

COMMENTARY

Making sense of the Ukraine war: Geographers should not be afraid of geography

Nick Megoran 

Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK

Correspondence

Nick Megoran, Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK.
Email: nick.megoran@ncl.ac.uk

Abstract

In this commentary I respond to the editor's dual invitation to offer critical geographical understandings of the Ukraine war and to reply to Ian Klinke's specific criticisms of my arguments about the role of NATO expansion in it. I suggest that first, we should recognise that geographical factors are crucial in understanding why the war occurred. Second, we need to theorise how geographical imaginations influence international relations and have done here in the form of NATO expansion. Finally, we should explore counter-mappings of European futures in ways that could help us move towards a resolution of this terrible war.

KEYWORDS

critical geopolitics, NATO, peace, Russia, Ukraine

The first time that I debated NATO was with a Kazakh woman called Roza in the late 1990s. We had both grown up under the shadow of the Cold War, but unlike me she was no admirer of Mikhail Gorbachev for bringing it to an end. I was shocked: 'But you sent your armies to East Germany, right up to the border with Western Europe, to threaten us', I protested. 'No', she replied, '*you* sent all *your* armies to West Germany to threaten *us*. Ours were just there in response, for defence'.

That conversation transformed my naïve understanding of both the Cold War and post-Cold War world. It impressed upon me the need to realise how the same conflict can look diametrically different from opposite positions. A quarter of a century later, NATO's role is in the spotlight as many of its members find themselves fighting Russia by proxy in Ukraine. In response, in January this year the Union of Atomic Scientists advanced its so-called 'Doomsday Clock' to 90s to midnight. We are living in grave danger and finding a way out—rather than prolonging or exacerbating an unspeakably destructive war—is imperative.

In this commentary I will respond to the broader question about how geographers should engage with the war, as well as to the specific criticisms Klinke makes about my recent arguments about NATO expansion being one of a number of factors behind the war (Megoran, 2022a). My focus here is on Russia's stated grievances and justifications for the invasion. This is not because I am remotely sympathetic to them (informed by a Christian anarchist peace tradition, I regard the invasion as utterly abhorrent), but because I think that a critical geographical interrogation of them can help us both understand why the war occurred and point towards a future peace. I agree with Klinke that geographers have struggled to articulate a coherent response, and suggest three things that we can do.

First, we should recognise that geography is an important part of this war. That should not, one would think, be a controversial statement for a geographer to make. But it is, because the dominant lens for understanding the 2022 invasion in the UK has been that of history.

According to this framing, Russian foreign policy can be understood primarily as the expression of Vladimir Putin's view of history. 'Why does President Putin object to Ukraine?', asks historian David Saunders (2022). His answer is that Putin's reading of history led him to conclude that Russians and Ukrainians are a single, indivisible people and therefore Russia needed to transform this supposed historical truth into political reality. For the oft-cited historian-turned-pundit Timothy Snyder, Putin's foreign policy can be explained by his seeing Russia as trapped in 'the politics of eternity' (Snyder, 2018, p. 8). According to this account, advanced by obscure 1920s philosopher Ivan Ilyin, the world was made from the detritus of God's failed creation but Russia somehow escaped this original corruption to find itself outside temporality, experiencing repeated cycles of endangerment with war-making as the essential release of excess energies. Putin, according to Snyder, is a disciple of Ilyin, and this explains his foreign policy.

The problems with these historical explanations are legion. They see the war as the product of 'just one bad Tsar' rather than the more complex sociological formation of modern Russia (McGlynn, 2023, p. 5). They do not account for the timing of the conflict starting in 2014 or accelerating in 2022, for Putin's prior readiness to accept Ukraine's existence and affirm its sovereign boundaries, or for his previous collaboration with NATO. Instead, they see Russian hostility to Ukraine and the West as primordial, timeless and ontological. The Ukraine war is placed beyond the realm of politics, impossible to comprehend in any rational way and therefore beyond political or diplomatic resolution.

Klinke (who cites Snyder approvingly) veers close to mirroring this in places. He suggests that what might really be behind Russia's concern over NATO expansion are Putin's 'imperial ambitions', given that the Russian president is apparently 'fixated' on Ukraine because he is 'caught up' in a 'primordialis[t]' worldview which 'thinks of war as endemic to the international system'.

Geographers are not qualified to analyse the psychological states of world leaders, but we are equipped to interrogate their geographies. Saunders' essay is a commentary on Putin's 5000-word rambling diatribe *On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians* (Putin, 2021). It has been widely critiqued by historians for its chilling erasure of Ukrainian identity and nationhood. But—and this has generally been missed—it is also a catalogue of political geographical grievances at different scales. Locally, Putin objects to the removal of historical monuments in Ukraine associated with Russia and their replacement by Ukrainian nationalist symbols. Regionally, he criticises the supposed mistreatment of Russian speakers stranded by the collapse of the USSR and the emergence of nation-states. Nationally, he refers to sovereignty disputes over previously contested territories like Crimea. All of these are common issues facing post-Socialist and post-colonial states that have emerged into the age of nationalism. They are the stuff of political geography, which can readily point to numerous examples where similar issues have been addressed and resolved (Megoran, 2022b). The first thing that geographers should be doing in response to the Ukraine war is illuminating its multi-scalar political geography.

Secondly, we need to interrogate how, at the international scale, geographical imaginations matter profoundly. We can do that through critical engagements with geopolitical theory.

Klinke contrasts the strong critical geographical opposition to the US/UK war on Iraq in 2003 with how geographers have 'struggled to find their voice' on Ukraine. He puts this down to the Iraq conflict being easier than Ukraine to explain through Marxist analysis. Whilst I do not deny the importance of Marxist contributions to these debates, I would emphasise the importance of geographical critiques of the 'War on terror' from the perspectives of critical geopolitics (Dalby, 2003; Tuathail, 2003) and feminism (Hyndman, 2010). I agree with Klinke that whilst 'civilisational imaginative geographies have dominated Western media coverage of the conflict ... a Saidian geography has been much less prominent in analyses of the invasion'. This points to the underexplored potential for critical geopolitical engagements of the war. Geographical imaginations alone do not explain international relations—wars are rarely if ever monocausal—but they help us understand them better.

This was the basis of my argument that NATO expansion has been one factor amongst others in leading to the breakdown of Russian–Western relations and the war in Ukraine. I will restate it here simply. NATO was created in 1949 as a US-led western military alliance to counterbalance the Russian-led military configuration that in 1955 would become the Warsaw Pact. These two alliances built up vast conventional and nuclear forces in Europe, each depicting themselves as primarily being a defensive alliance in response to the aggression of their counterpart. This macabre death dance was brought to a negotiated end in the late 1980s and the Warsaw Pact was wound up in 1991. With the evaporation of NATO's apparent *raison d'être*, many people assumed that it too would be retired and a new security apparatus for the new Europe be developed. Instead, NATO expanded in a series of waves (see Figure 1). There are complex reasons and drivers of this (Haluk, 2022). For many East Europeans, this was a way to connect their countries' futures to the liberal west and secure protection from future Russian aggression. For liberal North Americans and West Europeans it was merely the extension of a rights-based, democratic security system and no threat to Russia. For many in Russia, however, it appeared that the old enemy was advancing ever closer after they had withdrawn their own forces in good faith.

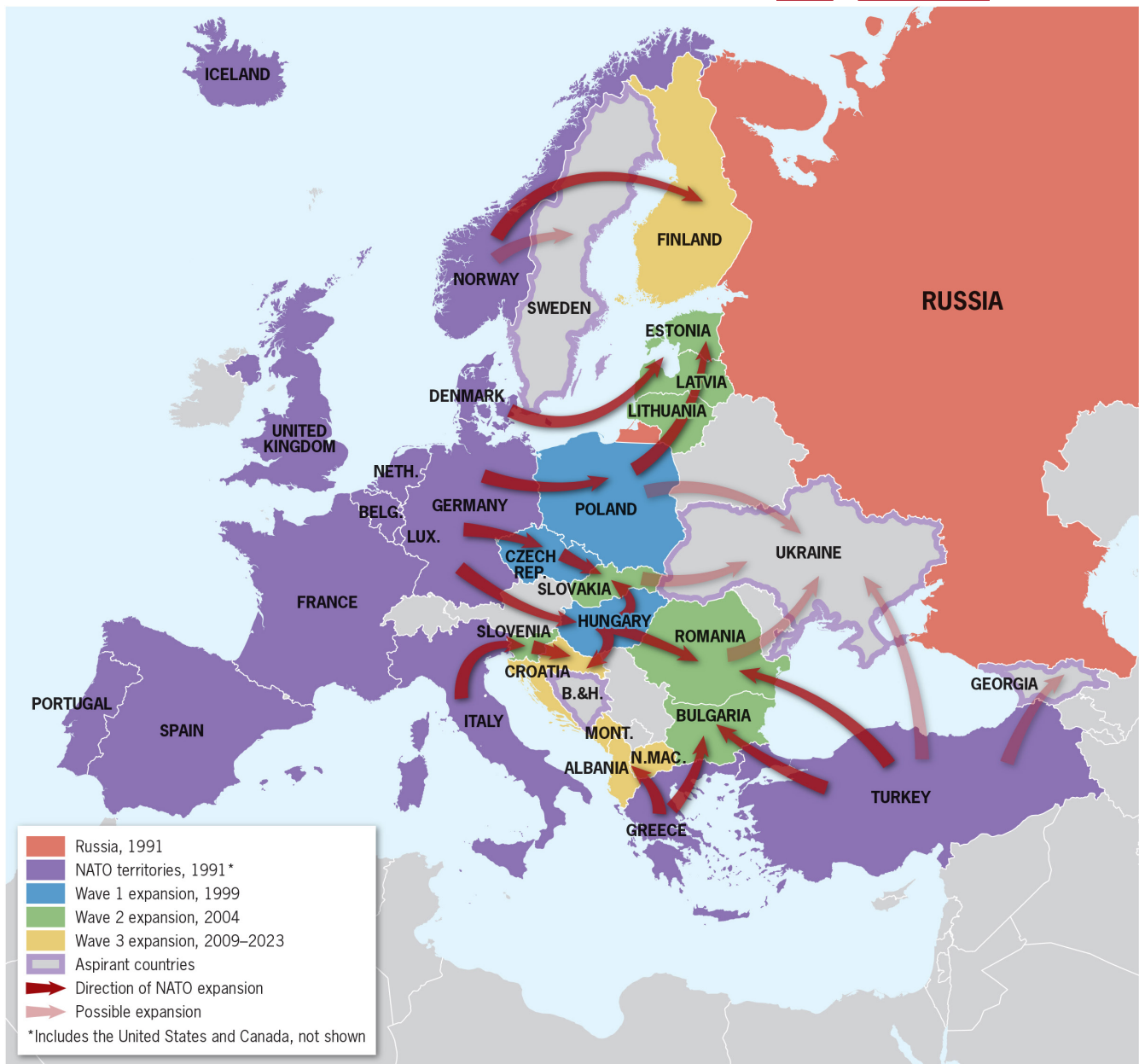


FIGURE 1 NATO expansion since the end of the Cold War

That Russian elites saw NATO expansion is a threat is clear from numerous pronouncements over time, right up until the eve of the Ukrainian invasion when Russia tabled proposals to the USA to reset their relationship in part by rolling back NATO expansion (these were dismissed by Washington). It is also the case that many Russia experts and commentators in the west—liberal and radical, left-wing and right-wing, pacifist and realist alike—repeatedly voiced concern that NATO expansion would risk inflaming Russian nationalism and jeopardising post-Cold War peace in Europe. As McGlynn (2023, pp. 119–124) argues, Russian concern at NATO expansion was amplified because it occurred alongside its post-Cold War transformation into an organisation that started attacking other states that had not threatened the alliance, in particular Yugoslavia and Libya.

Klinke is unconvinced: perhaps the Kremlin ‘hid its imperial ambitions behind a grievance with NATO’, he wonders, returning to the popular-historical interpretation. Undoubtedly there are many factors behind Russia’s invasion. He may be correct, but a substantial amount of recent scholarly evidence—from Dogan’s detailed study of the politics of NATO expansion in the 1990s and McGlynn’s incisive interrogation of Putin’s politics—suggests that Russian elites (and the general population) have not regarded NATO expansion as benign. Klinke reads my map on this as ‘a corrective to a dominant media narrative’. It is this, but it is more as well. It is primarily a cartographic representation

of what Roza taught me: that geopolitics looks differently to different people, depending in part on where you are located. We all find this hard to grasp, and it is increasingly common to see the attempt to understand other views as illegitimate, dangerous or even immoral. But in a compelling essay on the September 11, 2001 attacks, novelist Ian McEwan wrote that, 'Imagining what it is like to be someone other than yourself is at the core of our humanity' (McEwan, 2021). Geographers have a rare ability to help people do this through mapping, because key tenets of our discipline are that not everyone sees the world in the same way and that these imaginative geographies have material effects on how they act in it.

Thirdly and finally, having recognised that there are substantive geographical dimensions to this conflict, and that geographical imaginations themselves matter, I suggest that geographers should explore and map ways in which we could move towards a resolution of this terrible war. That is not the same as simply critiquing.

Although Klinke thinks my analysis 'struggles to distinguish itself from a realist interpretation', I see significant differences between critical geopolitics and realism. A realist critic of NATO expansion like John Mearsheimer recognised well in advance of 2022 that NATO and EU expansion into Ukraine risked provoking a major Russian military response. He suggested that the USA and its allies 'abandon their plans to westernise Ukraine' and instead 'aim to make it a neutral buffer between NATO and Russia' (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 87). Such realism removes people and nations of agency, reducing them to pieces in a game whose rules are determined by sheer power.

In contrast, I draw on the anti-militarism of Cold War-era peace activists and scholars like E.P. Thompson, whose movement for European Nuclear Disarmament rejected the power-politics framing of the Cold War and sought to think beyond NATO/Warsaw Pact blocs towards a demilitarised Europe with alternative security architectures (Megoran, 2022c; Thompson & Smith, 1980). As Dalby (1993) has shown, although they were dismissed and demonised at the time, such scholar and citizen-led movements helped bring the Cold War to an end without the horrors of a nuclear or 'conventional' war in Europe. We need such a bold geographical vision again today. We should not be afraid to name geography as both a reason for this war and also a resource for its resolution.

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ORCID

Nick Megoran  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5830-2293>

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