



The Geopolitics of the War in Ukraine

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On Thursday, February 24, 2022, the Russian Federation commenced its invasion of Ukraine, officially referred to by Moscow as a 'special military operation' against Ukraine (Osborn, 2022). The offensive caught many by surprise, especially the severity of Russian military actions, such as targeting civilians and civilian infrastructure. During the first weeks of the war, the Ukrainian army and society impressed the world with their bravery and commitment to preserving territorial integrity and sovereignty. The ongoing conflict in Ukraine is vital from a global perspective for several reasons. Firstly, the Russian invasion threatens principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity. If allowed and left unchecked, it encourages other acts of aggression, and in doing so, it confirms a worrying trend according to which the so-called great powers stand above international law. Secondly, it draws attention to Ukraine's strategic importance as a large European country. In that sense, the outcome of the conflict will shape the balance of power on the continent. It tests the Western alliance and its response to such challenges. Thirdly, it bears global economic consequences—Ukraine & Russia are significant exporters of grain, energy, and raw materials. Prolonged conflict involving these two risks, long-term inflation and food/fuel shortages abroad, is tantamount to the global spread of instability. Fourthly, the Ukrainian-Russian conflict bears an uncanny resemblance to a proxy war between the East and the West competition. An argument could be made that it could be seen as a battle between democracy and authoritarianism, where Russia's victory strengthens authoritarianism abroad. Finally, let us not forget the nuclear aspects of the conflict. A risk of direct Western involvement would raise the threat of nuclear escalation. The outcome of which could influence nonproliferation norms for security assurance.

The Tragedy of Great Power Politics

In the preface to the update of his seminal book "The Tragedy of Great Power Politics" (2013 edition), John Mearsheimer acknowledges that his analysis had to be updated with regards to the so-called "peaceful rise" of the People's Republic of China as a significant challenger to the role and position of United States in the international system. Consequently, he envisaged that the process would produce a

highly sensitive, if not prone to, local conflicts environment (Mearsheimer, 2013, 10). At the same time, as it appears at least mid-2023, contrary to Mearsheimer's predictions, Russia and China seem to be getting closer regarding geopolitics and geo-economics. On February 4th, Russian President Vladimir Putin met face-to-face with Chinese President Xi. The leaders convened in Beijing at the start of the Winter Olympics — and issued a lengthy statement detailing the two nations' shared positions on a range of global issues¹. The meeting happened shortly before the Russian invasion, and one could surmise that it was supposed to soften the possible adverse reaction from Beijing to the already prepared military operation by the Kremlin since Putin told Xi that Russia had designed a new deal to supply China with an additional 10 billion cubic meters of natural gas. Consequently, China abstained from a U.N. Security Council vote condemning the Russian invasion (Gerson and Klare, 2022).

The Demise of the Hegemon?

But is "Uncle Sam" still in a position to effectively challenge either Russia or China on their own? In 2001, French historian, sociologist, and political scientist Emmanuel Todd claimed that as of the beginning of the 21st Century, the United States was no longer a solution to global problems; instead, it became one of the problems (Todd, 2003). The U.S. guaranteed political and economic freedoms for half a century. In contrast, today, they seem to be more and more an agent of international disorder, causing uncertainty and conflicts wherever they can. They demand the international community support their foreign policy goals and join in their actions regardless of cost and benefit analysis. Given the geopolitical changes after 1989, the U.S. took its position in the international system for granted and decided to extend its global interests. Surprisingly, perhaps for Washington, even traditional U.S. allies started to demand more independence (see the case of Germany and its role in southern Europe.) (Macron's idea of 'strategic autonomy')². According to Todd, given the actual balance of power globally, the U.S. would have to fulfill two conditions to maintain its hegemonic position. Firstly, it had to continue controlling its protectorates in Europe and Japan. Secondly, it had to finally eliminate Russia from the elite group of 'big powers,' which would mean the disintegration of the post-Soviet sphere and the elimination of the nuclear balance of terror. None of these conditions have been met. Not being able to challenge Europe or Japan economically, the U.S. has also been unable to challenge Russia's nuclear position. Consequently, it switched to attacking medium powers such as Iran or Iraq economically/politically and militarily engaging in 'theatrical militarism.'

The Importance of Ukraine

The ongoing war in Ukraine is arguably proof of the region's role in the security and stability of Europe and its economy. Food supplies, mostly various harvests, and energy, mainly gas, are a case in point. On top of that, the region has a lot of raw materials. Ukraine has large deposits of 21 of 30 such materials critical in European green transformation (Ukrinform, 2023). Before the war in Ukraine began, in July 2021, The EU and Ukraine signed no less than a strategic partnership on raw materials. The partnership includes three areas from the approximation of policy and regulatory mining frameworks, through a partnership that will engage the European Raw Materials Alliance and the European Battery Alliance to closer collaboration in research and innovation along both raw materials and battery value chains using Horizon Europe (European Commission, Press Release 2021). As for security, in a traditional sense, the U.S. is involved with Ukraine regarding nuclear weapons. In the letter from March 17, 2023, the director of the Energy Department's Office of Nonproliferation Policy, Andrea Ferkile, tells Rosatom's director general that the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant in Enerhodar "contains US-origin nuclear technical data that is export-controlled by the United States Government" (Bertrand and Lister, 2023)³. Worse still, the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, Victoria J. Nuland, admitted in her testimony on Ukraine in the US Congress that, indeed, "Ukraine has biological research facilities, which we are now quite concerned Russian troops, Russian Forces, may be seeking to gain control of, so we are working with the Ukrainians on how they can prevent any of those research materials from falling into the hands of Russian forces should they approach" (C-Span, 2022).

As Scott and Alcenat claim, the analysis of the competitive policies of each great power confirms the Heartland concept's importance. They project the utility of Mackinder's analysis to Central Asia, asserting that: "it is valid in today's foreign policy and policy analyses. Each power strives for control of or access to the region's resources. For China, the primary goal is to maintain regional stability as a means for border security and assurance of stable economic relations. For the European Union, the main goal is to gain economic access while simultaneously promoting the democratization of those countries that are politically unstable." (Scott and Alcenat, 2008). To conclude, and take a more general view, Colonel Zhou Bo, the competition between the two giants (U.S.A. and China) will not occur in the Global South, where the US has already lost out to China. At the same time, in the Indo-Pacific, few nations want to take sides. Instead, it will be in Europe, where the U.S. has most of its allies, and China is the largest trading partner (Bo, 2023).

Halford Mackinder and the Heartland

Today's war in Ukraine occurs in a vital region for the European continent – Central and Eastern Europe. One of the founders of geopolitics, a scientific discipline – Halford Mackinder (British geographer, Oxford professor, founder, and director of the London School of Economics)- proposed an enduring explanation that combined geography and politics. His model was presented in a seminal publication at the beginning of the 20th Century - The Geographical Pivot of History. By 1943, Mackinder rightly foresaw the potential of the Soviet Union as a land power if it were to emerge victorious from the war (Mackinder, 1943). Yet the intellectual seeds that would allow such flexibility were already planted in 1904: "The actual balance of political power at any given time is, of course, the product, on the one hand, of geographical conditions, both economic and strategic, and, on the other hand, of the relative number, virility, equipment, and organization of the competing peoples" (Mackinder, 1904).

The Russian take on Geopolitics

According to Alexandr Gel'evich Dugin, allegedly the Kremlin's most influential thinker and writer, the postulated New Empire (Eurasian) has a robust geopolitical foothold: Central Europe. "Central Europe is a natural geopolitical entity, united strategically, culturally, and partly politically. Ethnically, this space includes the peoples of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire, Germany, Prussia, and part of the Polish and Western Ukrainian territories. Germany has traditionally been a consolidating force in Central Europe, uniting this geopolitical conglomerate under its control". (Dugin, 1997). Consequently, while the impulse of the creation of the New Empire needs to come from Moscow, Germany needs to be the center of its western part. Furthermore "only Russia and the Russians will be able to provide Europe with strategic and political independence and resource autarchy. Therefore, the European Empire should be formed around Berlin, which is on a straight and vital axis with Moscow." (Dugin, 1997, 127). Ukraine as an independent state with specific territorial ambitions, represents an enormous danger for all of Eurasia and, without resolving the Ukrainian problem, it is, in general, senseless to speak about continental politics" (Dugin, 1997) "[T]he independent existence of Ukraine (especially within its present borders) can make sense only as a 'sanitary cordon.' Importantly, this can inform us to an extent about the future settlement of the conflict: "The absolute imperative of Russian geopolitics on the Black Sea coast is the total and unlimited control of Moscow along its entire length from Ukrainian to Abkhazian territories."

Notes

1. Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development. Available at:
<http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770#sel=1:21:S5F,1:37:3jE>
2. "Emmanuel Macron's comments about Taiwan and his call for European "strategic autonomy" sparked controversy as he advocated for the EU not to become followers of the US and China". This parallels with President de Gaulle earlier calls for European strategic independence from American influence over European security (Lory, 2023).
3. See more at: <https://www.state.gov/energy-security-support-to-ukraine/>
4. Senior Colonel Zhou Bo (ret) is a senior fellow of the Centre for International Security and Strategy at Tsinghua University and a China Forum expert. He was director of Centre for Security Cooperation of the Office for International Military Cooperation of the Ministry of National Defence of China.

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