



The New Geopolitics

Preventing wars and other strife will increasingly depend on facing the ecological consequences of our economic activities By JEFFREY SACHS

Each era has its own dominating themes of global politics. The 19th century had the politics of industrialization and empire. The first half of the 20th century bowed to world wars and economic depression. The second half was overshadowed by the cold war. Our era, I believe, will be dominated by the geopolitics of sustainability.

Economic development has become a generalized global phenomenon, except in sub-Saharan Africa and a few other poverty hot spots. Even those impoverished areas will probably achieve economic takeoff with a little international help and the application of “best option” technologies. The world’s total economic throughput every year, adjusted for differences in countries’ purchasing power and measured as the gross world product (GWP), now stands at approximately \$60 trillion. Over the past century, the GWP has grown roughly 18-fold in price-adjusted terms.

With that increase in economic output have come some phenomenal benefits, such as rising life expectancy and improved overall public health, and some planet-threatening adverse effects, such as massive tropical deforestation, ocean fisheries depletion, man-made climate change, violent competition over limited hydrocarbon resources, and newly emerging diseases such as SARS and avian flu (H5N1). Until now, the favorable outcomes have outweighed the bad. Yet because many of the environmental consequences are hidden from view and from our national income accounts, we sit atop ticking ecological time bombs.

Every major ecosystem, whether marine or terrestrial, is under stress. The world economy is depleting the earth’s biodiversity, ocean fisheries, grasslands, tropical forests, and oil and gas reserves. We are massively and quickly changing the climate. These trends are occurring on a planet of 6.5 billion people and with economic activities that are already unsustainable as practiced. Yet with the economic successes now propelling India and China and the momentum of global population growth, we are on a trajectory to some nine billion people and a GWP of perhaps \$275 trillion by mid-century.

Without new technologies and a new kind of geopolitics,

we won’t get there. Hydrocarbon scarcities can easily lead to war unless we develop energy alternatives, including much safer ways to use the vast remaining coal reserves. The misguided Iraq War, in my view, counts as just such an oil war, and its disastrous results demonstrate the urgency of new global approaches to energy. Irreplaceable marine ecosystems will be destroyed unless we learn to develop environmentally sound aquaculture and slow the man-made acidification of the oceans. More hurricanes like Katrina will ravage our coastal-based economies as extreme weather events continue to mount in frequency, intensity and human impact. More humanitarian disasters such as in Darfur, Sudan, will result from inadequate water in arid regions. More global demands on food production will lead to massive deforestation in the Amazon and beyond unless diets and agricultural processes change markedly.

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Our global politics is not yet adapted to the challenges of sustainability. The superpowers spend far more time angling for short-term military and economic advantage than they do honoring international agreements on biodiversity, climate, oceans, desertification and other fundamental issues that will count much more for our well-being in the decades to come. Indeed, unless we face these problems honestly, terrorism and war are likely to be more frequent outcomes.

This new monthly column will be about the emerging geopolitics of sustainability and the search for genuine solutions. It will show that topics usually treated through a political lens—war, terror, corruption—more and more frequently have an ecological underpinning. Global market forces can be “re-engineered” to channel economic activity in a sustainable manner. Better technologies can square the circle of economic growth with sustainability. And perhaps most important, new approaches to global politics and governance itself, based firmly on the budding science of sustainability, can provide a vital bridge to future prosperity and peace. Stay tuned. ■

Jeffrey Sachs is director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University and of the U.N. Millennium Project.