possible. Many have been placed in old-age homes. For children there are no spaces to play near home where grandparents can keep watch over them.

The construction of new city spaces is further separating rural and urban life, and along with the Kun- ming’s massive increase in traffic, is a reflection of growing social inequalities.

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The atoms of meaning

Dear Professor Goddard,

You wrote a very interesting article in IIAS Newsletter 31. I share your view that linguists do not seem to regard semantics as an essential part of their discipline.

However, is this a shortcoming of scientists, or does it reflect the general lack of interest in basic research? It does not produce immediate results, even less spectacular ones, hence those attracted towards this research will continue to be small in number, and their influence too.

All the more I am grateful that scientists like you persevere in this demanding task.

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