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Viewpoint



Geopolitics of explaining Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the challenge of small states

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In this essay, I discuss some of the dominant ways of reasoning Russia's invasion of Ukraine. First, I examine the duality of the contemporary geopolitical condition, and the ways in which the invasion is understood to challenge the global liberalist project premised on economic competition rather than territorial contestation. Second, I briefly scrutinize the realist mode of explaining and understanding the Russian invasion and its problematic tenets from the perspective of small states. I argue that the liberalist and realist framings of world politics are, at their heart, reasonably similar. Both share and articulate a belief that there is a coherent geopolitical global order, and that it is the duty of powerful states to maintain and enforce that order.

On the duality of the contemporary geopolitical condition

An understanding that inter-state competition over territories belongs to the past, and that governments operate through "market-centered" state strategies, has become a central constituent of the purported liberal world order since the end of the Cold War. The new world of transnational liberalism was about de-territorialisation, overlapping sovereignties and networks of power; a world which is "run by the ideology of the market, market expansionism, and of market access" (Agnew & Corbridge, 1995). Rather than scrambles over territory and natural resources that characterized capitalism during the 20th century, the generation of national wealth and prestige during the period of globalizing capitalism was marked by positioning the state favorably in global value chains. Competition over talent and innovation replaced competitions over territory and other "tangible" constituents of national strength. Geoff Mulgan (2009, 2), former director of policy under British prime minister Tony Blair, argued revealingly: "Past states wanted to grow their territory, crops, gold, and armies. Today the most valuable things which democratic governments want to grow are intangible: like trust, happiness, knowledge, capabilities, norms, or confident institutions. These grow in very different ways to agriculture or warfare."

The challenge to liberal "connectography" (Khanna, 2016) was, however, already recognized some time ago. Indeed, the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 was scripted in terms of the return of territorial geopolitics. Or, rather, politicians, commentators, journalists, civil servants and scholars in the OECD world in particular were quick to argue that some states practiced old-fashioned territorial power. Putin's speeches on the collapse of the Soviet Union as a geopolitical tragedy and the annexation of Crimea were understood as entirely anachronistic and even barbaric within the context of a new, more "civilized" geo-economic world order. Accordingly, states such as Russia and China (as opposed to the United States and the European Union) had never given up practicing hard territorial power and were now making "forceful attempts" to overturn the "geopolitical settlement that followed the Cold War" (Mead, 2014, p. 70). Mead continues tellingly how "The United States and the EU, at least, find such trends disturbing. Both would rather move past geopolitical questions of territory and military power and focus instead on ones of world order and global governance" (Mead, 2014, pp. 69–70).

Russian geopolitics under Putin's regime have been addressed as an issue of public and political concern through wider anxieties about the future of liberalism both as an engine of global economic integration and as a project related to the spread of liberal political values. In such a perspective, Putin's invasion is seen as an existential threat to the liberal world order. This is one of the reasons why the Western alliance has pursued sanctions and committed to unprecedented military aid to Ukraine, exemplified by Germany reversing decades of non-interventionist policy.

From an analytic perspective, a logic according to which "geopolitical competition" and "liberal world order" are irreconcilable paradigms is a problematic one. Indeed, the contemporary geopolitical condition is characterized by two processes and related imaginaries: one centered on issues of territorial power and territorial sovereignty in a classical sense, and another one structured around economic 'hub and flow' imaginaries within which state territory and military conquest become increasingly obsolete (Moisio, 2018). Of course, for some factions of the Russian state apparatus, the world of territory and territorial enmities figure more prominently than for others. Individuals operating within the "security

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machine" of the state (the so called *siloviki*) explicitly deal with territorial issues such as the prevention of the territorial decomposition of the state, securing borders and strategic resources, and tackling domestic societal unrest and opposition. This sphere of action is not necessarily neatly aligned with, for instance, the world of those oligarchs who operate primarily in the spaces of cross-border economic actions.

The duality of the current geopolitical condition is highly salient in the efforts of the US and EU member states to contain Russia as a political-economic territory. The goal of such a geopolitics of containment is to re-position Russia at a considerable disadvantage within the global spaces of finance, banking and business, in order to make the war as expensive as possible for the state apparatus, Russian economic elites and Russian citizens. In fact, current economic sanctions cover all forms of capital: money capital (freezing financial resources such as sources of foreign exchange), commodity capital (e.g. oil and natural gas), and production capital (closing down factories in Russia).

The current sanctions follow the logic of global liberalism: if Russia commits to the tenets of the liberal world order, it will be rewarded with economic integration; if it doesn't, it will be punished. Indeed, even though Russia's integration into the global economy and related "global networks" has been characterized by oligarchic capitalism, ethnonationalism, informality, corruption, and even the rise of totalitarianism (Morrison, 2022), the EU and the United States nevertheless remained optimistic that Russia's integration into the global economy over the past three decades would eventually "housebreak" it to the norms of the global liberal order. The current geopolitics of containment signals the ways in which this hope has evaporated. Within the EU, this new situation is particularly frustrating. The almost missionary ambition with which the EU presents itself as a model geopolitical power fostering liberal democracy and associated "freedoms" within its close neighborhood through civilizing "normative power" (Manners, 2002) and through all kinds of economic processes sounds increasingly unrealistic in the context of Russia. The opposite is now true: Russian natural gas, for instance, now signals geopolitical contest rather than cooperation and trust.

The geopolitics of explaining the Russian invasion

In addition to the "globalist-liberal" way of understanding the war in Ukraine vis-à-vis the way the world should work at the contemporary conjuncture, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has also triggered analyses regarding the root causes of the war: why is Russia attacking its neighbor? A quick inspection shows that some of these explanations essentialize both Russia and the international system.

First, the longstanding essentialist Western narrative about Russia, summarized in Winston Churchill's famous declaration that it is a "riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside of an enigma", has been applied to a variety of issues. These range from Russian political leaders' purported everlasting obsession with occupying and mastering territories and uniting the Slavic peoples, to supposedly fundamental characteristics of the Russian political culture such as a tendency to exalt strong leaders, an authoritarian culture of governing, the cruelty of the state apparatus, corruption, and a tradition of governing population by constructing external enemies as existential threats. In such a view, Putin follows the cruel ideology of his predecessors and draws his ambitions from a set of domestic geopolitical advisers.

The second form of geopolitical essentializing touches upon explanations which attempt to situate Russia's invasion as a structural consequence of the inter-state system. Indeed, there has been a pervasive need to rationalize Russia's action through theories of international relations (IR). One of the most visible of these explanations is premised on political realism. Accordingly, Russia attacks Ukraine because Kremlin's geopolitical standing has become vulnerable due to NATO expansion; in other words, Russia is understandably, or at least inevitably, engaging in pre-emptive war based on rational fears of external threats. To illustrate, a school of realist IR assumes that, in a self-interested attempt to preserve national security, states will pre-emptively act in anticipation of adversaries. John Mearsheimer, a prominent representative of this realist school, has argued that US efforts to expand NATO in the former Soviet space and to establish close relations with Ukraine have actually laid the essential groundwork for Putin's aggressive position. According to Mearsheimer, "if there had been no decision to move NATO eastward to include Ukraine, Crimea and the Donbass would be part of Ukraine today, and there would be no war in Ukraine" (Mearsheimer cited in Chotiner, 2022).

In such geopolitical reasoning, it is the fault of NATO and the US that Russia has become belligerent, seeking to protect its interests against a purported foreign imperialism. The Mearsheimerian way of explaining the war comes close to the one that Putin himself has articulated within the past fifteen years. This logic has also been articulated by well-known political realists such as Henry Kissinger who in 2014 suggested that Ukraine should follow the logic of "Finlandization" (see Moisio, 2008). According to Kissinger (2014): "Far too often the Ukrainian issue is posed as a showdown: whether Ukraine joins the East or the West. But if Ukraine is to survive and thrive, it must not be either side's outpost against the other — it should function as a bridge between them." There is only a short step from the realist perspective to explain that Russia has been "forced" to attack because the West has not recognized the identity of Putin's Russia as a significant power with legitimate interests in its "near abroad".

Explaining the war from a realist perspective is premised on a view that the territorial sovereignty of "small" states (even though Ukraine is not particularly "small") is nothing but a constantly negotiated and contested phenomenon as great powers dominate the international system and engage in security competition with each other. In such reasoning, echoing the abovementioned logic of Mearsheimer and Kissinger, small states are pawns and tokens in world politics. For states located in the European "rimland," this objectification is, understandably, a dangerous discursive practice. From the perspective of critical geopolitics, speaking about these states and their preferences without listening to local voices resonates with colonial processes, as Jan Smoleński and Jan Dutkiewicz wrote succinctly in early March 2022. They note that:

> "for Eastern European scholars like us, it's galling to watch the unending stream of Western scholars and pundits condescend to explain the situation in Ukraine and Eastern Europe, often in ways that either ignore voices from the region, treating it as an object rather than a subject of history, or claiming to perfectly understand Russian logic and motives. Eastern European online circles have started using a new term to describe this phenomenon of people from the Anglosphere loudly foisting their analytical schema and political prescriptions onto the region: westsplaining."

"Westsplainers" may continue to analyze Russia's invasion on American televisions and in opinion pages in the future. Within political circles, however, Eastern European countries should be granted the right to choose their political geographical position among nation-states. The people in the region hardly accept their geopolitical role as neutral or silenced buffers between competing powerful states. They should be free to pursue policies of their own choosing, hence also demonstrating that the territorial sovereignty of small states is more than a *coulisse* on the stage of world history.

Concluding remarks

The previous discussion demonstrates that the liberalist and realist framings of world politics are, at their heart, very similar. Both share and articulate a belief that there is a coherent and proper global geopolitical order, and that it is the duty of powerful states to maintain and enforce that order. Both of these stances actually consider small states as objects whose primary function is to not irritate powerful states or/and to contribute to the global liberal order. The dominance of the liberal and

realist worldviews, yet again, demonstrates how difficult it is for critical political geography to gain ground in policymaking circles (Bachmann & Moisio, 2020). Insisting that critical geographers take the perspective of "small states" seriously does not solve the problem entirely but might act as a logical step towards providing fresh and badly needed perspectives to the violent geopolitical condition as it unfolds today.

Finally, one might also notice that the condition of war significantly limits the policy relevance of critical scholarship. The omnipresent nature of the war in media and social media has generated a military-security centered public sphere which fosters a culture of precaution and militarization across Europe and beyond. When weapons speak, critical voices are too easily deemed naïve idealists.

Declaration of competing interest

No conflict of interest.

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