

ARE THE GOALS OF BELLIGERENTS IN ‘NEW WARS’ REALLY DIFFERENT FROM THE GOALS OF EARLIER WARS?

By Ivan Ng Yan Chao

ABSTRACT

‘New wars’ is a term advanced by British academic Mary Kaldor to characterise warfare in the post-Cold War era.¹ It had been claimed that in ‘New Wars’, the struggle is not about geopolitics but about identity politics instead. The intent of this essay is to analyse this claim and argue that while it is true that identity politics plays a greater role in New Wars compared to wars in the past, the claim is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, even in the case of New Wars, geopolitics remains an ever-present consideration and has not simply been supplanted by identity politics. Secondly, wars in the past were also arguably driven by identity politics, thus, identity politics is not unique to New Wars. This essay proceeds to first define and discuss the key terms discussed. It then considers how identity politics is a prominent feature in the goals of belligerents in New Wars today. Thereafter, two objections to the claim will be examined after which the author concludes that both identity politics and geopolitics are important components of New Wars, and indeed, Old Wars as well.

Keywords: War, Globalisation, Territory, Identity, Politic

INTRODUCTION

Much academic ink has been spilt regarding the nature of ‘New Wars’ and whether they do indeed differ from wars in the past. A difference that has been claimed in the New Wars literature is that the goals of belligerents in ‘New Wars’ are no longer about geopolitics but are instead about identity politics.² This essay seeks to investigate this claim, and argues that while it is true that identity politics plays a greater role in New Wars compared to wars in the past, the claim is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, even in the case of New Wars, geopolitics remains an ever-present consideration and has not simply been supplanted by identity politics. Secondly, wars in the past were also arguably driven by identity politics, thus, identity politics is not unique to New Wars. This essay proceeds as follows: Section I will first define and discuss the key terms that would be used. Section II then considers how identity politics is a prominent feature in the goals of belligerents in New Wars today. In Section III, two objections to the claim will be examined, after which the essay will conclude that both identity politics and geopolitics are important components of New Wars, and indeed, Old Wars as well.

DEFINITIONS AND CONCEPTS

New Wars

The New Wars’ thesis is a way of approaching the ‘changing nature of conflict’.³ The New Wars literature generally argues that violent conflicts today have undergone significant transformations which render them distinct from wars in the past, or ‘Old Wars’.⁴ Old Wars are wars between states, fought by uniformed personnel, and whose outcomes depended on decisive battles.⁵ The emergence of the modern Westphalian nation-state is closely intertwined with wars of this sort—as Charles Tilly famously argued, ‘war makes states and states make war.’⁶ The New Wars thesis is a departure from such characteristics, and according to Newman, consists mainly of the following key arguments:

- Most wars today occur within a state, rather than between states
- New Wars occur in conditions of state failure and societal transformations as a result of globalisation
- Ethnicity and religion play a greater role than ideology in New Wars
- Civilian deaths are much higher in New Wars

- Civilians are targeted more often in New Wars
- The distinction between state and private combatants, and between combatants and civilians, is increasingly blurred in New Wars⁷

To this non-exhaustive list, one can also add the claim that this essay seeks to examine—which is that the goals of belligerents in ‘New Wars’ are different from ‘Old Wars’ because ‘New Wars’ are about identity politics rather than geopolitics. This is an argument that Kaldor, a key proponent of the New Wars thesis, makes.⁸ The end of the Cold War is commonly used in the ‘New Wars’ literature as the temporal dividing line between Old Wars and New Wars.⁹ For the purposes of this essay, the author adopted the definition of New Wars as propounded in the New Wars literature—that is to say, wars taking place after the end of the Cold War and possessing the above characteristics which make them different from ‘Old Wars’. Regardless of whether one is speaking of Old or New Wars, Kaldor emphasises that both these terms are ideal types—two different conceptualisations of war, not empirical realities.¹⁰ Here, the author acknowledges that the very existence of New Wars is contested by some scholars. Serious questions have been raised as to whether wars can simply be divided so neatly into an Old Wars-New Wars dichotomy, about the arbitrariness of the characteristics of New Wars or whether New Wars are wars at all.¹¹ This essay will not go into these debates, and will instead assume that the New Wars thesis is valid and presents a way of thinking about wars that is qualitatively different from Old Wars.

An important question which arises from the New Wars’ thesis as is the question of *who* exactly the belligerents are in New Wars. While the state is still commonly involved, the difference according to Kaldor is that New Wars involve various combinations of networks of state and non-state actors.¹² In addition to the regular armed forces of the state, a whole host of different belligerent groups are involved such as private security contractors, mercenaries, jihadists, warlords and paramilitaries.¹³ In this regard, the New Wars thesis has a significant degree of overlap, as far as belligerents are concerned, with theories of civil war, insurgency, terrorism and hybrid warfare.¹⁴ By moving away from a narrower focus on state belligerents and considering

the array of non-state belligerents in New Wars, it also becomes clearer that the identity of the belligerents is increasingly nebulous. The belligerents in Old Wars are simply the members of regular armed forces of their respective states, facing each other in combat. In analysing New Wars, however, it can be extremely difficult to neatly distinguish between soldiers and criminals, or between combatants and civilians.¹⁵

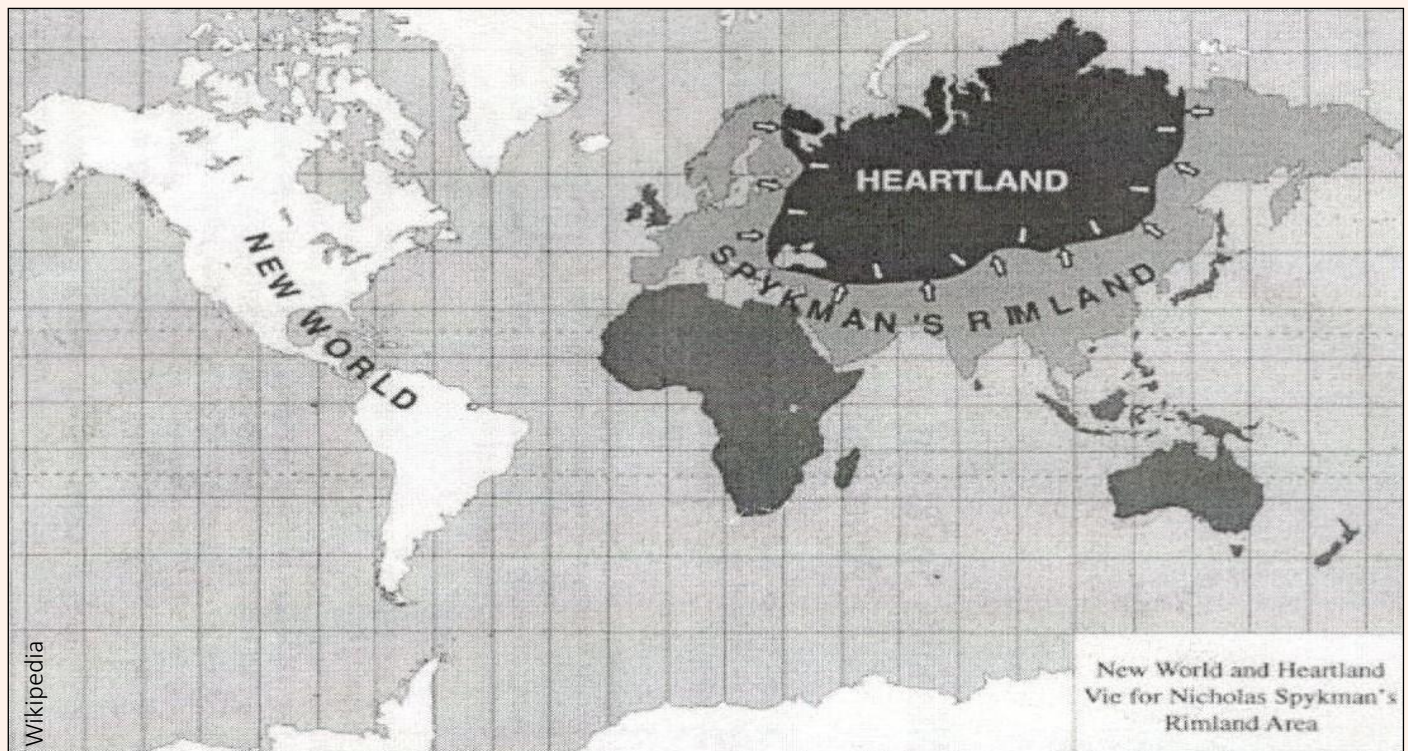
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Geopolitics

The term geopolitics is used in different senses depending on the context. As Deudney observes, the term has been so commonly used that it lacks meaning unless one is specified—‘[m]ost contemporary usages of the term geopolitics are casual synonyms for realist views of international strategic rivalry and interaction.’¹⁶ A multitude of contemporary definitions exists.¹⁷ For the purposes of this essay, the author adopted a definition provided by Colin Flint, a scholar of geopolitics, who defines geopolitics to be ‘the struggle over the control of geographical entities with an international and global dimension, and the use of such geographical entities for political advantage.’¹⁸ Flint further explains that geopolitics is an ongoing process of defining the meaning of geographical entities—it is a politics of who does and does not ‘belong’ within a particular place.¹⁹

Identity Politics

Identity politics is another term which has been used to describe a wide variety of situations. As Bernstein notes, identity politics can refer to things as different as ‘multiculturalism, the women’s movement, civil rights, lesbian and gay movements, separatist



World map with the concepts of Heartland and Rimland applied.

movements in Canada and Spain, and violent ethnic and nationalist conflict.²⁰ The final point, in particular, is most relevant to this essay—indeed, by the mid-1990s, scholars began to use the term identity politics to mean violent ethnic conflict and nationalism.²¹ Distinctions are also drawn between collective identities such as those based on ethnicity and nation (which have a degree of permanence), and movement identities such as the environmentalist movement (which can be adopted and discarded with relative ease).²² Thus, the term identity politics as used in this essay would refer to politics based on an identity construction of 'self' and 'other', especially where such identity constructions are of an ethnic or national nature, since ethnicity is one of the factors which is argued to play a greater role in New Wars.²³

IDENTITY POLITICS AND NEW WARS

How, then, does identity politics feature in New Wars? Kaldor argues that in identity politics, ethnic and religious groups seek to capture the state for the advancement of their own groups, instead of the public interest as a whole.²⁴ War provides an avenue through which identity politics can be constructed—the chief aim of war in New Wars is, according to Kaldor, to mobilise members of a group politically.²⁵ Many of the wars in the 1990s involved ethnic or national identity politics—especially the Yugoslav Wars, but also wars in

Burundi, Sierra Leone, Chechnya, Somalia, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Liberia, Congo and Angola, among others.²⁶ What is a common feature of all these wars is that the battle lines are drawn along ethnic, national or religious lines, as belligerent groups seek to assert their own group identity and protect their own group interests, through violent means. Unlike Old Wars, which are assumed to be pursued for rational political aims, New Wars driven by identity are assumed to be irrational.²⁷

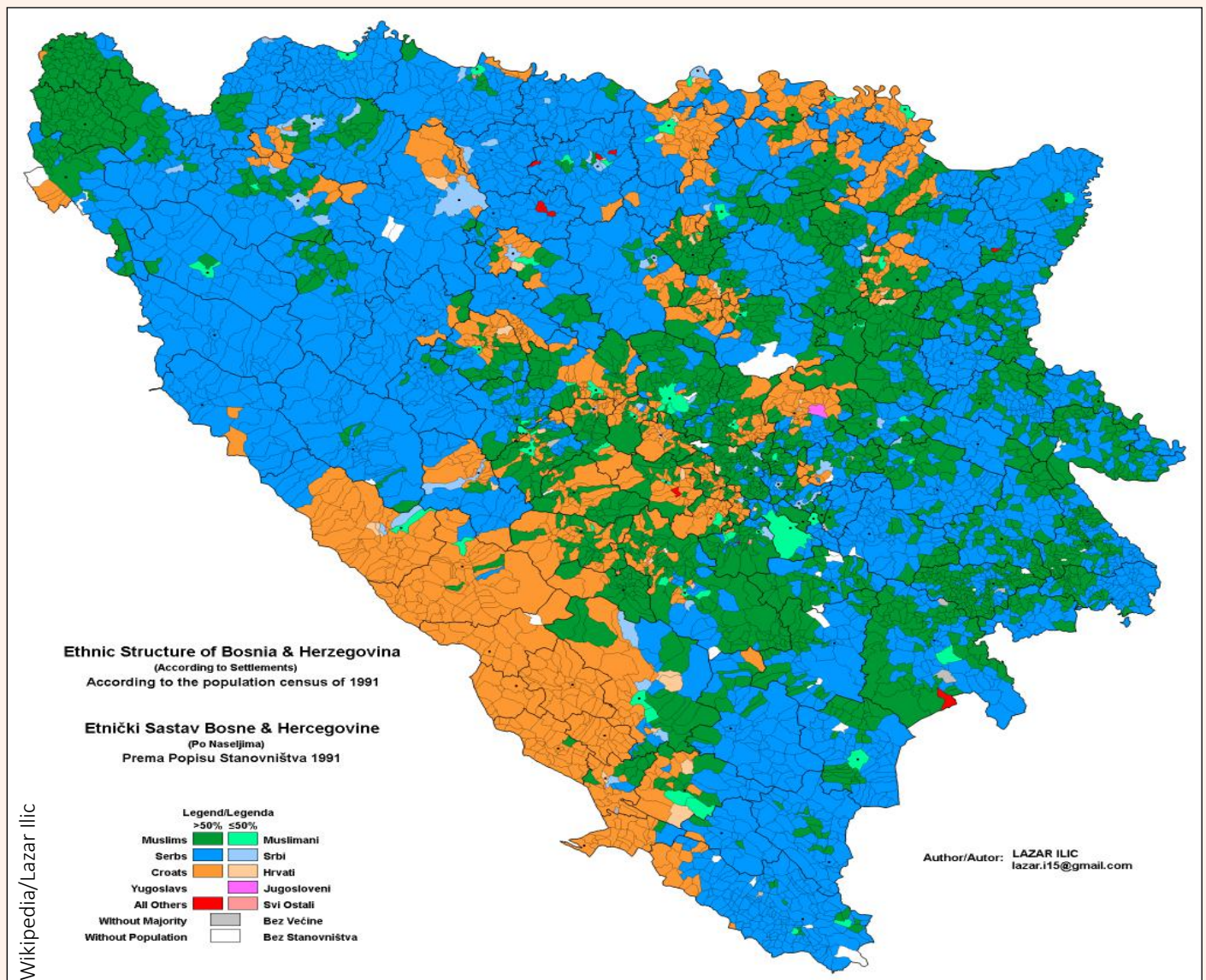
Kaldor cites the Bosnian War of 1992-1995 in her New Wars thesis as 'the paradigm of the new type of warfare.'²⁸ Unlike the Old Wars, which under the Clausewitzian paradigm are believed to be fought by states for geopolitical or ideological purposes with the ultimate goal of defeating the enemy, expanding territory and enhancing state power, the goals of the belligerents in the Bosnian War were different.²⁹ The Bosnian Serb leadership was clear on its goal of achieving 'an ethnically homogeneous, powerful Serb state', which operationally meant that all non-Serbs needed to be removed.³⁰ Non-Serbs were an 'other' against which a 'self'—a Serb identity—was juxtaposed.³¹ Ethnic cleansing was thus conducted by the Bosnian Serbs as they sought to either expel non-Serbs from territories they controlled or simply kill them.³² Identity politics was clearly at play as Serbs sought to create a Serb polity free of non-Serb 'others'.

The tremendous transformations in the global world order have been argued by some scholars to be a reason why identity politics rather than geopolitics has come to the fore in New Wars. The end of the Cold War and the onset of globalisation meant that the Westphalian nation-state, hitherto the most important political actor, was in decline.³³ The 'dense patterns of global interconnectedness' have made it difficult for the modern state to act in isolation without considering international ramifications and spillover effects.³⁴ As a result of the decline of the primacy of the state, Van Creveld argues that the Clausewitzian paradigm of war as a tool to achieve political ends has also become increasingly irrelevant.³⁵ The traditional geopolitical goals of states—expansion of territory, creating colonial empires or imperial aggrandisement are no longer seen as legitimate.³⁶ Old Wars—the use of war in the Clausewitzian sense as a 'continuation of politics'—are, as Malesevic observes, generally seen as illegitimate in

the modern milieu.³⁷

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Simultaneously, the same globalising forces which have made inter-state war based on geopolitics increasingly obsolete have also led to identity politics becoming more prominent. Fleming argues that in the era of globalisation, ostracised groups which had hitherto been prevented from having their political grievances addressed would resort to violence to



Ethnic Map of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1991.

express their identities.³⁸ Common grievances create a sense of group identity—sharpening distinction between insiders and outsiders—and over time, becomes politicised in the form of armed conflict.³⁹ Identity politics can also be explained via the grievance-opportunity dichotomy. Under grievance theory, as the level of perceived deprivation by a group increases, the risk of armed conflict also increases.⁴⁰ However, opportunity theory explains why armed conflicts break out as they do—it depends on changes in the political environment which affect the 'calculus of risk, cost and incentive'.⁴¹ The global world order in which New Wars take place can thus be argued to have tilted this calculus in favour of engaging in armed conflict.

The vastly improved transport and communication linkages as a result of globalisation have facilitated the sale of arms in the black market, making it a lot easier for aggrieved groups to obtain much-needed weapons to engage in New Wars.⁴² The uncertainties and fears brought about by globalisation opens the door to political entrepreneurs to capitalise on such insecurities by resorting to identity politics to increase political support.⁴³ There is also an economic element—as Fleming points out, belligerents invoking identity politics in New Wars may have strong reasons to continue hostilities so as to be able to take advantage of economic opportunities only a wartime economy offers.⁴⁴ Again, these economic opportunities would no doubt have been facilitated by the transnational linkages brought about by globalisation.

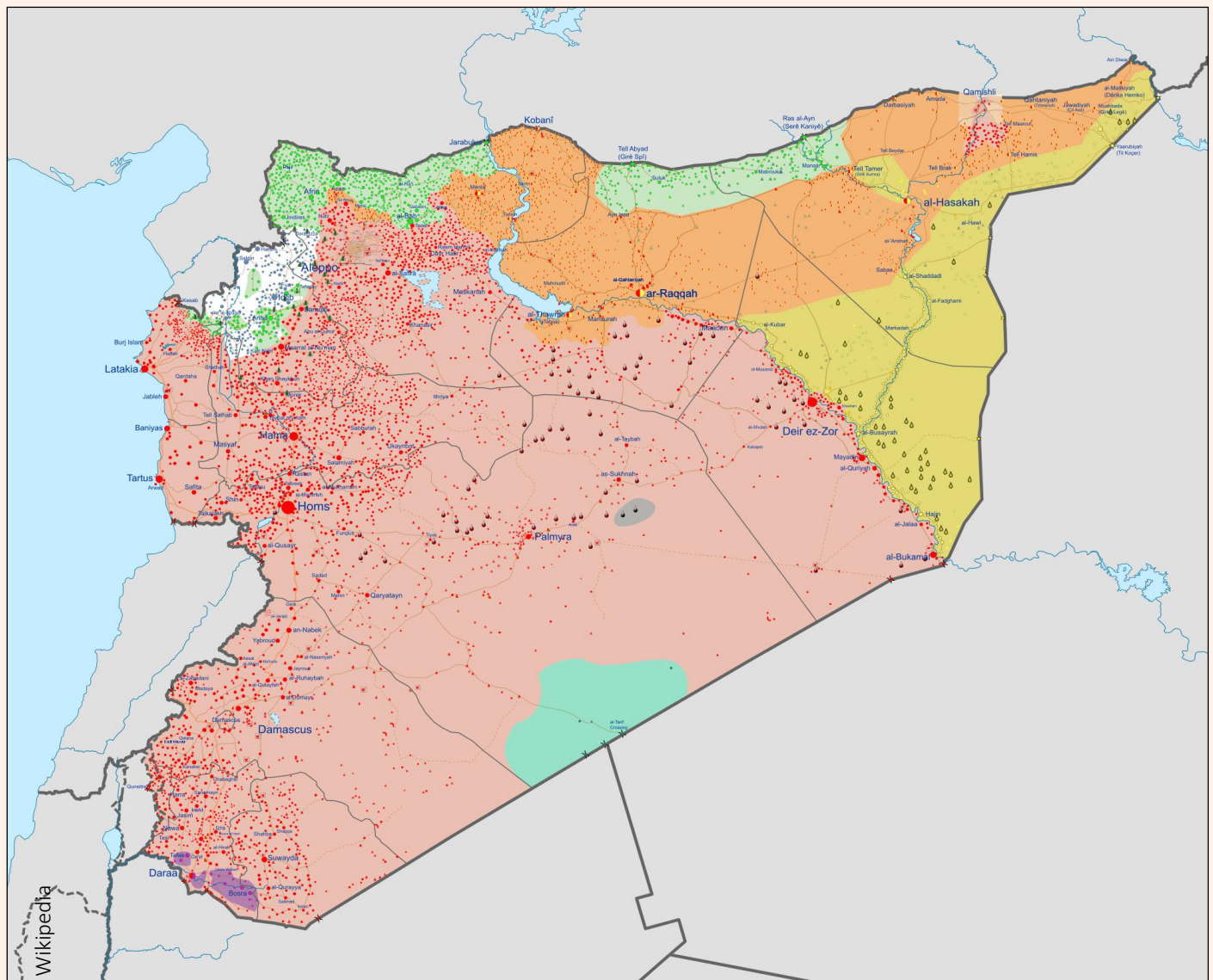
In summary, the New Wars' thesis, in relation to the goal of belligerents, is as follows. The end of the Cold War and the forces of globalisation have resulted in significant transformations to belligerents' goals in contemporary wars. Where belligerents in Old Wars engaged in war in a Clausewitzian sense—in the pursuit of rational political goals, the belligerents of New Wars are supposedly irrational. Geopolitics has declined in importance because unlike the world order in the days of Clausewitzian Old Wars, naked inter-state aggression in pursuit of traditional geopolitical goals is now generally seen as illegitimate. Therefore, geopolitics no longer has the once-central position in the goals of belligerents of New Wars. On the other hand, the post-Cold War, globalising world order has provided the structural conditions for an increase in identity politics,

especially along ethnic and religious lines, and this has resulted in New Wars when actors engage in armed conflict in pursuit of their identity politics goals.

OPPOSING VIEWS

The claim that the goals of belligerents in New Wars are about identity politics as opposed to geopolitics, however, also means that firstly, belligerents in New Wars have no geopolitical goals, and secondly, that identity politics did not feature in the Old Wars at all. Both of these ideas are problematic. It would arguably be inaccurate to say that geopolitical goals do not exist in New Wars. Going back to Flint's definition of geopolitics as a competition over geographical entities and the politics of who does or does not belong within a given geographical entity, it is arguable that although identity politics is a prominent feature of New Wars, geopolitical goals have certainly not disappeared amongst belligerents. The author discusses Kaldor's example of the Bosnian War. The ethnic cleansing operations by the Bosnian Serbs had a distinctly territorial element to it—the intention was to remove all non-Serbs from Serb territory, so as to create a territory of Serb ethnic homogeneity.⁴⁵ Apart from driving non-Serbs out, the Bosnian Serb leadership also sought to bring as many Bosnian Serbs as possible within this territory.⁴⁶ Undeniably, this was a geopolitical goal—defining who belonged, and did not belong, to a geographical entity—in this case, the entity which later became the autonomous Republika Srpska of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁴⁷

Conceptually, it has been argued that war and geopolitics go together, such that it would not be possible to analyse war without considering the geopolitical element. Tunjic, for example, argues that '[w]ar and geopolitics have always been, especially in certain circumstances, likened to Siamese twins or at least to inseparable lovers.'⁴⁸ Indeed, contrary to the New Wars thesis, Tunjic argues in the exact opposite direction—that since the end of the Cold War and the decline of the nation-state, we are actually seeing a return of geopolitics.⁴⁹ He argues that war inherently has territorial roots, as all social organisations engaging in politics require territory.⁵⁰ Territory is needed not only for sustenance at the most basic level, but also for



Syrian Civil War.

conquest—as Tunjic observes, it is only those who possess and control territory who are able to dominate others, which is what wars are about.⁵¹ The civil war in Syria, arguably an example of a New War where the various ethnic and religious groups have been mobilised along sectarian lines, has seen Syria become fragmented into distinct geographical areas controlled by competing armed factions, highlighting the continued salience of geopolitics.⁵² Deudney makes a similar argument when he notes that '[h]uman beings are fragile corporeal entities in continuous, intimate and inescapable intercourse with the material world, and therefore any realistic theory of security politics must incorporate some version of material factors'.⁵³ Even with the differences between New and Old Wars and a shift towards identity politics goals by belligerents, the need for belligerents in New Wars to control territory has not disappeared.

Even with the differences between New and Old Wars and a shift towards identity politics goals by belligerents, the need for belligerents in New Wars to control territory has not disappeared.

To say that the goals of belligerents in New Wars are not about geopolitics but identity politics also implies that identity politics was not a feature of Old Wars. This is arguably false as well—identity politics can be argued to have been ever-present in the Old Wars. As Colin Gray succinctly argues, '[t]here always has been intercommunal strife. It is a global phenomenon today,

but then it always has been. We should not exaggerate its incidence.⁵⁴ Newman, criticising the New Wars thesis, notes that conflicts and power struggles based on ethnic identity may have certain differences due to the effects of globalisation, but are, in and of themselves, ‘not qualitatively peculiar to wars of the late 20th century.’⁵⁵ Tilly’s dictum tells us that states and war have a mutually-reinforcing relationship, but the state is inextricably tied to the nation, which is an identity. The earliest European nation-states came into being ‘on the basis of a relative congruity between bounded territory, functional tasks and a shared identity.’⁵⁶ Berdal argues that identity politics has long been a feature of wars given the vital role of wars in ‘shaping and cementing identities’.⁵⁷ While identity politics may appear more prominently in the New Wars of today (and seem to be more ‘irrational’ as opposed to the Clausewitzian rationality of Old Wars), fundamentally, Old Wars arguably always involved identity politics because they were ultimately fought between different states which saw themselves as having different identities, however rational the goals of the belligerents might be.⁵⁸ In Hobsbawm’s view, conflicts between ‘us’ and ‘them’ define the group identity of people and are ‘a trait of the human condition and, in that sense, a universal one.’⁵⁹

The author uses a prime example of an Old War—World War II, to illustrate. There is almost unanimous scholarly agreement that racial ideology dominated politics in Nazi Germany.⁶⁰ Nazi Germany was a state where ‘everything was interpreted through racial lenses.’⁶¹ Identity politics was thus thriving in Nazi Germany—Aryans were deemed by the state to be racially superior and sharply distinguished from inferior groups—mainly the Jews, Gypsies and Slavs.⁶² Another central tenet of Nazi ideology was that of *lebensraum*, or living space.⁶³ In Hitler’s view, the future of the

German people depended upon an expansionist foreign policy through military force.⁶⁴ Although there were certainly geopolitical reasons for such aggressive plans (to obtain resources for sustenance), identity politics loomed large.⁶⁵ Eastern Europe, and especially the Soviet Union, had the *lebensraum* Germany needed, but first, its Slavic Polish, Ukrainian and Russian populations had to be killed, deported or enslaved.⁶⁶ A race war would thus need to take place between the Germanic and Slavic peoples.⁶⁷ Polish historian Czeslaw Pilichowski thus argues that a main goal of Nazi Germany’s wars in Eastern Europe was to ‘gradually denationalise and destroy the Slavic peoples.’⁶⁸ As the German military advanced into the Soviet Union in 1941, Hitler declared that the Europe-Asia border was one which divided the Germanic and Slavic peoples.⁶⁹ This again highlighting the importance of identity politics even as the largest and bloodiest (Old War) military confrontations in history were taking place.⁷⁰

CONCLUSION

On one hand, it arguably must be acknowledged, as per the New Wars thesis, that the end of the Cold War and the far-reaching effects of globalisation have changed the nature of wars today, such that identity politics are often a central part of the goals of belligerents. Yet, it would be inaccurate to say that geopolitics does not feature in New Wars (even belligerents in New Wars still need control of geographical areas), or that identity politics is new to New Wars (clearly not, when Old Wars were fought on the basis of identity as well). Fleming offers a middle ground—positing that the New and Old Wars paradigms need not be mutually exclusive, and that scholars can use a combined approach.⁷¹ New Wars are simultaneously about identity politics *and* geopolitics—although the identity politics aspect may appear more obvious today.

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