

Chaotic new world

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When Capt. Richard Phillips appeared before a congressional committee last week, one of the topics of discussion was whether commercial maritime crews should have weapons to protect themselves against pirates. Phillips thought it was a good idea; the chairman of the shipping company for which he works did not think so.

What sailors are confronting off the coast of Somalia is the effect of disintegration. As author Robert Kaplan has argued in many books and articles, the era in which we now live is characterized less by the threat of nation-against-nation warfare than by the chaos arising from failing states and transnational dangers.

Piracy off Somalia is one consequence of the fact that Somalia has been without a functioning government for nearly 20 years. It is a region where tribal leaders, warlords and Islamic insurgents wage a constant battle. In order to survive in this threatening world, a certain number of young men have taken to the seas to capture commercial ships, which they hold for ransom. Already off the Horn of Africa there have been 84 attacks this year.

We may get a false sense of order if our understanding of the world comes from looking at maps. When we look at a map of south-central Asia, we see several distinct nations, Afghanistan and Pakistan, among them.

Reality on the ground is different. The border between Afghanistan and Pakistan itself is a kind of fiction. It is called the Durand Line, and it was drawn by the British in 1893 to separate British India, which included what is now Pakistan, from Afghanistan, which the British had failed to subdue.

President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan has called the Durand Line a "line of hate" because it divides brother from brother among the Pashtun people who straddle the border. In previous years the Pashtuns have agitated for their own state, called Pashtunistan. Nowadays, the Pashtuns are the predominant ethnic group of the Taliban in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The complex geopolitics of India, Pakistan and Afghanistan involves more than those three nations. It involves a swirl of ethnic and religious forces of numerous groups that wax and wane in power as the central governments struggle. Now Pakistan is in danger because the weakness of the central government has allowed the Taliban to extend the reach of its brutal rule.

The transnational chaos that is so prevalent today includes the continuing chaos in central Africa, where civil war and ethnic rivalries have claimed millions of lives in Congo and Rwanda. In the new era of disintegration, ethnic and religious rivalries will be stoked by the pressures of population growth, pandemic disease, and climate-related disasters. This is the context for the conflict in Sudan and Darfur.

The United States is not immune from these pressures. Just as Europe faces immigration pressures from Africa and Asia, the United States will face continuing pressure from Latin America. The enormous economic disparity that exists between the so-called First and Third Worlds makes these pressures inevitable. Combined with the appearance of new diseases and climate-induced dislocations, these pressures will test our dedication to principles of democracy and human rights.

There is no accurate map describing this complex new world and the challenges it will present to future generations. All we can do is try to keep up with the changes as they come and to keep firm hold of our principles.

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