

Geopolitics Never Really Left

By Don Sutherland

Today is Day 68 of Russia's on-and-off war aimed at eliminating Ukraine and its people. In the face of Russian barbarism that reflects some of the vivid historical accounts of the sack of Rome, it is worth looking back to a prescient essay published in the May 2014 issue of *Foreign Affairs*. That essay was published soon after Russia seized Crimea and then sent irregular elements into Ukraine's Donbas region. In the article, Walter Russell Mead, reintroduced the concept of geopolitics to the journal's readers.

In parts of the Western World, there were growing illusions geopolitics had become extinct. The notion that nations would seek to expand territory through the use of military power was increasingly viewed as obsolete as the post-Cold War euphoria continued to skew perceptions. Mead argued against such claims. He wrote:

Westerners should never have expected old-fashioned geopolitics to go away. They did so only because they fundamentally misread what the collapse of the Soviet Union meant: the ideological triumph of liberal capitalist democracy over communism, not the obsolescence of hard power.

He warned that the nascent post-Cold War order was fragile, writing, "This settlement reflected the power realities of the day, and it was only as stable as the relationships that held it up." He then took on the rising sentiment that geopolitics was extinct or going extinct.

Unfortunately, many observers conflated the temporary geopolitical conditions of the post-Cold War world with the presumably more final outcome of the ideological struggle between liberal democracy and Soviet communism... [T]hey thought geopolitics itself had also come to a permanent end.

Mead's essay was not exactly popular. In a companion essay, the writer mocked it as "alarmism."

Now some eight years later, a number of points rooted in the assumptions that geopolitics is real and not likely to disappear anytime soon are worth restating.

First, there remain and will likely remain countries with ambitions and imperial designs that pose risks to the territory and sovereignty of other countries. Second, countries' worldview and aspirations are, in large part, a product of structural factors including history, culture, and institutions. Those structural factors can feed their ambitions and drive their actions. Russia's historic quest for expansion as a response to an almost pathological sense of insecurity makes Russia what it is today—a destabilizing and dangerous actor on the world stage. Third, not every country today seeks a liberal society based on rule of law, representative government, and respect for human rights. Fourth, a world order is only as strong as the willingness of those who back it to defend it against those who seek its demise (namely, revisionist powers, revanchist powers, and rising powers). Fifth, nations on the periphery of those pose threats to their territory and should not be turned away from joining the security architectures of like-minded nations.

Had Ukraine been a member of NATO, there almost certainly would have been no Russian invasions. Depriving Ukraine of NATO membership increased the prospects of Russian aggression. Incorporating Ukraine into NATO would have had the opposite impact.

Today, a brutal war rages. The West must insist on Ukraine's victory, the liberation of all of its territories, including those seized in 2014, and terms that allow Ukraine to enjoy full sovereign freedom, including the ability to join NATO. Revanchist Russia will not change its national character anytime soon regardless of whom is in power. Even jailed Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny sees Crimea as part of Russia, not Ukraine.

In seeking to secure its interests, the West must not allow itself to be paralyzed by fear over Moscow's wild threats or illusions that Moscow is one leader away from being a peaceful and liberal democracy. Today, and for the foreseeable future, Russia seeks to destabilize the West and gain territory around its borders. Therefore, the West must be prepared to defend its rules-based order. It should also accept Finland, Sweden, and ultimately Ukraine into NATO. The aggressor responsible for the current war and widespread crimes against humanity against Ukraine and its people should not have a "say," much less a "veto." Otherwise, any lull in the latest war would prove temporary and it would be a matter of time before Russian forces again cross Ukraine's borders.