

GEOPOLITICS, GEOGRAPHY AND THE UKRAINIAN - RUSSIAN WAR

The trigger of the Ukraine-Russia war is the enlargement of NATO, essentially a Western exploitation of Russian weakness emanating from Soviet Union's dissolution. Russia has communicated her reactions to the enlargement peacefully until the prospect of Ukraine becoming a NATO member. The second wave of enlargement coming from the direction of neutral states such Finland and Sweden originates from Finnish and Swedish fears of being the next targets of Russian military campaigns. NATO enlargement to Ukraine has caused Russia-Ukraine war that in turn has caused some neutral states to leave their neutrality and become NATO members. Therefore, NATO expansion efforts has led to a further expansion through war. However, the exclusion of and warring with Russia only obliterates the opportunity to form a large alliance to balance China. The West should understand that it is not wise to create incentives for the formation of a Sino-Russian alliance.

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Geopolitical positioning of the states in the international system shape international politics. The permanence of states' placements is a structural feature bending the distribution of power across states. Geographic positions of Russia, China, and the United States are constituting major power centers therefore turning the distribution of power across the three states.

“Geography is the most fundamental factor in the foreign policy of states because it is the most permanent.” Colin Gray, *The Geopolitics of the Nuclear Era*, (New York: Crane Russak, 1977, p. 1.)

“States are always engaged in curbing the force of some other state. The truth of the matter is that states are interested only in a balance which is in their favor.” Nicholas J. Spykman, *America's Strategy in World Politics: The United States and the Balance of Power*. (New York, Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1942, p. 20.)

It is impossible to replace, interchange states' geographic positions. One cannot work in a laboratory by placing Russia in the place of the United States and placing the United States in the place of Russia or injecting new superpowers in an international system to examine changes in global conflict and cooperation. The impossibility of conducting such experiments marks the demarcation between the discipline of international relations (IR) and science.¹ Yet, without thinking about verification of scientific hypotheses, like in physics, it is possible to generate conjectures, like in this paper, about how the current war between Ukraine and Russia would evolve and end.

Consequences of Russia-Ukraine War

The war will change Russia-Ukraine territorial border. Donbass and Luhansk regions will almost certainly become parts of Russia. Ukrainian forces can recapture those strips of land only under unexpected series of military victories by the Ukrainians. Other regions might suffer the same fate as well. Besides the changes of territorial contiguity conditions, the war will have several other consequences. First there will be a long-term impact on Russia-Ukraine relations, war will leave a deep scar in psychological, sociological, and political terms. Second, it will alter beliefs of Russia's military superiority, provided that Russia fails in obtaining an easy victory. The new belief will be that Russia is not as effective militarily in Eastern Europe reckoning the old days of, say, Soviet invasion of Hungary. A Russian failure will also strengthen Chinese hand, as a weakened Russia might desire to align itself with China.

¹ About the demarcation problem, see David B. Resnik, “A Pragmatic Approach to the Demarcation Problem,” *Studies in History and the Philosophy of Science Part A*, Vol.31, No.2 (June 2000): p. 249-267.

The Trigger: NATO Enlargement

There are two central questions in need of answers. Why did the war occur and how would it end? The trigger of the war is the enlargement of NATO. The Soviet disunion is followed by a successive instances of NATO membership of Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia, Albania, Croatia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia. The enlargement resembles a domino effect that transformed the NATO-Russia border.

“It is possible to argue that Americans have double crossed or cheated Russia amounting to a U.S. exploitation of a weakened Russian power after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.”

Did Russia not react to the enlargement? Indeed, she did. She has tried to communicate her dissatisfaction with the enlargement during diplomatic meetings and encounters. The invasion of Ukraine can be interpreted as the most recent Russian reaction. Russian perspective regarding the enlargement is that the German reunification was realized on Western terms in 1990, but Western promises of no NATO expansion were not kept.² The dispute is whether or not Western promises of no further NATO expansion after the German reunification were binding. American diplomats and analysts mostly claim that those promises were informal. The result is Russian feelings of being betrayed by the West.³

It is possible to argue that Americans have double crossed or cheated Russia amounting to a U.S. exploitation of a weakened Russian power after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. “While for the West, NATO’s expansion is perceived as “the enlargement of security community,” Russians see it as an assertive move of the Western, but primarily the American military infrastructure getting closer to Russian borders.”⁴ The current prospects of Finland and Sweden to become NATO members originate from Swedish and Finnish perceptions of a Russian threat given the current Ukraine War, reminiscent of the Turkish perceptions of a Soviet threat following Stalin’s demands on Turkish straits and Eastern Anatolia after the Second World War which subsequently effected Türkiye to become a NATO member. NATO

² Marc Trachtenberg, “The United States and the NATO Non-extension Assurances of 1990: New Light on an Old Problem?” *International Security*, Vol. 45, No. 3 (2021): p.162-203.

³ Joshua Itzkowitz Shiffrin, “Deal or No Deal? The End of the Cold War and the U.S. offer to Limit NATO Expansion.” *International Security*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (2016): p.7-44.

⁴ Maxim A. Suchkov, “Russia’s “Post-West World Order”: Why Turkey Matters,” *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Vol. 16, No.1 (2017): p. 69-78.

enlargement to Ukraine has caused Russia-Ukraine war that in turn has caused some neutral states to leave their neutrality willing to become NATO members. Therefore, NATO expansion to Ukraine has led to a further expansion through war.

Russian Warnings

NATO's primary role is to oppose any state that controls a large portion of Eurasia, either the Soviet Union or Russia. Cold War was characterized by the balance between NATO and the Warsaw Treaty Organization. But now "NATO threatens Russia".⁵ Thus, the opposition between two alliances evolved from a balance to a Western threat of Russia. Suppose one claims that NATO is nothing but an instrument to project U.S. power into Eastern Europe and observes the number of former Soviet allies in Eastern Europe that's changing sides and turning into NATO allies. In that case, one could imagine the level of Western betrayal Russians feel. Vladimir Putin, facing the prospect of Ukraine and Georgia as future NATO members, expressed his anger in NATO Bucharest Meeting in April 2008 by declaring that Moscow would view any attempt of expansion of NATO near its borders as a "direct threat".⁶ Indeed, a NATO-member Ukraine would be the last straw that Russia could bear. Hence, the war is nothing but the result of Western and Ukrainian rhetoric of freedom and democracy bolstering prospects of Ukraine becoming a NATO member.

Geographic Realities and Structural Modifiers

Geographic realities are hard to change. Russian territory corresponds, *grosso modo*, to that of the Genghis Khan's Mongol Empire corresponding to what the British geographer Halford Mackinder calls the "pivot area".⁷ Mackinder remarks that "The most remarkable contrast in the political map of Europe is that presented by the vast area of Russia occupying half the Continent and the group of smaller territories tenanted by the Western Powers."⁸ Adjusted to today's world, the Mackinder's "Inner Crescent" that borders the pivot area westwards contains whole Europe. Ukraine and Belarus are located in the Eastern European region of the Inner Crescent and are contiguous to Russia. The strategic importance of both states is already noted by Mackinder who claims that: "Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the World Island; who rules the World Island

⁵ Celeste Wallander A., "Why Russia Belongs to NATO", *Christian Science Monitor*, Vol. 89, No. 25 (1996): p.19.

⁶ The *Guardian*, "Putin warns NATO over expansion", 4 April 2008.

⁷ Halford Mackinder J., "The Geographical Pivot of History." *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (1904): p.421-437. Looking at the Mackinder's map at page 435 and the current political map of Asia, one can quickly recognize that the pivot area contains not only Russian territory but also those of former Soviet republics in Asia such as Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan in addition to Mongolia, northern parts of Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, and northern Chinese provinces including Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia.

⁸ Halford Mackinder J., "The Geographical Pivot of History." *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (1904): p. 423.

controls the World.”⁹

One should object against Mackinder’s views as they pertain to a bygone era and that now we live in the twenty-first century. As Colin Gray’s claim noted, it is impossible to change geographic realities of the planet earth: states’ locations are “the most permanent.” However, one can think that while the United States shares borders with only Canada and Mexico, it is contiguous to all states in the rest of the world. Why would this be true? The U.S. global contiguity to all states in the world is due to American power projection capabilities through oceans, continents, and nuclear bombs carried by intercontinental missiles.

“Russian decisions of balancing and bandwagoning depend on Russian perceptions of NATO, China’s aggressive intentions, and the distribution of power in the strategic triangle. There is no doubt that as Sweden and Finland will become NATO allies, NATO will be stronger. Hence, Russians will be more inclined to search for Chinese support to balance NATO.”

Weapons technology together with geographic proximity constitutes a potent structural modifier.¹⁰ The more distance there is between states, the less able they become in projecting their power to fight each other.¹¹ Ukraine (or Georgia for the same reasons) as a NATO member will definitely increase NATO’s ability of conducting successful military incursions into Russia. In contrast, nuclear weapons technology does not suffer from the diminishing power over distance. One cannot imagine that a nuclear missile’s power depletes through its trajectory. Thus, a nuclear state can be considered as if it is contiguous to another state while sharing no borders amounting to nuclear contiguity. All states endowed with nuclear weapons including intercontinental missiles benefit from nuclear contiguity. Hence, one can distinguish between nuclear contiguity and what international borders display which is conventional contiguity. The former implies the proximity of destruction of any

⁹ Halford Mackinder J., *Democratic Ideals and Reality: A Study in the Politics of Reconstruction* (London, 1916): p.106.

¹⁰ S. Lobell, “Structural Realism/Offensive and Defensive Realism,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*. Retrieved 15 May 2022, from <https://oxfordre.com/internationalstudies/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.001.0001/acrefore-9780190846626-e-304>

¹¹ Kenneth Boulding calls the diminishing amounts of projected military capabilities over distance as the “loss-of-strength gradient”: Kenneth Boulding. *Conflict and Defense: A General Theory* (New York: Harper, 1962): p. 262.

states' territories which would create a hostile environment to any biological form of life after a nuclear exchange unlike the latter which is at the core of territorial conflicts; territories permitting life. NATO's enlargement can be categorized by both. NATO engulfing Ukraine becomes stronger vis-a-vis Russia and there is no security in being just as strong as a potential enemy, there is security only in being "a little stronger" as Nicholas J. Spykman claims.¹² Therefore, Russia becomes a state that has almost no security especially after a possible inclusion of Sweden and Finland to NATO.

The Strategic Triangle: Russia, China, and the United States

Russia's increased level of insecurity has immediate repercussions on Russia-China-United State relations, qualified as the "strategic triangle".¹³ NATO enlargement can bring Russia and China together amounting to a balancing alliance. For this to happen, Russia and China should agree to face NATO together. Such an alliance need not be based on a formal treaty like the Sino-Soviet Pact of 1950. It is sufficient that the two powers help each other and align their ideas and objectives in diverse military issues without signing an accord.

China prefers a multipolar world where European Union stands as a new center of power, independent of the global political agenda of U.S., that is, as an autonomous player in world politics. During the Group of Twenty meeting in Brisbane in 2014, China's top leader Xi Jinping opted for a deeper cooperation between the European Union and his country and wished that China and the European Union would become supporters of a multipolar world.¹⁴ Nevertheless, Chinese preference for a European pole is difficult to materialize. European Union is not entirely independent of the United States. For example, the United States warns China about its stance towards Russia, especially concerning Russian invasion of Ukraine, and, similar to the attitude of the United States, European leaders put pressure on Xi Jinping to keep a distance between Russia and China. China does not desire to be pressed in that direction.¹⁵ China prefers to be the most powerful and independent state free from any alliances so that she's free to decide on issues of conflict and cooperation

¹² Nicholas J. Spykman, *America's Strategy in World Politics: The United States and the Balance of Power*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1942): p. 21.

¹³ Serdar Ş. Güner, "A Game-Theoretical Analysis of Alliance Formation and Dissolution: The Case Study of the relationship Among the United States, the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China," 1949-1972, PhD Dissertation, Graduate Institute of International Studies, Geneva, 1990; Lowell Dittmer, "An Elementary Game-Theoretical Analysis", *World Politics*, Vol. 33, No. 4 (July 1981): p. 485-515. Dittmer does not offer a game-theoretical analysis. He discusses the strategic triangle according to the Structural Balance Theory. For a thorough application of the Structural Balance Theory in, for example, the Syria conflict, see Serdar Ş. Güner and Dilan E. Koç, "Shifting Balances of Power in the Syrian Conflict," *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Vol.16, No. 1 (Spring, 2017): p.123-131.

¹⁴ Chris Buckley and Keith Bradsher, "Faced With a Changed Europe, China Sticks to an Old Script," *New York Times*, 15 April 2022.

¹⁵ Chris Buckley and Keith Bradsher, 15 April 2022.

for herself in world politics.

Balancing, Bandwagoning, and Two-Front Wars

If NATO enlargement brings Russia and China closer indicating a move of balancing against the West, the inverse alignment pattern, namely, bandwagoning, would occur if states flock to the stronger side. Balancing implies that Russia aligns with the mighty West after her failure in Ukraine targeting a rising China. Taken between a rising China and an enlarged NATO, Russia would share the same geographic position as Germany that was sandwiched between France and Russia prior to the First World War. Russia would then face a two-front war problem: she would face a war prospect with NATO in the west and with China in the east.¹⁶ Russia would then act not in the spirit of a costly fighting with both enemies but would select one of them as an ally to oppose the other.

Russian decisions of balancing and bandwagoning depend on Russian perceptions of NATO, China's aggressive intentions, and the distribution of power in the strategic triangle. There is no doubt that as Sweden and Finland will become NATO allies, NATO will be stronger. Hence, Russians will be more inclined to search for Chinese support to balance NATO. Nevertheless, China would not reciprocate Russian quest for Chinese help against NATO as long as her drive to reach a power supremacy toward the U.S. is jeopardized. A reduced Chinese power due to its alliance with Russia and attracting Western animosity would preclude her to counter and circumvent the United States. Such a prospect would ultimately prevent China from realizing her objectives about the South China Sea, especially Taiwan. Therefore, Chinese reciprocation for any alignment desire from Russia is conditional upon her assessments of her foreign-policy issues, not necessarily upon NATO getting stronger. If China rises to a level where it can dramatically oppose the U.S. , then China would help the Russian quest and a Sino-Russian alliance might form which can change the global power distribution. A Sino-Russian alliance pitted against NATO would generate a bipolar world stable in terms of Kenneth Waltz's theory of Structural Realism and unstable in terms of Karl W. Deutsch and J. David Singer's arguments¹⁷ Under the shadow of nuclear weapons, such a bipolar world of West pitted against a Sino-Russian alliance would exemplify a nuclear contiguity driven by the fear of a doomsday with no one daring to risk a nuclear exchange.

In a sense, a bipolar world of the West against the Sino-Russian alliance might be

¹⁶ German strategists von Moltke and von Schlieffen solved German two-front problem by planning to attack France first and then turning to Russia which would mobilize its forces in a period of almost two months.

¹⁷ Kenneth N. Waltz, "The Stability of a Bipolar World," *Daedalus*, Vol. 93, No. 3 (1964): p. 881-909; Karl W. Deutsch and J. David Singer, "Multipolar Power Systems and International Stability," *World Politics*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (1964): p. 390-406.

more stable compared to George Orwell's forecast in his book *Nineteen Eighty-Four* depicting a war-driven tripolar world consisting of Oceania containing the U.S., Latin America, the United Kingdom, South Africa and Australia, Eurasia containing Russia and Europe, Eastasia containing China, Japan, Korea while the rest of world like India, a large part of Africa, Arabia, Southeast Asia including Indonesia remain to be zones of perpetual wars.

Tripolar worlds are the smallest systems where two poles of states can improve their power position by aligning with each other against the third. Without any certainty about which alliance of two will form against whom, a tripolar world represents a form of instability. In contrast, in a bipolar system there is no uncertainty about who the enemy is unlike in multipolar systems.¹⁸ Hence, a weakening of Russia and Russia leaning to China leading to a Sino-Russian alliance targeting the West or a decline of Russia and Russia leaning to NATO are more stable in structural terms than a three-power configuration of Russia, China, and NATO.¹⁹ Thus, a NATO engulfing Sweden and Finland is not necessarily a factor of instability at systemic level. Yet global political stability in terms of polarity remains in limbo until the outcome of the Ukraine war becomes crystal clear.

The End of Ukraine-Russia War

How will the war in Ukraine end? The equivalent of this question is asking when human deaths including military personnel on both sides, wartime rapes, assassinations of Ukrainian civilians, war crimes, the exodus of millions of Ukrainians to contiguous countries will end. From a Russian perspective, it is not hard to notice that popular local support for war (even the support of Russian soldiers) is not at its fullest. The sinking of the Russian navy star is only one example of Moscow's difficulties in fighting and its losses. There is no easy victory in Ukraine.

The first take of the Ukraine War is the likelihood of Russian forces to be engaged in combat without a clear military strategy. What was Russian objective exactly? A takeover of the whole Ukrainian territory and a placement of a puppet government à la Belarus or a capture of the entire Ukrainian territory? Would not be a capture of Luhansk and Donbass enough? Answers to these questions can only be found in Russian war strategies. In more specific terms, Moscow should not be after a strategy that focuses on power demonstration against NATO but primarily should be after a strategy that aims to bend or end Ukraine's willingness to resist. Would captures of some regions of Ukraine lead to the abandonment of Ukrainians' resistance or of

¹⁸ Waltz, 1964.

¹⁹ Structural balance theory is based on the principle of "a friend of my friend as well as an enemy of my enemy is my friend and a friend of my enemy as well as an enemy of friend is my enemy." See Güner and Koç, 2017.

their aspirations of becoming a NATO member? Similarly, would captures of some regions of Ukraine lead to a strengthening of Russia against NATO in geographic and therefore geopolitical terms? Conditions of the end of the war can be speculated upon by the answers to these questions which even Russian military authorities cannot quickly provide.

Secondly, from Moscow's perspective, the military help from the West to Ukraine is a problem. One can recall how the outside aid provided to the Afghan guerrillas created high costs on Russian forces during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. One outcome of this problem is military escalation. Thus, sending more troops, using more equipment, and threats of using nuclear weapons can constitute a remedy. Nevertheless, a prolonged war implies a Russian military failure that might lead states in the Western camp and China to update their prior beliefs about Russian fighting capabilities.

A third remark about an end to the war can be made considering Putin's expectations of a quick victory. Eventually, Putin had wished a quick decline in popular support to Zelenskyy and Ukrainian leadership as a whole. He had also predicted a low Ukrainian resistance to the Russian forces. However, once the war has begun, he might have adjusted his views according to the actualization of the conflict. One should never eliminate prospects of military failure during the war, which goes for both sides -Ukraine and Russia. Plans are to be revised day to day. Putin's reception of war forecasts and eventualities from his own military might not be hundred percent correct. Thus, the end of the war is not near at all, and victory is uncertain.

If one assumes that Ukraine is the weaker belligerent in this war, then it is a possibility that Ukraine may choose to continue to fight till the end; because if her defeat against Russia is imminent, then any attainable peace is worse, in Ukraine's eyes, than fighting till the end. Why accept a total or partial sovereignty loss which is considered worse compared to a continuous fighting? It is possible to reach the same result of no near cessation of military hostilities in terms of overall gains and costs. Russia would prefer to fight rather than to negotiate a peace settlement with Ukraine given successive Russian military setbacks, because Russia would estimate that the power asymmetry in her favor would persuade Ukraine to surrender sooner or later. Putin would expect that higher levels of destruction and human costs would probably lead to the end of the conflict, and, therefore, he would prefer escalation for future rounds. Zelenskyy, likewise, can increase its level of resistance as he receives Western military aid. The result would, then, be a stalemate with no possibility of an end to the war in the near horizon.

Concluding Remarks

The expansion of NATO after the German unification constitutes a big strategic mistake. It only serves to provoke Russia to undertake military actions, which are the only options left for Moscow. The ultimate Russian means seems to be the use of its nuclear arsenal leading to the destruction of Europe and perhaps the world. Instead of benefiting from the break-up of the Soviet Union through the enlargement of NATO, the West should welcome Russia forming a colossal conglomerate of states almost encompassing the whole World except China. If there is need for a security system covering Europe, then why exclude Russia? If Russia becomes a member of a European security system, China would be deterred from issuing threats and claims like in issues of Taiwan and South China Sea, which are targeted by a widespread counter alliance. The exclusion of Russia only obliterates the opportunity to form a large coalition to balance China and creates incentives for forming a Sino-Russian alliance. Consequently, the West should take notice of Russia as a valuable and potential ally against China regardless of Ukraine's fate.