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Academic Foresights

## Revival of Geopolitical Thought in Europe



### *How do you analyze the present situation of the revival of geopolitical thought in Europe?*

The revival of geopolitical thought in Europe has neither started with the present Ukraine crisis, nor with 9/11. It somewhat paradoxically took off in the 1990s right after the end of the Cold War. Most prominent in this context was perhaps the case of Russia, which had witnessed a quite remarkable turnaround. Banned during the Cold War as a mistaken theory, if not ideology, by the Soviet authorities, geopolitics has since acquired an almost dominant place in Russian analysis of world politics (1). There have been consistent and widespread references back to early 20th-century geopolitical thought and ‘geopolitical necessities’, not least by Alexander Dugin. The latter is the perhaps the best-known representative of this resurgence, both through his *Fundamentals of Geopolitics*, reprinted several times, and through his political activism as party leader, director of a Centre for Geopolitical Expertise (founded late 1999) and adviser to the speaker of the Duma, Gennadii Seleznev. From Marx to Mackinder.

But the smaller countries in the post-Soviet space have also seen a revival. Although the exact status of geopolitical thought in Estonia continues to be disputed (2), the place reserved for Huntington’s ‘clash of civilizations’ thesis in that country had been truly remarkable. Estonia’s minister of foreign affairs wrote the foreword to the 1999 Estonian translation of Huntington’s *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. For the book’s launch, Huntington visited Estonia and spoke at a press conference together with Estonia’s prime minister and minister of foreign affairs (3). His book was extensively reviewed in major newspapers and has more generally become part of popular discourse (4).

Nor did the revival stop on the Eastern side of the former Iron Curtain. Quite strikingly perhaps, Italy has also seen a revival of ‘geopolitics’, with military general and political adviser Carlo Jean as its figurehead and a relatively new journal of geopolitics called *Limes: Rivista Italiana di Geopolitica* (the Italian equivalent to the French *Hérodote*, but with national success on the level of Foreign Affairs/Foreign Policy) as its main outlet (5). In Italy, Jean’s books are the most widely read books in international relations written by an Italian. Together with *Limes*, they have accompanied and arguably contributed to the permeation of the discourses of politicians and newspapers by geopolitical vocabulary.

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In a collaborative project (7), we asked ourselves why that would be the case – why would many countries in Europe experience the revival of the single most materialist and determinist branch of realist IR theories when the latter were generally believed to be in jeopardy for not being conceptually able to account for the change? The main answer, so we argue, is that geopolitical thought, exactly because it suggests a determinacy of easily ‘readable’ geographic factors (physical and human) could provide some anchoring coordinates to a foreign policy identity discourse in crisis. In other words, we would expect a revival of geopolitical thought in countries that undergo an identity crisis because, for instance, their borders changed, their importance was connected to a role during the Cold War which is no longer relevant, or because indeed the country comes newly into existence having to find a place for itself. Faced with this crisis, i.e. a kind of ‘ontological dissonance’ within the foreign policy discourses, geopolitical thought can, under certain conditions provide a fixture, even if only temporarily (8). Inspired by writings mainly in political geography and ‘critical geopolitics’ (e.g. John Agnew, Mark Bassin, Simon Dalby, Gearóid Ó Tuathail) and constructivist foreign policy analysis (e.g. Ted Hopf, Jutta Weldes), the book compares four countries where such revival happened (Estonia, Italy, Russia, Turkey) and two where it did not (Czech Republic, Germany).

The somewhat paradoxical result of the study is that the revival of geopolitical thought did not happen despite the end of the Cold War, but because of it. Peace provided the conditions for identity crises that made the revival of a determinist and more militarist thinking possible – exactly when military means had shown their limits. And this has important consequences for European security more generally (see Question 3).

***In your opinion, how will the situation likely evolve over the next five years?***

The war in Ukraine is already seen by many as a kind of watershed, as the end of the post-Cold War period. Now, to some extent, our study would make the argument that this end has been with us for quite a while. Still, the open land grab in Crimea, Russia’s proposed return to a type of Breznev doctrine where unilaterally decided spheres of influence prevail, and smaller or weaker countries are sacrificed on the altar of great power security management (or condominium), poses a major problem for the foreign policy visions of some countries in Europe. Whereas e.g. the Baltic states, and indeed Russia itself, would see themselves vindicated by the events (leaving aside for a moment in what exactly that vindication consists), some other European countries have started to raise fundamental questions about European politics and their role therein. I will refer to Germany and Sweden as examples.

If the book’s thesis is correct, then one needs to assess the development of individual foreign policy identity discourses for finding out whether ‘ontological anxieties’ are present. Such crises are possibly developing when the foreign policy discourses shows self-reflections which openly address the (internal) self-understanding and (external) role conceptions of a country, as well as their potential mismatch. Crises may break out when the existing reservoir of identities cannot find a sufficiently coherent re-articulation in such self-conscious debates. Germany had surely seen a

coherent re-articulation in such self-conscious debates. Germany had surely seen a large discussion about its precise and potentially new role after unification and with/after its first international military interventions. But there was not really a crisis, because, in the 1990s, this role was conceived as a Bonner Republic writ large, in particular in its conception of the EU as a post-nationalist peace project, in which, at the same time, Germany is aware of its particular responsibilities in the face of mass atrocities (the German involvement in former Yugoslavia). However hypocritical one may find similar descriptions, the existing identity discourse(s) carried ready-made solutions within its repertoire (all identity discourses include several identity projects and facets, as they have historically developed).

And indeed, Germany may be the one country which has most difficulties to come to terms with the war in Ukraine. German foreign and security policy in Europe after 1989 was very much based on the combination of EU enlargements as a peace project, while allowing foreign interventions when prompted by humanitarian concerns. At the same time, it continued to play a great power role in trying to provide an arc and bracket to Russia, whenever another round of enlargement, whether EU or NATO, was hurting Russia's sensibilities. German Chancellors were often mediators between the sides, also by moderating the more aggressive anti-Russian stances in the Western alliance; and they also eased potential tensions by increasing trade relations and technology transfer: a kind of 'win-win' situation for Germany. Russia's behaviour in Crimea showed to the German government that this compromise would no longer work, and ushered in the possibility of an open and hence consented/legitimate return to a sphere of influence policy that profoundly contradicts German visions of a post-détente and Helsinki-inspired European order. It is in the Helsinki spirit of the independent decision of countries, free and sovereign to choose their external relations, that Germany found it hard to oppose NATO enlargement in Europe despite its previous promise that no such thing would happen (or: be looked for, which is not the same). In the name of what could one refuse smaller states' access to NATO when they themselves asked for it?

For Germany, the issue was less that Crimea was annexed, but the way and justification in which it was done, i.e. the open return to great power spheres of influence, unilaterally decided, and applied over the heads of populations. Russia, fearing that it has very little to offer to its Near Abroad if the logic of the security order would continue like this, decided not only to attack Crimea, but also the underlying normative system. And this has been seen by German politicians (9). The question is whether it will eventually undermine a German role in, and commitment to, multilateralism and the Helsinki principles, and whether this debate will more openly mobilise geopolitical argument. So far, it looks as if with the critique of Russia's policy also the latter's underlying geopolitical visions are criticised. But it is too early to tell.

Another country where the present war is producing very open discussions is Sweden. Sweden was initially a country we wanted to analyse for the 1990s. Here is a foreign policy discourse based on 'neutrality' and yet, after the end of the bipolar competition in Europe, the country found itself in a strategic environment in which there were no

sides left to be neutral about. Despite this, no major geopolitical revival happened. In fact, it is debatable whether a real identity crisis developed. After all, there are different ways to conceive of neutrality, not all connected to a ‘mediating between the blocs’ policy. The Swedish way was a form of armed neutrality in which its foreign policy independence was to be achieved through a relatively high military investment, including arms production. This independence between the blocs was also mirrored, and closely so, by the Swedish social-democratic third way which allowed a much higher place for public property and intervention in a capitalist system than elsewhere. Hence, as long as there was a general consensus around the Swedish welfare model, also neutrality, being part of this identity package, would be safe, however the international environment would look like, or almost.

This does not mean that during the Cold War and surely after, many in the Swedish military and those political parties, that wished to get rid of that social-democratic model and self-identification, were undermining this vision of neutrality. The crisis in the early 1980s with the USSR was the tensest moment in that regard, although there are indications that the submarine which entered Swedish territorial waters may have been belonging to NATO countries, not the USSR (10). Moreover, after 1989, EU membership and the CFSP at least qualified classical neutrality; although the EU is not and is not primarily seen as a military alliance. Now, the war in Ukraine offers yet another possibility for the present right-wing government to undermine the weakening consensus about the model, already undermined from within. Still, there is quite a paradox in the present argument in favour of NATO membership to oppose Russia’s foreign policy. Neutrality of the Swedish kind makes exactly sense when there is a bipolar competition. The more competition, the more neutrality returns to relevance. Or, to put it differently, if the present situation asks for joining a military alliance, it should also have been the case during the Cold War, which is indeed the opinion of many who push for it now. In Sweden, a struggle for the collective memory and foreign policy identity is in full swing. Whether or not geopolitical thought will be mobilised remains to be seen just as in the German case.

I have chosen to illustrate the potential shifts by taking two countries where no geopolitical revival had taken place in the past. Of course, such revivals are much more to be expected when countries have a history of them, prone to be mobilised when world politics raises military issues to the top of the agenda. This also clearly shows that geopolitical thinking re-appears not just in moments of peace; indeed its more self-evident environment is military competition. Hence, as it looks now, there are reasons to believe that the revival will pick up again, if great power politics obtains in the present renegotiation of the European order. And this is important, because we are not just interested in a set of ideas: the way actors think about the European security order directly interacts with it.

### ***What are the structural long-term perspectives?***

The security order is not only something to which actors react; it is something whose outcome is the result of how our beliefs interact with it. The project underlying the

research was called 'self-fulfilling geopolitics'. The idea is quite simple: if everyone shares a geopolitical worldview, then the effect will be a militarization of foreign policies and of the European security order.

Geopolitical thought leads to the militarisation of politics. The book shows in detail how geopolitics mobilizes 'realism's militarist gaze', i.e. a particular component of realist thought. That component is best characterized by what Raymond Aron has called the reversal of Clausewitz (11). According to him, whereas Clausewitz looked at war as the prolongation of politics (and hence driven by political concerns), much of the United States' foreign policy has been about politics as the prolongation of war (and hence driven by military logic and worst case scenarios). For instance, when Newt Gingrich criticized Colin Powell for not selling well enough the US' war strategy in Iraq, he epitomized this reduction of foreign policy to the marketing department of a strategy already defined elsewhere. And if there has been such a geopolitical revival in the 1990s, then this militarization predated 9/11. Indeed, it may have predisposed elites to read 9/11 in a more militarist way, making the war on terror with the Iraq invasion more likely, albeit counterproductive even (or especially) for realists (12).

Besides militarization, I identify the main effect of this revival in what I call a 'vicious circle of essentialisation'. Geopolitical thought makes factors of political and human geography, such as territories, borders and populations, appear fixed and 'natural' for deriving policies from them. But their meaning is not 'naturally' given; they are not 'essentially' so (and therefore geopoliticians necessarily quarrel over how best to read their 'nature'). Yet, if such thinking is widely accepted and, in turn, inspires policies, then they risk becoming self-fulfilling prophecies. Geopolitical thought interacts with a social reality it purports only to explain. There is a 'politics of geopolitics' which affects the structure of the European order in the long run.

#### Notes:

- (1) Ivan Tyulin, 'Between the Past and the Future: International Studies in Russia', *Zeitschrift für Internationale Beziehungen* vol. 4, no. 1 (1997), pp. 181-194; Alexander A. Sergounin, 'Russian post-Communist Foreign Policy Thinking at the Cross-Roads: Changing Paradigms', *Journal of International Relations and Development* vol. 3, no. 3 (2000), pp. 216-255.
- (2) Pami Aalto, *Constructing Post-Soviet Geopolitics in Estonia*, London: Frank Cass, 2003.
- (3) Merje Kuus, 'Toward Cooperative Security? International Integration and the Construction of Security in Estonia', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* vol. 31, no. 2 (2002), pp. 297-317.
- (4) Pami Aalto and Eiki Berg, 'Spatial Practices and Time in Estonia: From Post-Soviet Geopolitics to European Governance', *Space & Polity* vol. 6, no. 3 (2002), pp. 253-270.
- (5) Carlo Jean, *Geopolitica*, Roma-Bari: Editori Laterza, 1995. Carlo Jean, *Guerra, strategia e sicurezza*, Roma-Bari: Editori Laterza, 1997. For a discussion of LiMes, see also Sonia Lucarelli and Roberto Menotti, 'No-constructivists' land: International Relations in Italy in the 1990s', *Journal of International Relations and Development* vol. 5, no. 2 (2002), pp.

in the 1990s', *Journal of International Relations and Development* vol. 5, no. 2 (2002), pp. 114-142.

- (6) Marco Antonsich, *Geopolitica e geografia politica in Italia dal 1945 ad oggi*, Trieste: Università di Trieste: Quaderni del Dottorato di Ricerca in Geografia Politica, n. 2, special monographical issue.
- (7) Stefano Guzzini, ed., *The return of geopolitics in Europe? Social mechanisms and foreign policy identity crises*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. [The country chapters make up half of the book and are written by Andreas Behnke (GER), Petr Drulák (CZ), Elisabetta Brighi and Fabio Petito (I), Merje Kuus (EST), Alexander Astrov and Natalia Morozova (RUS), Pinar Bilgin (TK)].
- (8) An interesting feature of geopolitical thought is that although geography suggests fixtures in nature, whether physical or human, it is far less determinant than geopolitics assumes. That allows for a variety of often contradictory definitions of 'geopolitical necessities' and ultimately foreign policy self-understandings and roles. Just as geopolitical thought may be an easy early fixer in such identity crises, it also seems unable to avoid a relapse, as the country studies on Russia and Turkey exemplify in the book.
- (9) See e.g. Elmar Brok, the quite influential Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the European Parliament (MEP EPP), who repeatedly refers to the Helsinki principles. See e.g. in the interview at the early stage of the crisis: <http://www.profil.at/articles/1404/982/371980/ukraine-auf-weg-autokratie>.
- (10) For the argument in favour of a NATO submarine, see Ola Tunander, *The secret war against Sweden: British and US submarine deception in the 1980s*, London: Frank Cass, 2004. For a different assessment, see Fredrik Bynander, *The Rise and Fall of the Submarine Threat : Threat Politics and Submarine Intrusions in Sweden 1980-2002*, Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2003.
- (11) The point is repeatedly made in Raymond Aron, *Penser la guerre, Clausewitz. II: L'âge planétaire*, Paris: Gallimard, 1976.
- (12) John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, 'An unnecessary war', *Foreign Policy* 134, 2003, pp. 50-59.

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