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# The Expansion of NATO and the Contraction of Eurasia

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The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) summit in South Wales held 4–5 September 2014 was heavily mediatized in member countries as a “wake-up call” for this military alliance, for Europe, and even for Western civilization. Violence in eastern Ukraine, for which Vladimir Putin alone was allegedly responsible, was said to be catapulting the world back to the polarization of the Cold War. Yet when one looked more closely, Putin’s propaganda was restrained in comparison with the inflammatory rhetoric of the retiring NATO secretary general and the hyperbole of the US State Department and numerous European politicians with only one thing in common: They knew little or nothing about the history of Ukraine.

Of course, whatever politicians and pundits may proclaim, there can be no way back to the polarities of NATO’s glory years. The coverage of this summit concealed both radical changes in global political economy in recent decades and more insidious changes in political imaginaries. In this contribution I concentrate on the latter, but before I turn to contentious notions of Eurasia, I must explain my personal motivation for following this summit particularly closely. I was born in the Welsh capital Cardiff and attended primary school in nearby Newport, where the leaders of the alliance gathered. My secondary education was at Croesyceiliog Grammar School, a few miles to the north, and my father still lives in the vicinity. When I visited him in August, local residents were just beginning to realize that this summit would bring more disruption than the Ryder Cup golf tournament, held at the same location in 2010. For me, it brought back waves of memories of my school days. I recalled that morning in the late 1960s (it might have been toward the end of that special year, 1968) when we were surprised to find a large caravan parked in the middle of our schoolyard. When its doors opened, NATO information officers expounded the message of the posters on display inside and distributed leaflets. However, they underestimated the political consciousness of the sixth-formers of that era. None of us wanted to defend the

Soviet intervention in Prague, still fresh in our minds, or repression of the uprising in Budapest in 1956. But we looked at the map and pointed out that USSR militarism was limited to neighbouring “allies” in Eastern Europe, whereas NATO members seemed to think they had the right and duty to be active on the world stage, from Suez to Vietnam. In short, we were skeptical toward the message brought by that caravan.



The main building of Croesyceiliog School, in front of which a NATO publicity vehicle parked during the author’s school days.

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Perhaps my decision some years later to carry out research as a social anthropologist in countries behind the Iron Curtain was a delayed reaction to this early exposure to Cold War propaganda. At the time, we debated the issues with a wise English teacher, Mr. Phillips. The political essays of George Orwell were prescribed texts for A-level examinations that year, and of course we also read his popular postwar novels *Animal Farm* and *1984*. I think most of us found Orwell’s perspective on political language refreshing, but some of us questioned whether the NATO publicity flyers were any more transparent than their Soviet equivalents. We asked, “Could global politics really be painted quite so black and white: the free West versus the totalitarian East?”

Of course, a great deal has changed since the 1960s. For one thing, NATO has expanded in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet bloc. There were seats at the conference table in the Celtic Manor Hotel for politicians from Budapest and Prague, not to mention Baltic States that used to form part of the Soviet Federation. But some things have not changed. Now, as in the 1960s, it is asserted that serious threats to world peace emanate from Moscow. The Kremlin leader is pilloried in virtually all segments of the western European media, from *The Sun* to *The Economist*, from *Bild-Zeitung* to *Die Zeit*. Now as then we have been told that military spending must be increased in order to preserve the values of freedom and civilization.<sup>1</sup>

The trigger in 2014 has been Ukraine. Following the integration of most of the former Warsaw

Pact states into both NATO and the European Union, Washington and Brussels policymakers have long targeted Ukraine for “preferential partnership” and eventual incorporation into the Western world. This policy was bound to lead to disaster. The proportion of ethnic Russians in Ukraine is not higher than in the Baltics, but the larger numbers and the interwoven east Slav history make the Ukrainian case very different. All sections of the population have suffered under corrupt power holders of varying hue over the past two decades. By dangling dreams of European prosperity and forcing Ukrainians to choose either the West or Moscow, Brussels must bear much of the responsibility for this misery. If we truly cared about creating a transparent liberal democracy within the boundaries of this sovereign state, we should long ago have made it clear that in no circumstances would Kiev be able to accede to NATO, the EU, or any other Western association until identical forms of integration had been negotiated with Moscow. This simple edict would have spared Ukrainians the agonies of senseless partisanship that has benefited only the oligarchs. It would have opened up the vista of a genuinely new political unity embracing all of Europe, in which the rights of linguistic, ethnic, and religious minorities would be guaranteed. Those Cold War ghosts would have been banished at last.

Instead, the ghosts have returned to seize the political agenda. Behind the politicians, the new Cold War has been prepared by intellectuals on multiple fronts. The late Samuel Huntington is being credited for his diagnosis of a civilizational fault line dividing eastern from western Ukraine (Huntington 1996). The reality is one of many complex regional differences but nothing a genuinely democratic political opening embracing other eastern Slavs could not handle. Instead, in 2014 the West lined up behind a new government widely perceived in Ukraine to have no more legitimacy than the regime it replaced. When these predictable reservations are endorsed in Moscow, the response is to demonize Moscow. The best way to accomplish this is to claim the whole of Ukraine for the West and associate the Kremlin with all those forces opposed to an idealized model of liberal Europe. In 2014, US historian Timothy Snyder has been making this case in the New York Review of Books and similarly influential journals in Europe. He argues that populist parties in the West, such as the UK Independence Party in Britain and the Front National in France, are the fifth column of an authoritarian Russia. Thus a vote for Nigel Farage or Marine Le Pen is in effect a vote for Vladimir Putin, whose vision of “Eurasia” is the antithesis of everything civilized Europeans stand for (Snyder 2014).

Snyder is one of those backstage intellectuals shaping the contemporary moral geography of territories far more vast than the eastern European borderlands where he has great professional expertise. What is this Eurasianism that, in a move Orwell would surely have considered breathtaking, Snyder equates with populist and neo-fascist movements in western Europe?

Putin's recently formed (though long in gestation) Eurasian Economic Commission with Belarus and Kazakhstan has so far barely been registered in the Western media. This is unsurprising, since in terms of population, gross domestic product, and trade flows, the sums remain small in comparison with the figures for the EU, not to mention China. But nowadays, thanks to the media and academics like Snyder, the term "Eurasia" is being taken up more widely. Its sudden prominence has prompted me to think back to my A-level history course at Croesyceiliog, which was divided between British history (Mr. Watkins) and European history (Mr. Thomas). In the latter we learned a little about Renaissance Italy and Spain in the age of Philip II but nothing about those parts of Europe that happened to be behind the Iron Curtain, or about Asia. I do not recall any use of the concept Eurasia. I did not come across it until much later, in the works of anthropologists, archaeologists, sociologists, and world historians (Hann 2014b).

Even before this later reading, I don't think it would ever have occurred to me that Eurasia could mean anything less than a vast entity subsuming both Europe and Asia (and, as I found out, in the most influential accounts North Africa to boot, so it is not strictly a geographically defined entity at all). To imagine Europe and Asia as constituting equivalent "continents" has been widely recognized in the scholarship of recent decades as the ethnocentric cornerstone of a Western Weltanschauung. The amalgam Eurasia corrects this bias by expressing the interconnectedness and basic unity of the entire landmass since the urban revolutions of the Bronze Age (in comparison with the Americas, sub-Saharan Africa, and Oceania). However, this academic truism is now being overturned by those wedded to the mind-set of the Cold War and the uniqueness of the West. These Westerner pundits favor a shrunken concept of Eurasia, based to a considerable extent on obscure currents in Russian nationalism that they deploy to demonize Russia.<sup>2</sup> This impoverished usage has been gaining ground in scientific nomenclature and in the research agendas of the Western academy, where, for many scholars, the primary association of Eurasia is now an ill-defined zone between the Russian and Ukrainian steppe in the west and Mongolia in the east.<sup>3</sup>

In short, the long-term history of unity modified by civilizational differences across Eurasia is trumped nowadays by a Manichean politics of the short term (the original Manicheans being a fine example of civilizational flows along what has come to be termed the "silk routes"). As a result of their national histories, some of NATO's newer members are understandably sensitive to discourses about Orthodox Eurasian civilization. They are more vociferously anti-Russian than the older members are. Since their post-communist elites gravitate toward Washington rather than Paris or Berlin, they might be considered a kind of fifth column in Europe, analogous to that diagnosed by Snyder when he views the far-right parties as surrogates for the policies of Putin. A

strong antisocialist reflex shapes the socioeconomic policies of these leaders: They instinctively favor the intensification of the market principle wherever possible. These elites are more attracted by the ideals of the Tea Party in the United States than those of the post-1945 settlement in Western Europe, with its undertones of social democracy. They applaud post-Thatcher Britain as the most energetic renegade on the Keynesian principles it had formerly pioneered. In Poland as in Britain, many politicians would allocate the dividends anticipated from a North Atlantic free trade zone to finance increased military spending in defense of this same Atlanticist space, ahead of spending on welfare and social justice.

Historically informed, forward-looking leaders who cared about the maintenance and spread of the post-1945 accomplishments of Western Europe would surely be pursuing very different policies. Why was Poroshenko but not Putin invited to Newport ? I would have welcomed an edict of Newport in the form of a commitment to negotiate with Kiev and Moscow equally and simultaneously. With the integration of the two historic capitals of the east Slavs, the European Union would finally embrace the entire continent. Of course, the unity of Europe would be no more than a first step. We should not forget the constructed character of this imagined continent and place it in world-historical context. That context is Eurasia, not the North Atlantic. Yet this NATO summit did not engage with Eurasia, let alone our moment in world history. It was just one more example of how the elites of Western Eurasia enjoy conniving in parochial, Atlanticist plots with those of Washington.

## **Aftermath**

The general sentiment in the immediate aftermath of the summit was one of relief. The retiring secretary general (not to be confused with a Soviet-style general secretary) was able to secure agreement for the deployment of a new NATO rapid strike force in eastern Europe. Sanctions against Russia remain in place and may yet be stepped up. Commentators generally agreed that without the restraining voice of Angela Merkel, the anti-Russian measures would already have been ratcheted up further. The underlying polarization has not changed at all. As soon as the ceasefire in eastern Ukraine breaks down, the pressure to isolate Russia and its "Eurasian" partners will again become acute. Ukraine will again be put on the agenda for full membership of NATO as well as the EU. Expansion of the West will signal a definitive contraction of Eurasia, as the older scholarly usage comes to be considered obsolete and that of Alexander Dugin becomes the focus of scholarly attention.

Future historians (and even some contemporary observers in other parts of the world) may

classify this drawn-out zero-sum game in western Eurasia as a pathetic sideshow, which will do nothing to impede the long-term transfer of power toward Beijing and may well accelerate this shift. Orwellian, anti-Moscow plots concocted by Western elites and justified by dubious intelligence will come to be seen as an irrelevant throwback to a world order that has already been superseded. If EU leaders want to preserve and spread the values of the post-1945 settlement in western Eurasia, they should be courting Ankara (long-time NATO member but not yet considered salonfähig for Europe), Beijing, Cairo, Delhi, Hanoi, Moscow, Teheran and Tokyo—and not feuding with any one of them. Beginning with Mesopotamia, that other zone of unresolved crisis in summer 2014, the civilizations of Eurasia have a long common experience of dealing with social inequalities and taming markets to serve the interests of the human economy. This is what the vast majority of Eurasian citizens today want. For all the differences between them, these countries today can draw on strong traditions of social inclusion, a disposition to support welfare policies that, in principle, might be extended to cover the entirety of the landmass (Hann 2014a). Realization of such a Eurasia would enable the speedy dissolution of NATO and release vast resources to promote human well-being and protect the environment globally. Why are so many European leaders rushing in the opposite direction? The most perverse strand in the current media commentaries is the one that insinuates that bloodshed in Ukraine, however tragic for Ukrainians, is serving the higher goal of unifying Europeans in a common cultural identity.

The issues could hardly be more urgent. Do we want China to continue the efforts it has recently initiated to institute national insurance and pension schemes for the entirety of its vast population, and to respect labor codes and ecological regulations comparable to those in place at the other end of Eurasia? Or do we allow the power of global capital to prevail, such that market logic alone determines all of our futures? If eastern and southern Eurasia are courted not by Brussels but instead, just a few years from now, by a Tea Party president in the White House, the dismantling of the evolved welfare states of western Eurasia will accelerate dramatically.

## **Notes**

1. I generalize based on nonsystematic consumption of mostly “quality” newspapers and websites in France, Britain, and Germany in the months preceding the summit. Orwell would have a field day analyzing the language used. New electronic media offer many new possibilities for dissimulation and hypocrisy, but they also open up niches for alternative viewpoints excluded from the mainstream media. For example, shortly before the summit, I was cheered to find a Memorandum for Angela Merkel by a group of retired US intelligence experts who pointed out

that, as in the case of Iraq before former President George W. Bush ordered the US invasion, the evidence to support current US charges against Russia is flimsy if not entirely incredible.

See also Karel van Wolferen's analysis of the increasing perils of the ideology he terms "Atlanticism."

None of these authors can be accused of blindness or sycophancy toward the power holder in the Kremlin.

2. Leading the way in the Western media is the coverage of *The Economist*. See for example the issue of 24 July 2014, in which Putin is accused of "epic deceptions." The issue of 4 September, coinciding with the summit in Wales, carried a feature about Alexander Dugin. Readers were given the frightening information that, for the best-known contemporary exponent of "Orthodox Eurasianism," even Putin is signally failing to live up to the historic calling of a leader of the Russian people.

3. For example, in 2010 the major Area Studies association for US scholars working in what used to be glossed as Slavic and East European Studies, covering territories corresponding more or less to the former socialist world, was renamed Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies.

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This contribution by Chris Hann was originally posted at the Focaal blog in September 2014:

⑦ <http://www.focaalblog.com/2014/09/26/chris-hann-the-expansion-of-nato-and-the-contraction-of-eurasia/>

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