

Gerard Toal

***Near Abroad: Putin, the West and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus***

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It is unimaginable that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century a powerful country could invade a neighbouring country and annex part of its territory just because it does not like its neighbour's politics. Though there have been some anti-terrorist and regime-change operations by powerful countries like the United States in failed states like Afghanistan or despotic ones like Iraq, officially the U.S. did not annex the countries it occupied. However, as Gerard Toal, political geographer, discusses in his book, *Near Abroad: Putin, the West and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus*, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Russia has twice engaged in unwarranted military intervention to its neighbours, Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014. This is the question Toal tries to answer, why does Russia invade its Neighbours? The whole book illustrates the post-Soviet and some historical developments in mentioned countries to understand why events occurred so that Russia invaded its neighbours? Toal believes that instead of classic geopolitics, critical geopolitics gives a broader picture to comprehend developments in the Caucasus and Ukraine and the conflict between these regions and Russia.

The book consists of eight chapters and an introduction. The introduction explains the term 'near abroad' and why Moscow uses this phrase at the international stage. In this context 'Near Abroad' is a Russian concept that was introduced to define its post-Soviet regions, and its sphere of influence. Adopting such a phrase unintentionally imply acceptance of Russia's primacy in those regions.

Following of the collapse of the USSR, Russia tried to define itself in the context of Western civilization, however subsequent developments have illustrated that Russia is still the same age-old, enemy of the West, at a civilizational level (pp.4-7). Thus, the author defines the Ukrainian conflict as a "civilizational choice" (p.212).

The book tries to explain, "Why does Russia invade its neighbours?" The author states that there are two generally accepted answers to this question. The first is that Russia invades its neighbours because it follows an imperialist policy towards them, classic geopolitics. The second, less explicitly debated in public, in media and foreign policy, is a "realist theory approach," Russia sees enlargement of NATO threat to its security. However, Toal states that these explanations are insufficient and he argues that a critical geopolitical approach provides a richer understanding of such conflicts and Russian invasions. By illustrating the "illusion of transparency" of liberal storylines, the author effectively

compares how liberals contradict themselves when they defend the sovereignty of states. Regarding the realist approach, using Mearsheimer's arguments, Toal states that realist assumptions are stuck in geopolitical determinism and a static outlook on world politics.

Instead, according to the author, cultural belonging and the identity of nations and decision makers could be a more effective way of understanding the policies of actors. Both the West and Russia have constructed their own stories about political developments in the region. But the construction of stories changes according to narrator. The Western desire is to liberate "captive nations", while Russia's aim is to protect co-ethnic and compatriot communities from "fascist" nationalists. This duplex should be regarded during the policy making towards the region.

In the second chapter, the author discusses the collapse of the USSR, the trauma that member states have experienced, and new realities that Russia faces in the region. The chapter begins with how Putin describes the trauma of the collapse of the Soviet Union for Russians, and it continues by narrating historical developments. The author expresses how Russian political decision makers and intellectual circles reacted and assessed Russia's international role after the collapse of the USSR. Toal states that Russian decision makers tried to make Russia an assertive, great power, at least in the post-Soviet region (p. 80). This means that Russian politicians could be seen as revanchist (p. 88), or, in other words, that they were not satisfied with only an influence inside their borders. The West's intention to enlarge its sphere of influence towards the post-Soviet regions is the cause of conflict between Russia on the one side, and Georgia, Ukraine, and the West on the other.

The subsequent chapters illustrate the empirical bases of the question. In the chapters, 3, 4, and 5 the study examines post-Soviet Georgia, in the context of the West and Russia. Eduard Shevardnadze's cautious policy towards Russia, followed Mikheil Saakashvili's ambitious policy believing that the West will rescue Georgia from bullying empire (p. 128) even if it has to confront with Russia. Expansion of NATO was seemed in this context as "rescue fantasy" of captive nations and enhance overall security and stability in Europe (p.97). Toal states that to legitimize their action both sides constructed storylines. Russia presents behaviour of Georgia and Ukraine, as genocidal towards minorities, specifically the people of South Ossetia and the Russians that live in Ukraine. It presents its invasion of Crimea as rescuing people from fascism and declares that Crimea was illegally gifted to Soviet Ukraine (p. 227).

Chapters 6 and 7 discuss crises of Ukraine, between the West and Russia. Western world supported mass protest and Ukrainians will. However, Russia sees Ukraine as little brother and historical part or Russia (p. 227). For this reason, Russia launched the Novorossiya Project but it failed to realize. Invasion of Crimea was presented as rescue mission (p. 216) by Russia. However, by conquering Crimea, it lost Ukraine and Ukrainians.

All in all, Toal's book is a valuable contribution to our understanding of recent political developments between the U.S. and Russia, and remind us not to assess events as black and white. Moreover, the study also illustrates how geopolitical boundaries can change and local disputes could become global. Instead of *thin geopolitical* approach, Toal put forward *thick geopolitical* understanding of spatial relationships and in-depth knowledge of places and peoples (p. 279). To conclude, the book is a must-read study for scholars, students, and general readers who interested in the Post-Soviet political developments. In addition to presenting a new approach to West/US-Russia relations, the book describes quarter-century developments after the collapse of the USSR.

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