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COMMENTARY

Of tanks and tankies: What's 'left' for geography after the invasion of Ukraine

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Abstract

This commentary explores the degree to which the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine has posed a challenge for political geographers. I reason that while the war has exposed conceptual weaknesses and political blind spots, it has also validated many of the foci with which geographers have approached post-Cold War European security. By drawing attention to the epistemological and moral problems of current NATO scepticism, I argue that tactics of counter-mapping and whataboutery need to be carried out with the necessary care for the historical and political context.

KEYWORDS

geopolitics, NATO, Russia, Ukraine

More than 12 months have passed since Russian tanks rolled into Ukraine, initiating a military campaign that is likely to have already left hundreds of thousands dead. Some believe the war has a genocidal quality (Snyder, 2022). Few question that Russia has slid into its own brand of fascism (Laruelle, 2022).

I am writing this commentary as Moscow has begun its spring offensive. And while the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation has recently agreed to gift main battle tanks to Ukraine, it has rejected requests for phosphorus incendiary weapons and cluster munition. It is hard to predict how long the war will last or how it will end. At the time of writing, critique of NATO is muffled. What dominates instead is the view, delivered with great moral certainty, that the Western military alliance has functioned as something of a Noah's Ark since 1991, protecting its members from the kind of scenes currently unfolding in Ukraine: urban and trench warfare, summary executions and child abductions. The implication is that none of this would have happened if Kyiv had only been allowed to join NATO.

It is no understatement to say that geographers, particularly those on the political left, have struggled to find their voice on Ukraine. Unlike in 2003, when the interest of big oil seemed to explain the US-led invasion of Iraq so neatly (Harvey, 2003, pp. 24–25), it has been much more difficult to read current events in a Marxian register. Some have tried of course (Wolff & Harvey, 2022). But ultimately the fact that Russia's oligarchs were not consulted before the full-scale invasion has revealed the autonomy of the political sphere in Russia, questioning conceptions of the state as a mere tool of bourgeois class interest. Similarly, few convincing attempts have been made to interpret the war through the lens of a post- or decolonial geography. Yes, civilisational imaginative geographies have dominated Western media coverage of the conflict. But unlike in the Cold War or the global war on terror (Gregory, 2004; Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992), a Saidian geography has been much less prominent in analyses of the invasion. The rallying cry 'decolonise Russia', moreover, often

delivered to signal a decolonisation of academic knowledge (Shaipov & Shaipova, 2023), can slip easily into the pursuit of maximalist war aims such as regime change and territorial break-up (Bershidsky, 2022; Michel, 2022). Indeed, this is precisely how the phrase is used by Ukrainian officials (Danilov, 2023).

More than Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and the ensuing war in Donbas, the 2022 invasion has prompted a questioning of any residual Cold War-era sympathies for Moscow. Many who were previously known as NATO sceptics have joined the ranks of a newly empowered liberalism which has interpreted the war as a struggle between past and present, darkness and light (for an overview, see Klinke, 2023). They have found themselves among advocates of no-fly zones and those who see any concern with nuclear escalation as succumbing to Russian blackmail (Toal, 2022). In this context, some geographers fell back on a well-worn narrative: they condemned the invasion but drew attention, in the same breath, to the formative influence of NATO's post-Cold War activities in Europe (Megoran, 2022a).

It is indeed worth revisiting the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's recent history. It was not self-evident that NATO would survive the demise of the Warsaw Pact in 1991. In the years that followed, the window of opportunity for a pan-European security order was progressively closed. NATO enlargement had effectively become the only game in town (Sarotte, 2021; Toal, 2017). And while it is certainly true that what would soon be known as the 'new Europe' of former Soviet satellites and republics campaigned for its accession (NATO did thus not 'annex' those states), it was ultimately US politicians like Dick Cheney, Madelaine Albright and Bill Clinton, aided by West Germany's Chancellor Helmut Kohl, who opened NATO's door.

In the 1990s, NATO adopted a new 'out of area' doctrine which guided its war against Yugoslavia in 1999. Although the Kosovo War is largely seen as a success for NATO, it came at a cost. Not only did the alliance bomb civilian infrastructure, an embassy, and a passenger train, it also used cluster bombs, including on a crowded marketplace in the city of Niš. Following Kosovo, NATO supported the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 after Washington activated Article 5, it fought Somali pirates and it participated in the removal of the Gaddafi regime in Libya, demonstrating that it had become a crucial agent in the liberal way of war – much to Russia's dismay. In the 2000s, NATO began upgrading its nuclear arsenal and planning a missile defence system in Eastern Europe, all the while holding on to its first-strike doctrine. The alliance was acting as something of a 'nuclear addict' at a time when conflict with Russia was at a historic low (Flockhart, 2013). It had always remained a regional military alliance, directed against its former Cold War adversary.

The first time the US state department reached out to Kyiv to discuss NATO membership was a year after Ukrainian independence, in 1992. Clinton was persuaded by the idea two years later, though nothing came of it. In 1996, he told Russian President Boris Yeltsin that he saw 'no reason to foreclose in advance membership for any of Europe's new democracies' (as quoted in Sarotte, 2021, p. 261). By the mid-1990s, Ukraine had become US Aid's third-largest recipient after Egypt, another geopolitical 'swing state', and Israel, the closest of allies (Meaney, 2022). Ukraine thanked the US by sending troops to Afghanistan and Iraq. Military cooperation with NATO steadily increased, involving training and joint exercises. In 2008, the US sought to offer Kyiv (and Tbilisi) NATO membership, one of the last actions of the George W. Bush administration. Again, Germany played an important role, but this time in the form of a veto (for which Angela Merkel has since received much criticism). Although NATO claimed that the door was open for Ukraine to join, in practice Ukraine was held in the limbo of 'potential membership'. In January 2022, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken confirmed that the 'open door' policy was not up for discussion (Guardian, 2022).

It is difficult to ignore the ways in which NATO has shaped the world around it since the fall of the Soviet Union. And yet, the degree to which NATO has contributed to political instability and war is very much an open question, one to which geographers have not always offered the most consistent answers. Megoran, for instance, criticises commentary on the latest invasion 'that pins more blame on the West than Russia' (Megoran, 2022a, p. 3), a statement which leaves a considerable margin for NATO involvement. Elsewhere, he writes 'Russia *alone* is culpable for the Ukraine war and must be held fully accountable for its crimes. But this does not negate the argument that Nato expansion was a significant factor in precipitating this crisis' (Megoran, 2022b). While it seems clear that Georgia's potential NATO membership was a crucial trigger for the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, it is not certain to what extent NATO enlargement, actual or prospective, explains the annexation of Crimea in 2014, let alone the invasion of 2022.

There is an epistemological problem at the heart of this question. NATO sceptics take Russia's long-held fear and disdain of NATO, restated frequently since Putin's famous speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference, at face value. But is it not also possible that the Kremlin, which has been all too willing to distort its mutual history with NATO (Sarotte, 2023), hid its imperial ambitions behind a grievance with NATO? In the absence of any conclusive evidence, arguments about NATO's decisive impact depend on a counterfactual. One has to imagine how 30 years of European history would have unfolded without the alliance. In pursuing such counterfactual arguments, sceptics tend to neglect, however, that whereas NATO's ability to shape European security in the 1990s was considerable, its influence began to wane in the 2000s with Russia's economic recovery and the decline of US soft power.

There are ethical problems too with an insistence on NATO's contribution to the current war. In urging the Western alliance 'to understand just how threatening the map of its own enlargement looks to Russia' (Megoran, 2022b), we are not only being invited to visualise the world from an 'enemy' perspective (without doubt an important exercise). We are also asked to see some form of fragility behind the act of aggression. Indeed, Megoran's map renders enlargement as a military campaign with arrows that penetrate ever closer towards Russia's post-Soviet territory. His map is probably intended as a corrective to a dominant media narrative that depicts the war as one of Russian imperial aggression only. Yet the analysis slips too easily into its own form of geopolitics and struggles to distinguish itself from a realist interpretation (Specter, 2022). Critical geopolitical interventions would certainly do well to differentiate themselves from those who simply restate the Kremlin line and render Russia's war a mere response to US foreign policy and cultural divisions in Ukraine (for a particularly crass example by a geographer, complete with authoritative Stalin quotes, see Dunford, 2023).

The 2022 invasion of Ukraine has already begun to challenge geographical conceptualisations of war, diverting attention away from the 'new', 'asymmetrical', and 'everywhere' wars that had come to dominate geographical debates in recent years (for a summary, see Gregory, 2011). The war on terror's deterritorialised structure, Gregory and others reasoned, had deprived war of its contours, blurring the distinction between the battlefield and the home front. But despite an initial rhetoric of cyber- and hybrid warfare, Ukraine has been a remarkably twentieth-century armed conflict, a war for territory. Although unmanned aerial vehicles and satellite images are used to significant effect, tremendous loss of life is inflicted by an old-fashioned mode of warfare, by artillery fire. More can and should be done to unpack the spatial politics of this war. One particularly promising avenue is to develop a more complex understanding of the role of territory within the Russian geopolitical imaginary (Ortmann, 2023). Smirnova and Golubchikov (2023) highlight how a specifically Russian modality of territory has emerged at the confluence of three colonial tropes: territory as sprouting from collective agricultural work, territory as a natural condition of the terrain, and territory as a modernist project. Similar analyses could be carried out on NATO, too. The alliance has thus far been approached quite obliquely in the geographical literature. A critical geopolitics of Atlanticism from Kosovo to Ukraine, one that treats NATO not only as an institution and a set of military capabilities but as forum for competing geopolitical visions, is yet to be systematically conducted.

It is worth recalling that one of the reasons why Vladimir Putin became so fixated on Ukraine is the extent to which he and his regime are caught up in a worldview that thinks of war as endemic to the international system and that is oblivious to the ways in which nationhood can be forged in relatively short periods of time. This is the twin trap of geopolitics and of primordialism. Geographers should have much to contribute to our understandings of such logics. Indeed, they were among the first to warn of the dangers of an emerging Eurasianist geopolitics in Russia at the turn of the century (Ingram, 2001; Smith, 1999). And it is not just Russian neo-fascists who have drawn on geopolitical ideas, including – again and again – on the writings of the Oxford geographer Halford Mackinder. Stuart Peach, until recently chairman of the NATO Military Committee, or Major General Jonathan Shaw, one of Tony Blair's army officers, to name but two Brits, have also invoked Mackinder (Shaw, 2022; Tinline, 2019). Primordialism underwrites many Western framings of Ukrainian statehood, too (Maxwell, 2022). The problems that arise from viewing the world through the lens of a primordialist classical geopolitics are well understood by geographers. They are not always obvious to others.

In the view of liberals, any discussion of NATO's geopolitics smacks of whataboutism (Lucas, 2022). But while 'whataboutery', as Irish Republicans called it in the 1970s, certainly has a bad reputation, it still fulfils an important role (Burgis, 2022). Why, for instance, does Poland welcome Ukrainian refugees when it continues to push others back across the Belarusian border and how does it justify the tension between such regimes of hospitality (Barszcz & Bialasiewicz, 2022)? What are the geopolitical and moral implications of considering a no-fly zone over Ukraine but not over Yemen or Gaza? Why is the plight of the Ukrainians framed in such different ways to that of the Palestinians and why is it more controversial to understand the Israeli occupation as colonial? The answer surely has to do with a larger and often unspoken geopolitics that whataboutery can help to uncover. Although the latter can serve as a deflection tactic, which is why the Kremlin has engaged in the practice since Stalin's days, it can also be the basis for serious discussion. Analytically and morally, it allows us to expose and critique the position from which the West speaks and acts, and thus to establish a firmer moral coordinate system. But much like other strategies of counter-mapping and counter-narrating, whataboutery needs to be carried out with careful attention to the political and historic context. It cannot be done without paying the most serious attention to the history of Russian imperialism and its wars, which to this day involve in the most direct way geographical institutions and their knowledge claims (Mykhnenko, 2023).

As the war enters its next stage, it is important to realise that while the morality of the invasion is clear-cut, the ethics of Western military support for Kyiv remains tied up with events on the battlefield, the degree of further escalation, and, ultimately, the outcome of the war. It is with an eye on this strategic and moral terrain that we should reflect on the

lessons of this war for the geography of war itself. There are still, it should be said, good reasons to be a NATO sceptic. But such scepticism has to be delivered with the necessary nuance, even ambivalence, reflecting the fact that the current war is both a proxy war and a war of liberation.

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