



Viewpoint

“Russian Troops Out! No to NATO expansion!” A pacific geopolitics for a new Europe

Nick Megoran

Newcastle University, United Kingdom

In 1876 general Mikhail Skobelev conquered the Khanate of Kokand, an important moment in cementing Russian imperial control of Central Asia. The nationalist passions generated in Russia elicited very different responses from two of the nation's greatest novelists. Fyodor Dostoevsky wrote how the colonisation of Central Asia would allow the blossoming of Russian identity: “In Europe, we were Asiatics, whereas in Asia we, too, are Europeans. Our civilizing mission in Asia will bribe our spirit and drive us thither” (Hauner, 1990). In contrast, Leo Tolstoy wrote his response in *The Kingdom of God is Within You*. “Why do good men and even women,” he lamented, “quite unconnected with military matters, go into raptures over the various exploits of Skobelev and other generals?” (Tolstoy, 1905). Pitting an anarchist vision of Christian pacifism as an alternative to state violence, the book would become one of the most influential works in the global nonviolence movement.

The major response elicited by Russia's military actions in the 1880s was war fever – from the “raptures” of ordinary people on the street to the geopolitical musings of elites about Russian identity and its place in the world. We have seen the same in responses to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. War fever has gripped Russia and Ukraine as populations have generally supported the bellicose, masculinist posturing of their presidents. This war fever has spread far and wide. Across the West, for example, Ukrainian flags are emblazoned across social media and public space. Massive amounts of military aid have been provided or promised to Ukraine, and war-porn videos of Ukrainian soldiers using these weapons to kill Russian soldiers by destroying their tanks or helicopters have been widely and approvingly shared online. The power of war fever seems as great today as in 1876.

In this intervention, I want to look instead to the more marginal second response that the opening vignette indicated: opposition to war and the search instead for a pacifistic alternative. I locate this commentary in pacifism, a heterogeneous constellation of ideas including opposition to military violence and the belief that humans should pursue a comprehensive political project to construct a nonviolent politics (Christoyannopoulos, 2021). I have argued elsewhere that a particular geographical contribution to this is “pacific geopolitics,” the study of

how ways of thinking geographically about international relations can promote peaceful and mutually enriching human coexistence (Megoran, 2010, p. 385). I will first examine a geopolitical idea, NATO expansion, that has arguably contributed towards the current war, and then consider alternative visions of Europe that could look beyond the present war fever. Peace and nonviolence should, I believe, be far more central to political geography than they have been. Rethinking a pacific geopolitics of Europe is particularly apposite for 2022, the year in which major warfare has returned to the continent and in which we also mark the centenary of the founding of the International Geographical Union, which grew out of a pacific vision of the discipline of geography (Megoran & Dalby, 2018).

1. Geopolitical visions of Europe

The vital insight of critical geopolitics is that the ways that political actors *think* about global space actually affects the ways they *act* in it. This can be demonstrated through the debate about the role of NATO enlargement in precipitating the present Russo-Ukrainian war.

Headquartered in Brussels, NATO was formed in 1949 to “promote stability and well-being in the North Atlantic area” through “collective defence and for the preservation of peace” (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, 1949). “Defence” is euphemistic: NATO structures and forces have been used on multiple occasions to suppress anti-colonial resistance movements and to attack or occupy countries not only Europe, but also Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. Nevertheless, NATO was formed primarily to counter the Soviet Union (Park, 1986), and with the end of the Cold War its *raison d'être* appeared to have evaporated. So many people were surprised in the mid-1990s when rumours began circulating that Washington was pushing for an expansion of the alliance up to the borders of its old enemy, Russia. This occasioned a striking intervention from retired US diplomat and historian, 92-year-old George Kennan, who in the 1940s was influential in formulating US Cold War policy of “containing” Russia. He argued in the *New York Times* that “expanding NATO would be the most fateful error of American policy in

E-mail address: nick.megoran@ncl.ac.uk.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2022.102699>

Received 7 June 2022; Accepted 13 June 2022

0962-6298/© 2022 The Author. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

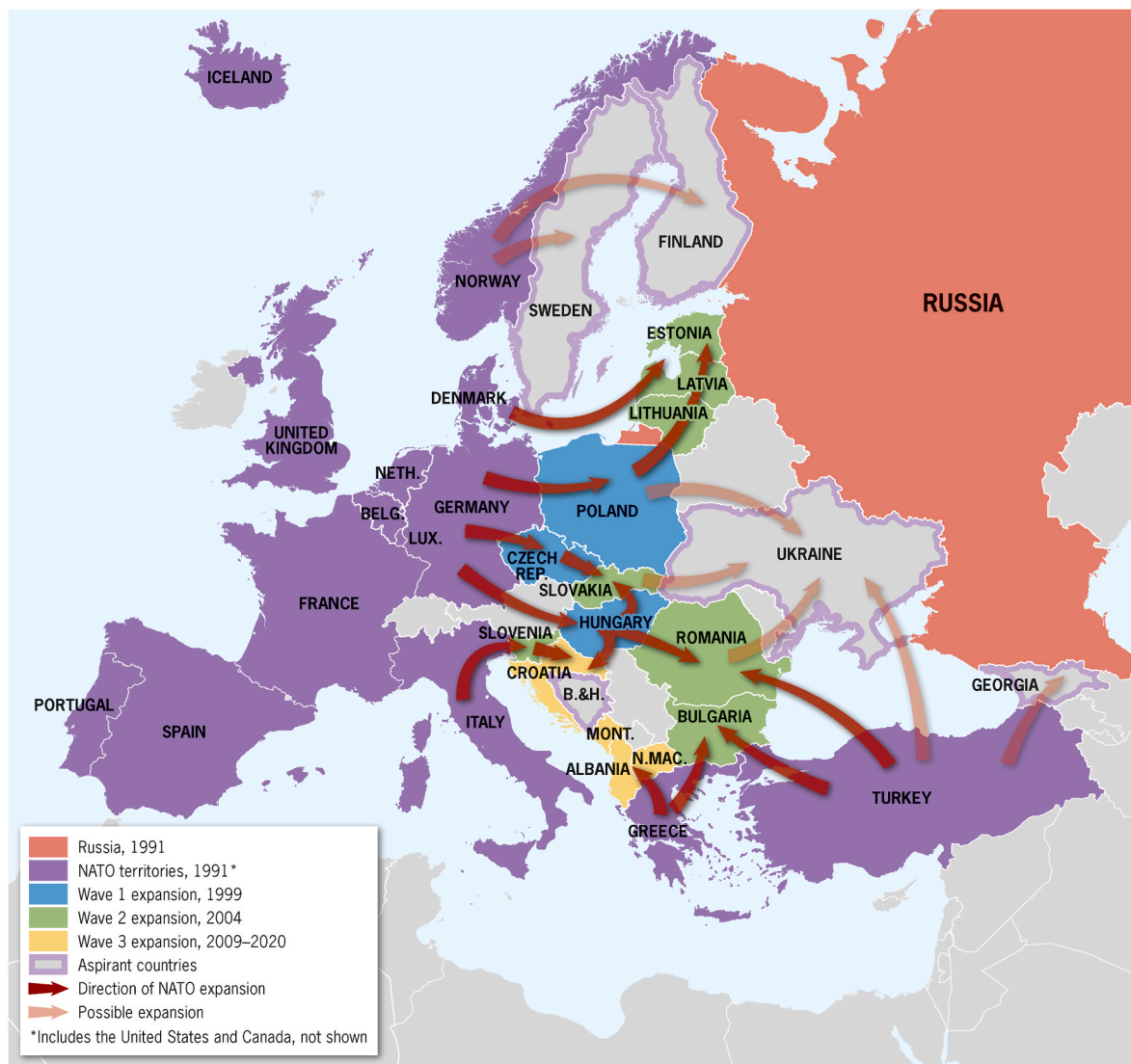


Fig. 1. NATO expansion in Europe since 1991 (Map: Nick Megoran).

the entire post-cold-war era" (Kennan, 1997, p. 23). He worried that this would squander the "hopeful possibilities engendered by the end of the cold war," suggesting that it would have a number of negative consequences: inflaming "nationalistic, anti-Western and militaristic tendencies" in Russia; hampering "the development of Russian democracy"; restoring the "atmosphere of the cold war to East-West relations"; hindering nuclear weaponry reduction negotiations; and impelling "Russian foreign policy in directions decidedly not to our liking."

Kennan's warnings went unheeded, with NATO expanding eastwards into the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland in 1999 and then Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia in 2004, brushing aside Russia's repeated concerns. A turning point was the alliance's 2008 Bucharest Summit, which declared that "NATO welcomes Ukraine's and Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership" and "agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO" (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, 2008). Following this a third wave of expansion brought Albania, Croatia, Montenegro and North Macedonia into membership (see Fig. 1).

Kennan's concerns were reiterated by realist thinker John Mearsheimer (2014) in a *Foreign Affairs* article arguing "Why the Ukraine crisis is the West's fault." He contended that NATO enlargement and EU expansion were seen by Putin as a threat to Russia, but because of "liberal delusions" about the supposedly inevitable triumph of post-Cold

War (neo)liberal democracy this was not recognised by Washington. In 2013 when Ukrainian President Yanukovich opted for a more lucrative Russian economic deal over an EU one, violent demonstrations led to his ouster and the installation of a pro-Western, anti-Russian government. This, claimed Mearsheimer, triggered Russian annexation of Crimea and a destabilising intervention in the East of the country. NATO's subsequent response of promising increased military aid "will only make a bad situation worse", he predicted (p. 87). The way out, he suggested, would be for the US and its allies to "abandon their plans to westernise Ukraine" and instead "aim to make it a neutral buffer between NATO and Russia."

2. Local agency

It would appear that Kennan's and Mearsheimer's warnings were prescient: almost everything Kennan warned of in 1997 has come to pass. That what they set out anticipates Kremlin propaganda cannot be a criticism of their writing: the act of seeking to critically understand and explain dangerous geopolitical reasoning should not be confused with its justification. The real problem with this realist position, rather, is that it writes out local agency. For Mearsheimer, Ukraine is just a potential "buffer zone" in someone else's game. In reality, many political elites in Eastern Europe actively sought NATO and EU membership to provide



Fig. 2. “Stop The War: Russian troops out/No NATO expansion” Peace rally in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, March 2022 (Photograph: Nick Megoran).

prosperity and protection from the power which had proved their main existential threat in modern times – Russia (Smoleński & Jan, 2022). This had significant consequences. For example, Fumagalli and Rymarenko (2022) argue that post-Soviet elite bargains between Kyiv and Simferopol kept Crimean separatism in check, but these bargains broke down under President Yushchenko’s Ukrainianization of language and valorisation of World War II nationalist paramilitaries, and in the power vacuum that emerged after Yanukovich’s ouster local elites lobbied for annexation by Russia. Rather than focus on great power politics, they suggest, it is precisely such local agency that is important to understand.

That NATO membership was desired by some elements of Ukrainian society does not, however, negate the argument that NATO expansion was a significant element in the present war. What matters is the perception of threat in Russia and how political actors in Brussels, Kyiv and Washington respond to it. On the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall Russia’s foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov, delivered a key speech explaining Russia’s logic in Ukraine. Like Kennan, he lamented, “The chance to overcome the dark legacy of the previous era, and decisively erase the dividing lines was missed” (Lavrov, 2015, pp. 12–13). He blamed Western expansionism, including the EU but particularly NATO, for this. “Assurances that the North Atlantic Alliance would not expand eastward—which had been given to the leadership of the Soviet Union,” Lavrov claimed, “turned out to be empty words, for NATO’s infrastructure has continuously drawn closer to Russian borders” (p. 13). Lavrov went on to say that despite repeated Russian warnings that Kiev must not be forced to “choose one vector of its foreign policy ...” (i.e. make a clear alignment with either Russian or Western geopolitical structures), “... we were not heard” (p.14).

3. A pacific geopolitics for a new Europe?

Wars are never mono-causal, and Bilous (2022) is correct to call out Western leftist commentary on the present war that pins more blame on the West than Russia. Hence the slogan used by a coalition of peace and anti-war groups in the UK: “Russian Troops Out! No to NATO Expansion!” (Fig. 2). This recognises both the immediate culpability of Russia for the war and the indirect responsibility of NATO. It points to a pacific approach of envisaging a way out of the current war and towards a more sustainable peace. The “raptures” of war fever are driving what is increasingly looking like a proxy war between NATO and Russia. At the time of writing (June 2022), NATO members and their allies are almost daily promising transfers or sales of more and more advanced weaponry to Ukraine. US national security adviser Jake Sullivan said that the US’s goal is to see not just “a free and independent Ukraine,” but also “a weakened and isolated Russia, and a stronger, more unified, more determined West” (DeCamp, 2022). Whilst the defence of Ukraine might be morally justifiable, we have repeatedly seen such proxy wars drag on for years, cause horrendous suffering to the places over which they are fought, and cause unintended negative consequences for decades to come. With other countries aspiring to NATO membership to protect themselves from similar Russian aggression (Fig. 1), one of these consequences could be a wider escalation of violence.

Facing a similar threat of escalation in the late Cold War, Thompson and Smith (1980, 59) wrote, “Against a strategy which envisages Europe as a ‘theatre’ of limited’ nuclear warfare, we propose to make in Europe a theatre of peace”. In galvanising a loose network of scholars and activists across Europe to oppose both US and Soviet nuclear militarization of the continent, Thompson showed how this could be done (Dalby, 1993). It is such a values-based pacific geopolitical reimagining of

Europe that is required today. We need a Europe where divisive military alliances like NATO are consigned to the dustbin of history. We need a Europe where the dangerous pretensions of rival blocs like the European Union and the Eurasian Economic Union are tamed or transcended. We need a Europe where majority populations and ethno-linguistic minorities alike are protected from invasion or discriminatory state coercion. We need a Europe of citizens whose loyalty to each other is more powerful than the lurid appeal of war fever. We need a Europe which Tolstoy would recognise as an improvement over the one of 1876. We missed the chance to create such a Europe in the 1990s. As a result, it will be harder to fashion now, as proper peace demands restitution and accountability for injustices inflicted upon Ukraine by Russia. But we – the peoples of Europe, and their pacific-minded friends including critical scholars – can still do it, and in so doing open a negotiated way out of the current disaster.

Declaration of competing interest

There is no conflict of interest.

References

- Bilous, T. (2022). A letter to the Western Left from Kyiv. *Open Democracy*. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/a-letter-to-the-western-left-from-kyiv/>.
- Christoyannopoulos, A. (2021). A pacifist critique of the red poppy: Reflections on British war commemorations' increasingly hegemonic militarism. *Critical Military Studies*.
- Dalby, S. (1993). Post-cold war security in the new Europe. In J. O'Loughlin, & H. van der Wusten (Eds.), *The New political geography of eastern Europe* (pp. 71–85). London: Bellhaven.
- DeCamp, D. (2022). In *Jake Sullivan says US wants 'independent' Ukraine and a 'weakened' Russia*. Defend Democracy Press. <https://www.defenddemocracy.press/jake-sullivan-says-us-wants-independent-ukraine-and-a-weakened-russia/>.
- Fumagalli, M., & Rymarenko, M. (2022). Krym. Rossiya...Navsegda? Critical junctures, critical antecedents, and the paths not taken in the making of Crimea's annexation. *Nationalities Papers*. <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2021.75>
- Hauner, M. (1990). *What is Asia to Us? Russia's asian heartland yesterday and today*. London: Unwin Hyman.
- Kennan, G. (1997). A fateful error. In *r. New York Times*, 05/02/2022,.
- Lavrov, S. (2015). Russia's priorities in Europe and the World. *Horizons, Winter*, (2), 12–21, 2015.
- Mearsheimer, J. (2014). Why the Ukraine crisis Is the West's fault: The liberal delusions that provoked Putin. *Foreign Affairs*, 93(5), 77–84.
- Megoran, N. (2010). Towards a geography of peace: Pacific geopolitics and evangelical Christian Crusade apologies. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 35(3), 382–398.
- Megoran, N., & Dalby, S. (2018). Geopolitics and peace: A century of change in the discipline of geography. *Geopolitics*, 23(2), 251–276.
- North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. (1949). *Founding treaty*.
- North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. (2008). *Bucharist Summit statement*, 03/04/2008.
- Park, W. (1986). *Defending the West: A history of NATO*. Brighton: Wheatsheaf Books.
- Smoleński, J., & Jan, D. (2022). *The American pundits who can't resist "Westspaining" Ukraine*. The New Republic.
- Thompson, E. P., & Smith, D. (Eds.). (1980). *Protest and survive*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Tolstoy, L. (1905). *The kingdom of God is within You; Christianity and Patriotism*. London: J. M. Dent and Co.