

Can National Cultures Really Change?
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One of the best geo-political analysts and forecasters around is George Friedman, head of STRATFOR (Strategic Forecasts), whose services are used by people responsible for foreign policy making. His team travels, talks to important decision makers, and watches unfolding events from the perspective of history.

Does history really repeat itself? Friedman thinks it does. \223The geopolitical is about the intersection of geography and politics. It assumes that the political life of humans is shaped by the place in which they live and that the political patterns are frequently recurring because of the persistence of nations and the permanence of geography.\224

This is a view that differs greatly from that of optimists who believe that all people are essentially alike and their cultures are merely temporary ornaments. We Americans have generally believed this because in our own country, people who come from some of the most miserable backwaters in the world change and bloom when living here. That is the key, however: \223living here.\224 These immigrants have been freed of their old geography and history.

Who could have predicted that the Irish fleeing the potato famine, a people so beaten down and damaged by their British colonial masters, could thrive as they have in America? Or the half-starved Jews living in wretched village-ghettos in Russia could come to this country and within a generation become so outstanding in so many disciplines? Or Southern Italians and Sicilians, also coming from half-starved villages, came to this country and rose to the level of leadership of the Cuomo father and son or Leon Panetta? What changed for these people when they came to America was a new geography and history. Geography and history matter.

Friedman\222s theory can be seen in Russia. The Russian Empire\222s borders did not change under the USSR. The Soviets dominated the same colonies and maintained the same borders. Now that the Soviets are gone, has Russia changed? No, they are in the process of going back to their imperial boundaries\227although this time using influence and intimidation rather than military force. Friedman explains: \223The frontiers of Czarist Russia and the Soviet Union had reasons for being where they were\205Russia would inevitably seek to return to its borders. There is no New World Order, only the old one replaying itself in infinitely varying detail, like a kaleidoscope.\224

Imperial (oppressive) Russia is still alive. And there is nothing new about their timeless stifling of unpopular news. Despite their current pretense at having a free press, the lifespan of investigative journalists is abysmal. Two more were assassinated in the streets in November\227adding to a long list of others mysteriously murdered.

Now it looks like other Cold War tricks are alive and well too. The Russians planted sleeper agents in the US\227but a Russian intelligence officer (pseudonym Colonel Shcherbakov) tipped off the US. He is now in hiding from an assassination squad looking for him.

Young Russians who were so excited by the process of having a democratic modern state have been silenced. Their views have never been the majority and democracy is suffocating in the midst of the rebirth of old Russia. George Friedman is not surprised.

Iran is another example of a country with an eternal identity. The great Persian empires of antiquity (three of them between 600 BC to 600 AD) have never died. Persian geography, like Russian and Chinese, has given them lands wide open to barbarian invaders, and all three have had to learn how to preserve their identities, even under occupation\227including occupation by Arab Muslims.

Iran\222s national identity has been shaped and preserved by their national epic poem, The Book of Kings (Shahnameh), in which kings come and go, heroes come and go, but Iran is eternal. They had a national identity before anybody else thought there was such a thing. The current government is just one more all-too-familiar tyranny that people ignore as much as they can. They know that this one will go too, but Iran will remain. Identities do not change.

671 words

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