The Ukraine Crisis as explosive anachronism

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The Ukraine Crisis tends to be analysed in terms of traditional power politics, rather than in terms of 21st-century conditions of world politics. This article describes the 19th-century image of power politics inherent in most analyses. Next it highlights five anomalies which point at the anachronistic, yet persistent nature of this mode of reasoning. The final section offers an alternative approach of geopolitics, based on cities rather than states, and argues for a revival of the functionalist pragmatism that has resulted in European integration.

It is fairly easy to analyse the Ukraine crisis in terms of traditional power politics. This, moreover, is the dominant way in which the crisis is presented in the media, both by politicians and commentators. A preliminary conclusion could be that the familiar analysis must be correct, because it is so widely shared on all sides of the divide. Indeed, the analysis has a self-fulfilling quality, encouraging politicians to act upon its premises. These premises, however, are rooted in a 19th-century mode of reasoning. This would turn the analysis into an anachronism, were it not that it is well-alive.

The main reason to offer an alternative reading of the crisis and world politics more generally is because we know how power politics of the 19th century ended. It culminated in the so-called short century of total war, 1914-1991. Some analysts then were warning against the self-destructive nature of traditional power politics. History proved them right: 19th-century thinking culminated in the First World War. This can happen again, some analysts are warning today. This time with history on their side. Only fatalists who don’t believe in social learning have reason to stick to a 19th-century logic of geopolitics. There is no objective need in history to steer a dramatic course. In the final section it is argued that contemporary political analysis is better served with a world society perspective that takes the division between rural and urbanized areas as its geopolitical foundation, rather than sovereign territorial states.

A 19th-century analysis

So, what is the conventional story? It is a story of great power politics. A story of sovereign states and their territorial struggle for power. The shorthand is: geopolitics; a geography of power. The Russian Federation wants to regain its periphery, the story goes, while the EU/NATO combination tries to expand its sphere of influence. Ukraine happens to lie in between, and is subsequently pulled into both directions. In some variants, the USA is said to play divide and rule, by preventing a Eurasian political-economic alliance between Russia and the EU. Within this script, the Western press portrays Putin as a new Tsar, a Stalin or a populist aggressor. The Russian press provides a mirror image, talking about Western fascist aggression in and outside of Ukraine.

The dynamics of the confrontation follow a predictable pattern. The EU tries to buy influence on Ukraine by offering an Association Treaty. Russia trumps the EU by offering a
better deal to the Yanukovich administration: an offer to buy Ukrainian government bonds (15 billion dollars) and to supply gas at a substantial lower rate. At that time protesters are already in the streets and a revolution topples his regime in February 2014. Parliament votes to abolish Russian as the second official language. In the Russian reading the West is behind the revolution, which is of course denied by the West. Still in February, Russian separatists take control of Crimea and, in April, in the east of Ukraine, especially the cities of Luhansk, Donetsk and Kharkiv. In the Western reading Russia is behind the rebellion, which is of course denied by Russia. Russia intervenes on behalf of potentially repressed Russians in Crimea and offers aid to the rebels. The West installs economic sanctions. Crimea declares its independence, supported by a referendum on 16 March 2014, which of course is not taken seriously by the West. In the fog of war the Malaysian airplane, flight MH17, is brought down on 17 July 2014. Both sides accuse each other of bearing responsibility. Defense cuts in the West are reduced. NATO sets up a rapid deployment force (September 2014). Russia sets up a foreign legion for the protection of Russians in its near abroad (January 2015). The USA considers to deliver defensive weapons to Ukraine (February 2015).

Meanwhile the situation in Georgia (South Ossetia and Abkhazia) is still shaky. The situation in Chechnya is instable. The territorial disputes between Armenia and Azerbaijan about Nagorno-Karabakh are frozen. There is difference of opinion about solving the Syrian civil war and the fight against the Islamic State. Russia tries to court NATO-member Turkey. There are different views on the Serbian-Kosovar conflict. Competing sovereignty claims in the Arctic are unsettled. In short, the media report an emerging New Cold War, based on the antagonistic geopolitical logic of confrontational interdependence: there is no escape.

If this is indeed the storyline both sides keep investing in, the outcome will not be a new cold war, but a repetition of World War I. That war started just over one hundred years ago, due to an escalation pattern based on strictly rational choice considerations of all sides. The famous historian Sir A.J.P. Taylor (1906-1990) analysed all diplomatic moves in detail. The struggle for mastery in Europe, as his book was titled, culminated in irrational disaster for all European countries and people. It was preceded by two Balkan wars. Are Georgia, 2008, and Ukraine, 2014-2015, a similar prelude? The logic of 19th-century power politics says that in the end there is no choice. Each side forces the other side to escalating responses, even if the intention is to stop escalation. It is the type of mirror-image behavior as predicted by the world’s best philosopher of war, Carl von Clausewitz (1780-1831) — a 19th-century thinker indeed.

Anachronisms in the 19th-century analogy

Even within such reasoning there are various anomalies, some of which bear the promise for a different course of history.

First of all, we know the history of the short 20th century. The advantage of contemporary politicians, military, civil servants, journalists and academics over their 19th-century predecessors is enormous. We know that small incidents, like the terrorist assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria in Sarajevo on 28 June 1914, can trigger a world war. We also know that aggressors, like the German and Japanese governments in the 1930s, need to be stopped at an early stage. We also know that ‘-isms’ lead to intangible,
unsolvable, polarized conflicts. We know that cold wars lead to imperialism and constant fighting in proxy wars.

Of course lessons from history do not go undebated. On the contrary. We can make a variety of analogies and spell out their consequences. If we perceive the Russian Federation and the EU/NATO as fighting for power over Ukraine, the crisis looks different than if we perceive both sides to be ‘blundering into disaster’, to borrow the apt title of McNamara’s analysis of the nuclear age. Fatalists who see major wars as inevitable will also point at history. The difference, however, with the 19th century is the experience of the 20th century. This in itself is reason to question the wisdom of political theories that treat history as being circular; the more so because of the other anomalies and anachronisms.

Secondly, the appreciation of warfare has changed. Up to the First World War, waging a successful war was seen as the highest goal in politics. If rulers wanted to conquer a heroic place in history, they had to conquer new territories — or regain those lost in previous wars. A successful war was a crown on diplomacy. Moreover, warfare was a normal means in the diplomatic toolkit; a means to underline arguments with violence and threats of violence. Warfare between states was not a matter of if, but a matter of when.

There were already some important exceptions. The last war between the Nordic countries dates back to 1814. These sovereign states established a zone of peace among themselves and can be qualified as a security community. Ever since the Rush-Bagot Treaty (1812) the border between the USA and British North America, later Canada, has been demilitarized. But these exceptions had not yet changed overall expectations, even though the USA tended to look at the European wars with weary eyes as an anachronistic left-over of aristocratic rule during the Ancien Regime of the 18th-Century. The US were reluctantly drawn into the First and Second World Wars, and moved towards economic imperialism and cultural hegemony rather than territorial colonialism. American military hegemony and interventionism gradually developed throughout the 20th century, ever since the Monroe Doctrine and Manifest Destiny merged.

World War I marks an important global shift in the appreciation of warfare. Warfare turned into a failure of diplomacy. Avoiding war became the highest quality of diplomacy. With a few exceptions, war lords turned from heroes into war criminals. Wars of aggression were forbidden. The Neuremberg Trials and Tokyo Tribunal after World War II were followed by the Yugoslav and Rwanda Tribunals in the 1990s. In 2002 the International Criminal Court (ICC) has been created to prosecute politicians and military leaders as individuals for crimes against humanity. Be sure, the normative turn did not end warfare. There is even a return of the just war doctrine in the UN context of humanitarian interventions. But warfare is no longer seen as inevitable or (in most circles) as glorious.

Thirdly, the European Union is an anomaly in 19th-century thinking. If traditional analysts were right, the EU would not have survived its own creation in 1992. Yet, it is a main actor. One of the champions of 19th-century reasoning, professor in Political Science at the University of Chicago John Mearsheimer, proved wrong in predicting that the loss of a common enemy would bring traditional power politics back to Germany, Britain, and France; he also thought NATO’s role would be over. Evidence of the opposite comes from the Yugoslav wars. In the early years of the wars France and Germany were hopelessly
divided as always: France supporting the integrity of the Yugoslav Republic and Germany supporting the independence of Croatia. In the 19th century they would have mobilized their armies against each other. Expecting them to do so today is an anachronism.

More in general, the role of international organizations in world politics is historically new. The short 20th century was not just an era of world wars and conflicting ideologies, but also the era of International Organization. Diplomacy and power politics have moved to a new level. The system levels of world politics and the world economy have developed their own institutions in international law, the UN-system, hundreds of Intergovernmental Organizations (IGOs), thousands of international Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and ten-thousands of Transnational Corporations, with interests wider than the home country. Adherents of traditional geopolitics have no choice but to belittle their meaning. Acknowledging their roles, however, allows for full exploitation of their conflict prevention potentials. Europe and Russia have failed to invest in especially the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and in the Council of Europe. The number of joint ventures in business is too limited or is not given its proper political-economic value. But it offers a potential non-existent when traditional geopolitics was formulated.

Fourthly, even though we have entered a new era of precision warfare and proxy wars, the suicidal nature of world war is recognized ever since the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962. The Einstein-Russell Manifesto of 1955 brought scientists from East and West together to spell out the risks of weapons of mass destruction. Due to their status, including various Noble Prize winners, they had substantial influence both in the Kremlin and the White House and talked sense to those in power. Mutual Assured Destruction is still a fact of life in case of unlimited escalation. In that sense analogies with a return of a cold war, rather than World War I or II, are understandable: EU/NATO and the Russian Federation are not able to survive each other in a full-scale open military confrontation.

Fifthly, at the global level of world politics there have been no major controversies since 1991. All major powers, and almost all smaller ones as well, adhere to the principles of the Liberal International Economic Order (LIEO). They are united in the G7, G8 and G20, which appear to replace the UN Security Council as an effective body for multilateral diplomacy serving the global interests of the world economy (for better or for worse). At the global level, the EU member states, the Russian Federation, the USA, China, Japan, India, Brazil, South Africa, Australia, Indonesia etcetera have no ideological conflicts. They disagree about interpretations of human rights and the characteristics of democracy, but this pales in the face of the controversies between great powers throughout history. The problems today are at the regional and national levels.

Because of this unique historic consensus at the global level, it is possible that in the case of the Ukraine crisis the USA and the Russian Federation, perhaps including a wider range of countries, may reach agreement on the future of the country in secret: Crimea for Russia, Kiev-centered Ukraine for the EU and perhaps even for NATO, Donbass Ukraine as a no-man’s land for the time being or ending up at the Russian side of this pragmatic equation. Frightening for the people who live there, but possible nonetheless. We will have to wait for the release of the archives in some twenty years, the autobiographies of involved statesmen or a whistle blower to learn about this level of negotiations.
Overall, these five points are modifications of war, especially between sovereign states. Escalation ladders have become longer, diplomatic means and techniques for conflict management have improved. Most contemporary wars, therefore, are civil wars (be it often with involvement of external states). However, these modifying points also open up a paradoxical if not cynical window of opportunity for limited military adventures. If it is not likely that great powers let themselves be pulled into risky escalation processes, the margins for military expansion increase. NATO expansion is not likely to be confronted by military steps from Russia. Russia’s military answer at best is indirect: causing instability in candidate countries helps to prevent their NATO-membership. Russian military protection of minorities in non-NATO member states is not likely to be confronted by direct military steps from NATO. Neither side wants to escalate. Yet, counting on this is playing Russian roulette indeed.

Towards an urban world society perspective

The trouble of discussing the risks of anachronistic thinking in power politics is that diehard traditionalists will only be hardened by the debate — anomalies are waved aside as a misleading misreading of the ‘true’ nature of politics — while those sensible to it don’t have to be convinced. In the study of world politics the so-called Realists and Pluralists, in all their variants, keep confronting each other. In the practice of national politics both positions are often found in the media, opposing political parties (if they are allowed to exist) and in opposing governmental bureaucracies (that always exist). Especially in military and foreign policy circles the traditional way of thinking is persistent and dominant. This largely reflects the institutional position of ministries of defense and ministries of foreign affairs: they are rooted in a territorial sovereignty discourse. The flag is their logo, the national anthem their song. Serving these ministries means serving the national interest, which is a combination of sovereignty, wealth and national identity, with a clear emphasis on the first. This is typical for the present historical phase of world society, which started in the 17th century and found its Waterloo in the short 20th century. Its legacy is quite persistent and self-fulfilling.

European integration started as a market discourse side-lining sovereignty. Increasingly, however, the EU is turned into a sovereignty project. The attempt in 2004 to give it a constitution symbolizes the course it has taken. Its attitude towards ‘neighbors’ and ‘candidates’ is increasingly antagonistic. The strength of the integration discourse was that it replaced traditional power politics, preoccupied with territorial disputes and national pride. Over the last decade, however, the EU acts like a quasi-state. Ukraine tends to become an integration trophy, rather than a logical extension of the European market. The Russian Federation responds in kind, be it with the limited means for foreign policy it possesses: military power and resource power.

More and more Europe has become EU-centric, forgetting the richness of its wider unique development of international organizations. The EU complains about lack of a military profile. Yet, Europe has NATO, which even includes a special relationship with its Partner for Peace, the Russian Federation — which has been put on ice in April 2014. The EU adopted a Charter of Fundamental Rights whereas the Council of Europe (CoE) and the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) already offered an excellent forum, with much wider membership, to develop the legally binding European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms further. Ukraine, the Russian Federation and
Turkey are among its member states. The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) provided a crucial forum for ending the Cold War, leading to the Charter of Paris for a New Europe in 1990. The EU member states have neglected the potential of these organizations. The CoE, the ECHR and the OSCE are poorly funded and play a marginal diplomatic role. As a result, EU-Europe and the Russian Federation have come to stand face to face in Ukraine. The Russians use the main foreign policy tools they possess (gas and guns) and the European countries respond with economic sanctions and military build-up.

‘Back to the future’ after all? To break the spell in Europe, the Russian Federation, the EU and the USA need to develop an alternative scenario.

A different way of looking at the problems in Europe, including the Ukraine crisis, is to interpret world politics in terms of an urbanised and a rural world. The social-economic reality for more than half of world society is that people live in urbanised settings. Instead of national states, their salient environment is determined by the quality of city life and the global networks (trade, finances, cyberspace, environmental stability) on which cities rely for their survival and day-to-day functioning. There are no fall-back positions. Cities cannot be self-sufficient. Food, water, energy are provided in a regional and global setting. Moreover, cities form the core of modern economies.

This forces upon them — and upon the sovereign states hosting them — a pragmatic functionalist logic, as developed by political scholars like David Mitrany and Ernst B. Haas. That approach has been instrumental in creating European integration. In order to revive this line of reasoning, we should stop comparing the EU with a federation in the making. Instead the proper historical analogy would be the Hanseatic League — which has existed for some 300 years and was a dominant force in European politics for more than a century. A league of geopolitical centers of economic activity and global connectivity. Instead of looking for new member states, the EU should start looking for closer association with cities in its near abroad, based on functional cooperation in specific issue areas. Cosmopolitan centers like Kiev, but also Moscow, St. Petersburg, Istanbul and Ankara can easily meet the EU’s accession criteria, whereas the countryside still needs decades. The same can be observed in member states like Bulgaria, Rumania and the Baltic states: Sofia, Bucharest, Riga, Vilnius and Tallinn are modern cities. If you travel outwards, however, it is like traveling back in time: horse power still has its original meaning in the rural areas of these countries. Functional cooperation between cities makes sense. Benjamin Barber makes a similar argument in his recent book If City Mayors Ruled the World. In fact they do. They control the majority of the world’s population and host the largest share of the world economy. They are entrenched in regional and global networks that are existential for their functioning. They have a self-interest in the proper functioning of these networks and hence of each other. Cities are the logical units of today’s and tomorrow’s geopolitics.

A focus on the functional needs of the urbanized world population will push the focus of geopolitics and national interests into a new direction. Issues that have emerged in the context of today’s global agenda are not served by power political struggles over territory. Food security, energy security, environmental security, health security and cyber security point at global challenges that provide incentives to spell out the consequences of a new functionalist approach. It requires a redrawing of the map, both in geographical and cognitive terms. It might help to let more people look with weary eyes and concern at the
return of the anachronistic, yet romantic and persistent longing to the power politics of the 19th century.

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8. Archives on the Cold War period, e.g., revealed appeasement of the Soviet Union during the Prague Spring of 1968. The USA was informed in advance of the Warsaw Pact intervention, and to show its abstention US troops were temporarily withdrawn from southern Germany.
9. See the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) at www.pcr.uu.se/research/ucdp.