



GEOPOLITICS AND THE UKRAINE CONFLICT: AN ANALYSIS

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Abstract

On February 24, 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine, sparking one of the worst armed conflicts in European history. The international community sees Russia and the European Union as engaged in a geopolitical contest. In addition, there has always been conflict in Russia's relations with the EU between cooperation and disagreement. Putin has undoubtedly altered the security dynamics within the EU, as Russia continuously prioritizes bilateral ties with specific countries over those with the EU as a whole. Following the start of this invasion, Ukraine has seen economic recession, territory loss that has resulted in numerous casualties, and uprisings in the southeast and east of the country. The Eurasian continent as a whole is seriously at risk due to the geopolitical rivalry between Russia and the EU. The goal of this present paper is to analyze Russia's foray into Ukraine. This article will analyze the Ukraine-Russia Conflict, the Eastern Partnership (EaP), the historical background of Russia's relations with the EU, their policies, and their implications on the world order.

Keywords: *European Union, Russia, Ukraine, NATO*

Geopolitics and the Ukraine Conflict: An Analysis

The Global ramifications of the Russia-Ukraine conflict have been immense, resulting in humanitarian and political issues (Ratten, 2022). Russia officially recognized the People's Republics of Luhansk and Donetsk on February 21, 2022. On February 22, 2022, the Russian Federation Council gave its approval for the use of force to allow the Russian army to occupy the territories that had proclaimed their independence. Russia and Ukraine have been embroiled in an ongoing confrontation ever since. The war can also be examined through the lens of opportunistic view or the defensive view and thus Russia's invasion of Ukraine can be attributed to several geopolitical reasons. Historically, Russia and Ukraine have had a strong historical and cultural bond that has developed over many years. This can be ascribed to their geographical proximity and commercial connections (Lichterman, 2022). Therefore, it can be regarded as a chance taken by Russia to incorporate economic and geostrategic resources that were lost when the Soviet Union fell apart. Furthermore, the conflict might be ascribed to Ukraine's enormous stocks of natural resources, which have the potential to provide economic advantages for Russia (Johannesson and Clowes, 2022). Infact, the Russian invasion of Ukraine can be interpreted as a strategic maneuver to divert global attention away from the prolonged focus on the United States and China.

Geopolitics: Concept and Definition

Geopolitics is about how one views the world. In order to understand the meaning of the term 'geopolitics', one must first examine the concept of geography and politics. Geography, or in other words human geography, can be defined as "systematic study of what makes places unique and the connections and interactions between places"¹. According to Spykman (1938):

¹ Knox, P. L. and Marston, S. (1998), *Places and Regions in Global Context: Human Geography*, Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall



“war was an instrument of national policy in his (Napoleon’s) time and still is today, and, in a world where groups struggle for power by means of war, policy becomes high strategy. In such a world, the geographic area of the State is the territorial base from which it operates in time of war and the strategic position which it occupies during the temporary armistice called peace. It is the most fundamentally conditioning factor in the formulation of national policy because it is the most permanent. Ministers come and ministers go, even dictators die, but mountain ranges stand unperturbed. Because the geographic characteristics of states are relatively unchanging and unchangeable, the geographic demands of those states will remain the same for centuries, and because the world has not yet reached that happy state where the wants of no man conflict with those of another, those demands will cause friction. Thus, at the door of geography may be laid the blame for many of the age-long struggles which run persistently through history while governments and dynasties rise and fall.”²

The text essentially indicates the permanent nature of geographical factors which influence the foreign policies of a state. All states have a defined territory and states formulate and implement its policies towards other states from this very territorial base. Geographical location can be seen as fundamental factor which remains constant and the relationships between states is governed by several factors such as location itself, history, economics, natural resources, and international power structures.

The term politics and political science can be understood from the words of Gerry Stoker (1995) as:

“a process of conflict and cooperation over the resources necessary to the production and reproduction of our lives, politics is a ubiquitous activity ... politics should give special consideration to how that process is resolved in the act of government – in particular how issues reach and leave the government agenda and how, within that arena, issues are discussed, contested, and decided ... political science is an academic discipline which seeks systematically to describe, analyse and explain collective decision-making and the values and perspectives that underlie it.”³

Political science, thus, is the art or science of government which is concerned with guiding or influencing governmental policy and with winning and holding control over a government. Both geography and politics are related and affect each other. Geography determines the relations between states and knowledge of geography immediately presents a picture for conflict as well as outcome of wars. The relationship between geography and politics is also evident from the writings of Jean Bodin in the 16th century. Bodin stated that national characteristics change because of climate and topography which are geographical factors and this has an impact on political structure of the states (Norris, 1980). The relationship between geography and politics was also emphasized by Montesquieu by applying world geography to world politics. Montesquieu highlighted the significance of location on political freedom (Norris, 1980). Mackinder highlighted the significance of geography in the study of global politics. In ‘The Great Wars of History’, Mackinder wrote about the uneven distribution of fertility and strategic opportunity provided by geography which leads to unequal growth and of nations (Sempa, 2000).

The term ‘geopolitics’ is regarded to be first used by Rudolf Kjellén (1864-1922), a Swedish political scientist, in an article published in Swedish geographical journal *Ymer* in the year 1899. Kjellén used the German term ‘*Geopolitik*’ in another article in the year 1905 and defined geopolitics as:

²Skykman, N. J. (1938), “Geography and foreign policy, I”, *American Political Science Review*, 32 (1): 28-50

³ Marsh, David, and Gerry Stoker, eds. *Theory and methods in political science*. London: Macmillan, 1995.



“the study of the state as a geographical organism or spatial phenomenon with particular emphasis on a state’s location in relation to other states, its territorial form, and its size”⁴.

This definition views geopolitics as a study of the state’s territory and hinges on the societal and government-constitutional politics. Kjellén fixated the state as the sole powerful entity with the belief of the nation being the state’s soul.

The term ‘geopolitics’ was later popularized by Karl Haushofer (1928). Haushofer defined geopolitics as:

“geopolitics is the science of conditioning of political processes by the earth. It is based on the broad foundations of geography, especially political geography, as the science of political space organisms and their structure. The essence of regions as comprehended from the geographical point of view provides the framework for geopolitics within which the course of political processes must proceed if they are to succeed in the long term. Though political leaders will occasionally reach beyond this frame, the earth dependency will always eventually exert its determining influence. As thus conceived, geopolitics aims to be equipment for political action and a guidepost in political life... Geopolitics wants to and must become the geographical conscience of the state.”⁵

Geopolitics has also been defined as the relationship between power politics and geography (Child, 1985). Thus, while making policies and strategies planners need to keep in mind the geographic factors as these factors can wither enhance or impede the actions of nations in the world stage. Geopolitics is also defined as “describing geographical settings and their relationship to political power and setting out spatial frameworks embracing political power units such as hemispheres, oceans, land and maritime boundaries, national resources, and culture (Cohen, 1973).

Halford Mackinder in his seminal article titled “The Geographical Pivot of History”, stressed on the fact that geopolitics is limited to geographical impediments and opportunities that exists for successful policies. Mackinder believed that in large states power was becoming more and more centralized and there will be emergence of mass political movements in the background of the post-war order. Mackinder viewed global politics as a ‘closed system’ –which refers to the interconnectedness of the actions of different countries and identified the major axis of conflict was between land- and sea-powers. Mackinder’s views of geopolitics are illustrative of the features of ‘classical’ geopolitics as he uses a limited Western centric view of geopolitics. Another proponent of classical geopolitics is Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840-1914) who considered owning and retaining control over seas as the factors that led to the emergence of domination by certain nations. Classical geopolitics focuses on the conventional factors such as political, economic, and military strategy as means to defend the interest of nations and to prevent other powers from gaining competitive advantage. A prominent proponent of classical geopolitics states:

“geopolitics is not geographic determinism, but is based on the assumption that geography defines limits and opportunities in international politics: states can realize their geopolitical opportunities or become the victims of their geopolitical situation. One purpose of grand

⁴ Chapman, Bert. (2011), *Geopolitics: A guide to the issues*, California: Praeger

⁵ Tuathail (1996) 46-47



strategy is to exploit one's own geographical attributes and an adversary's geographical vulnerabilities.⁶

Critical geopolitics, as opposed to classical geopolitics, criticizes the state-centric approach to understand the geopolitical dynamics and international relations. It reflects diverse interdisciplinary methods to understand geopolitics which were developed during the 1980s. Gerard Toal, a key proponent of critical geopolitics states:

“geopolitics is the study of world politics through the lens of state competition and the geographical dimensions of power. Moreover, certain journalists, politicians, and strategic advisors value geopolitical discourse for various reasons; First and foremost, geopolitical discourse addresses the compelling issues of power and danger in international affairs. The critical point to grasp at the outset is that geopolitics is already entangled in global politics; it is not a disinterested observer. Second, geopolitics is alluring because it purports to simplify a great deal. It establishes a framework within which local events in one location can be viewed in the context of a broader global picture. Numerous geopolitical narratives are structured around essentialized oppositions between ‘us’ and ‘them’. ‘Entire regions of the world are divided into oppositional zones, a structure we can refer to as earth labelling’. Finally, geopolitics is popular because it offers insight into the future course of world events... because geopolitics aspires to be prophetic discourse, it has a certain magical allure... because those with inter in international affairs live in a globalizing world marked by information saturation, the desire for simplified nostrums packaged as ‘strategic insight’ is strong.⁷”

Geopolitics: An Analytical Perspective

Critical geopolitics has a leftist orientation and essentially criticizes the state-centric approach of understanding geopolitics. Critical geopolitics lays emphasis on geographical aspects of United States and other western countries interventions on the developing world.

Thus, geopolitics aims to draw political conclusions based on the study of the dynamic evolution of States amidst the impact of geographical, social, historical, and economic factors that have influence this evolution.

Geopolitics focuses on the relationship between geography and politics at a global level. Here, geography works as a lens to interpret politics at an international level. Halford Mackinder, in the year 1904, presented the concept of heartland where he proposed that the post-colonization era will be marked by increased focus on efficiency rather than territorial growth. Mackinder (1904) considered Europe and Asia as a unit which based on accessibility of the hinterland and its exploitation. On the other hand, Mackinder considered the internal land dimension to not be an opportunity, however, this may appear as a future counterpart to domination (Takacs, 2023). Mackinder (1904) proposed for the robust land power around the pivot areas to gain power. Mackinder proposed the concept of ‘Inner Crescent’ and ‘Outer Crescent’. The geographical area outside the pivot is the Inner Crescent which consists of Europe, Southern and Southwestern and Eastern Asia. The Outer Crescent consists of Britain, South and North America, Southern Africa, Australasia, and Japan (Mackinder, 1904). Russia occupied the pivot areas being a land power (Mirza and Ayub, 2022).

⁶ Chapman, Bert. (2011), *Geopolitics: A guide to the issues*, California: Praeger

⁷ Tuathail, O. et. al. (2006). (Ed.) *The Geopolitics Reader*. Routledge.



The changing geopolitical environment led Mackinder to review his previous propositions. He proposed that as Asia, Africa, and Europe contain a quarter of the world's landmass, he termed it as 'World Island' (Mackinder, 1942). Mackinder renamed the 'pivot area' as 'Heartland' and suggested that it was the key to strategic domination which consists of – a part of Eurasia around the Baltic and Black Sea, Central Asia, the Caucasus, and parts of modern day Russia. He also suggested that the 'Inner Crescent' which consisted of Arabia, East Asia, India, and Western Europe was more powerful part of the 'World Island' even though that part makes up only one-fifth of the World Island landmass (Mackinder, 1942).

Mackinder's Heartland is characterized by inaccessibility of naval forces as the region is separated from the ocean by the Arctic ice in the north; mountain ranges of Carpathians, Himalayas, and Zargo; and the deserts of Arabian and Gobi in between. In terms of geography, the heartland area comprises of the region which extends from the Volga River in the west to the east of Eastern Siberia, mountains of Himalayas in the south, and to the Arctic Sea in the north (Mirza and Ayub, 2022). However, Mackinder's Heartland did have an Achilles Heel which was the opening in the West between the Black Sea and the Baltic Sea which exposed the area to attacks. According to Mackinder (1942):

*"Who rules Eastern Europe commands the Heartland: Who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island : Who rules the World-Island commands the world"*⁸

Mackinder's concept of Heartland was contested by Nicholas J. Spykman in 1942. Spykman (1942) termed the 'Inner Crescent' of Mackinder as the 'Rimland' which is situated in the periphery of the Eurasian continent. Geographically, Rimland is the strip of land and islands which exist between Heartland and the Planetary Ocean, stretching to the west, south, and east of Eurasia, circling the large landmass between central-eastern Europe and the Far East (Diaconescu, 2020). Spykman (1944) argued that Rimland powers are maritime oriented and therefore have the advantage of having access to the sea and by virtue of that have wider exposure to the world. As a result, the Heartland powers can be controlled by the Rimland powers. Spykman (1944) further noted that:

"Who controls the Rimland rules Eurasia; who rules Eurasia controls the destinies of the world".⁹

Mackinder's Heartland has remained traditionally under the Russian sphere of influence. The quest for the control of Rimland eventually led to the Cold War (Gaddis, 2005). Loss of power and influence of the United States and its allies on the strategic areas such as East Asia, Europe, and the Middle East enhances the power of the Soviet Union on Eurasia- African "World Island". As a result of this threat, the United States along with its allies of Western Europe formed the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in the year 1949. The objective of NATO was fairly simple and that was to contain the Soviet Union expansion which already possessed Eastern Europe and the Heartland (Sempa, 2002). In order to contain the expansionist tendencies of the Soviet Union, regional alliances were formed, such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Central Treaty Organization (CENTO),

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⁸ Mackinder, S. H. J. (1942). *Democratic Ideals and Reality: A Study in the Politics of Reconstruction*. Constable Publishers

⁹ Spykman, N. J. (1944). *The Geography of the Peace*. Harcourt, Brace



already possessed Eastern Europe and the Heartland (Sempa, 2002). In order to contain the expansionist tendencies of the Soviet Union, regional alliances were formed, such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), and Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). These regional alliances were aided both economically as well as militarily by the United States. The alliances were all made with Rimland nations in order to withstand pressure from the Soviet controlled Heartland. Afghanistan, Greece, Korea, Indochina, and Turkey, thus, became the battlegrounds for the Cold War which pitted the Maritime power on the 'Outer Crescent' with the land power in the 'Heartland' in a move to control the 'Rimland'.

Geostrategic importance of Ukraine

Geostrategy refers to the synthesis of geopolitically grounded strategic goals, principles, and directions of the state's foreign policy (Martsikhiv and Shepelyak, 2020). Understanding of the Ukrainian geostategy provides for a useful reference to understand the current geopolitical situation. Ukraine is situated at the middle of Europe where economic, environmental, and political interests intersect with one another. The Ukrainian State Liberation Council was established in the year 1944 by the Ukrainian State Forces in opposition to the Soviet regime as the supreme body of the Ukrainian people in its revolutionary struggle. Ukraine gained independence after the collapse of the USSR when the Cold War ended. In a true sense, international recognition of Ukraine and establishment of Ukraine on the political map of the world happened only after Ukraine was declared independent on August 24, 1991. Moreover, several geopolitical changes took place in the last decade of the twentieth century. The United States emerged as a power center, becoming the first non-European state to become a world power. Though, the United States emerged as powerful leader, European Union and Russia, and countries in the East Asian region seek play the role of political as well as economic influence.

Development of Ukraine is largely based on the geopolitical situation and historical conditions and the same will also determine the future of its geostrategic axis. Ukraine, due to its location and historical context, holds a very important geostrategic significance. Ukraine today occupies central-eastern position on the European subcontinent and shares borders with seven countries, namely, Belarus, Hungary, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Russia, and Slovakia, which is at the crossroads of Eastern Europe and Western Asia. The geographical position of Ukraine makes it a bridge between Asia and Europe, with Ukraine having access to transportation via land, waterways, and air. More specifically, Ukraine's access to the Black Sea makes it an extremely geostrategic location. Ukraine has a long coastline along the Black Sea and this provides Ukraine with major access to trade. Furthermore, it also connects Ukraine to the Mediterranean Sea via the Turkish Straits and it also holds considerable energy sources. Ukraine's control over Black Sea ports of Odessa and Sevastopol gives it a strategic importance and also influences its Maritime capabilities.

Historically, Ukraine had close ties with both Russia and Europe. Ukraine had historical ties with the Russian empire. It was part of the Soviet Union which shaped the geopolitical identity of Ukraine. Thus, there exists a lot of common history and cultural affinities between Ukraine and Russia. Ukraine also developed close ties with Europe through the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) in the year 1994. The agreement basically strengthened the relationship between the European Union and Ukraine through summits, exchanges, and development of free trade areas. The European Union executed policies such as the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the Eastern Partnership (EaP) to extend its sphere of influence over Ukraine. Furthermore, Ukraine's willingness to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union generated great geopolitical debates as Russia was always concerned with the eastward expansionist tendencies of the European



Union. The willingness of Ukraine to join NATO was perceived by Moscow as a direct threat to its own security and hence complicated the geopolitical situations even more.

The relationship between Ukraine, Russia, and the European Union can also be understood from the point of view of Ukraine being the energy transit hub. Ukraine acts as a major transit country for Russian gas exports into the European Union. Russian oil pipelines traverse the Ukrainian territory and control over these energy supply routes provides Ukraine the leverage for regional politics. Moreover, it also provides Ukraine an ability to influence energy security dynamics in Europe. This makes the relationship between Ukraine, Russia and the European Union more complex and complicated.

The geostrategic importance of Ukraine also stems from the fact that Ukraine has world's almost half of fertile chernozem soils and powerful industrial and scientific-technical potential. This makes Ukraine one of the world's leading agricultural producer as well as an exporter. Ukraine's agro-industrial sector is of great significance and Ukraine is also termed as the 'bread basket of Europe' as it is amongst the top three exporters of grain around the world. Thus, Ukraine's fertile soils and agricultural potential makes it an important geostrategic location.

Conclusion

Geopolitics is the study of how geography and politics interact to shape national policies and actions that uphold and advance national sovereignty. Ukraine has been through a tumultuous journey since its freedom in the year 1991 till the present time as it undergoes a war with Russia. The geopolitical narratives set around Ukraine and EU relations and EU and Russia relations set out several factors which acted as catalysts in promoting the war. While Ukraine expressed explicit interest in joining the EU, on the other hand, EU went ahead with its Eastern Partnership Program offering trade relations and even political discussions but falling short of granting membership to Ukraine into the European Union. EU's eastern partnership program, which is considered an offshoot of the ENP, has been observed as tools for exerting normative and civilian powers by the EU by some geopolitical scholars and observers. But at the same time, rationalists have criticized the same on the grounds of such policies being designed to cover European flaws and weaknesses and also as tools to protect the security of EU. EU's interest in Ukraine can also be understood from the point of view of EU trying to promote democracy in nations and creating European norms and rules in other nation states.

Russian interest in Ukraine stems from the fact that it is historically and culturally related. Moreover, Ukraine is an important conduit for trade with European nations for Russia to export gas. Ukraine is also a major market for Russia and above all it acts as a guard to Russia preventing the western forces from entering into Russia. However, the policies undertaken by EU, were seen as encroaching upon its territory by Russia. Russia saw the common neighbourhood as a threat to its own security from the western nations and NATO. As a result, in 2014 Russia attacked Ukraine and annexed Crimea. Separatists backed by Russia in the region of Eastern Ukraine, succeeded in controlling significant part of Donbas region of Ukraine¹⁰. Russian troops and pro-Russian separatists attempted to establish de facto rule in the eastern regions of Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic. The conflict in the eastern region of Ukraine evolved into being static and in the year 2015 Minsk II

¹⁰Yekelchik, S., *The Conflict in Ukraine: What Everyone Needs to Know*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015, 115-152; Toal, G., *Near Abroad: Putin, the West and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2017; D'Anieri, P., *Ukraine and Russia: From Civilized Divorce to Uncivil War*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, 211-252; Smith, C.M, *Ukraine's Revolt, Russia's Revenge*, Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2022.



Agreements were signed between Russia and Ukraine. Russia achieved major goals with the annexation of Crimea in 2014 with the first being a significant enlargement of its territory by taking control of the Crimean Peninsula. In the subsequent years, Ukraine remains in a tight spot with explicit intentions to join the EU despite the Russian revolutions which gave the final blow on 2022 with an active war between both the states.

While the war in Ukraine has caused heavy casualties, it has major geopolitical impacts. The war has been severely criticized by the western nations and they have issued sanctions against Russia. This throws Russia into a box and it has the risk of getting trapped in its own geography. On the other hand, the war poses a threat to European nations. The war has also wide ranging ramifications in terms of influence of the west and NATO. While some are of the opinion that Ukraine may be granted membership into EU, others disagree for the very fact that Ukraine is already on a war with another state. After post-cold war, Russia and EU have always had differences, but they were major trading partners. Specifically, Russian oil and gas is imported to European nations through Ukraine which is getting affected due to sanctions imposed by EU on Russia. On the flipside, lack of Russian oil and gas may plummet the European economy into a dark recessionary period which will in turn affect several non-European nations as well.

While the conflict has disrupted political as well as economic relations between EU and Russia, other nations have also maintained their geopolitical positions with respect to this conflict. While China has appealed to all parties to maintain restraint, it seems to diplomatically support Russia. The UAE and Saudi Arabia, through support US and EU policies, support Ukraine only in a lukewarm manner while maintain the trading relations with Russia. India also considers Russia to be a trading as well as strategic partner for growth, and therefore does not apply any sanction against Russia.

Thus, the war in Ukraine has far reaching geopolitical impact which is not limited to the relations between EU and Russia, but also encompasses important geopolitical actors such the US, China, and India. The Ukraine conflict has the potential to alter political power in regions and geopolitical realities of the world.

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