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New Wars: Same Old Goals

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, the author cites Mary Kaldor¹, who argues that armed conflicts in the post-Cold War era is fundamentally different from traditional Clausewitzian interstate conflicts. Unlike old wars, which were fought between state-controlled militaries for geopolitical and ideological reasons, 'new wars' are predominantly financed by 'predatory private means' and fought in the name of identity. Identity politics has played an important role in legitimising the use of violence against other groups, for geopolitical and ideological pursuits, in both classical and contemporary armed conflicts and it is difficult to split the concept of identity politics from geopolitics due to the nature of warfare as a social activity. The author concludes by explaining that identity politics is being used as a tool to incite violence against out-groups. Identity also shares a strong emotional linkage with concept of a 'homeland', and has been politicised by interest groups to further their geopolitical agendas.

INTRODUCTION

In 'New and Old Wars' Mary Kaldor posits that armed conflict in the post-Cold War era is fundamentally different from traditional Clausewitzian interstate conflict. Armed conflicts in a post-Cold War environment, or what Kaldor calls 'new wars', have four defining features. First, unlike old wars, which were fought between state-controlled militaries, the key actors of new wars are 'varying combinations of networks of state and non-state actors.'² Second, while old wars were won and lost through decisive, large-scale military encounters, battles are sporadic in new wars and 'violence is largely directed against civilians.'³ Third, old wars were financed by the state and 'new wars' are predominantly financed by what Kaldor refers to as 'predatory private' means, including loot, smuggling, diaspora support and kidnapping.⁴ Last and perhaps most significant, she argues that new and old wars differ in their goals. Kaldor suggests that old wars were fought for geopolitical and ideological reasons, and new wars are fought in the name of identity.⁵

The key actors of new wars are varying combinations of networks of state and non-state actors.

In this essay, the author examines the goals of belligerents in classical and contemporary armed

conflicts. While the author agrees with scholars like Martin Van Creveld and Herfried Münkler, who echo Kaldor's view that contemporary armed conflict is fundamentally different from Clausewitzian interpretations of warfare in its ways and means, he questions Kaldor's view of the ends, or goals, of new wars.⁶ In this essay, the author contends that identity politics has played a crucial role in legitimizing the use of violence against other groups, for geopolitical and ideological pursuits, in both classical and contemporary armed conflict. The argument is presented in three parts. First, the author discusses how belligerents have exploited racial, religious and ethnic fractures to legitimise and amplify violence in not just new, but old wars as well. Secondly, the author argues that it is difficult to divorce the concept of identity politics from geopolitics due to warfare's nature as a political, and therefore social activity. Lastly, the author contends that by viewing political ideology from a predominantly Western perspective, Kaldor fails to consider the inextricable link between religion and politics in the 'new' war on terror. The author then concludes the essay with a discussion on Kaldor's recommendation for Cosmopolitanism as a potential antithesis to the particularistic aims of new wars.

For discussion purposes, the author uses Kaldor's definition of 'new wars' when referring to armed conflicts in the post-Cold War era, and 'old wars' for

prior conflicts. When discussing identity politics, he draws upon Hew Strachan's and Sibelle Scheipers' interpretation of the term, which is the use of identity markers such as race, ethnicity, religion, clan or an appeal to a common ancestry or history, to promote the specific interests of a particular group, and in extreme cases, foment violence and claim power over a different group.⁷

ARE THE GOALS OF 'NEW WARS' NEW?

Kaldor argues that Identity politics has a different logic from geopolitics or ideology. The aim is to gain access to the state for particular groups (both local and transnational) rather than to carry out particular policies or programmes in the broader public interest.⁸ However, contrary to Kaldor's assertion, identity politics, or the exploitation of racial and ethnic fractures for the benefit of certain groups at the expense of the 'other', is hardly unique to new wars.



Forced labour at Sachsenhausen brickworks, during World War II.

World War II (WWII) provides numerous examples of politically charged racism aimed at isolating certain groups within and beyond the state, and eventually justifying intense brutality against them. For

example, Nazi Fascist ideology was based upon principles of racial superiority and limiting access of 'out groups' to the state. Adolf Hitler and his Nazi Party viewed the citizens of Slavic states like Poland and Serbia, as *Untermenschen*, or sub-humans, who stood in the way of German progress.⁹ This idea was fervently politicised by the Nazi Party and was eventually used to justify its expansionist *Lebensraum* (living space) policy, which held that the *Herrenvolk* (Germanic Aryan master race) were racially superior, and had a mystical right to expand into Eastern Europe and exterminate its native populations.¹⁰ This ultimately led to the German occupation of Poland and the surgical execution of Heinrich Himmler's 'depolonisation' plan, which sought to 'reorganise the ethnographic conditions' of Poland.¹¹ In this case, identity politics resulted in the deaths of over 6 million people, including Jews and Slavs, or 18 percent of the entire Polish population, between 1939 and 1945.¹²

It is widely accepted by historians that geopolitical interests aside, competition for racial supremacy was a key factor behind the intense savagery of the Pacific Campaign when compared against the European theatre.¹³ Authors like John Dower argue that Japan did not merely attack Southeast Asian territories. It had, instead, 'invaded colonial outposts which the Westerners had dominated for generations, taking absolutely for granted their racial and cultural superiority over their Asian subjects.'¹⁴ He goes on to suggest that in doing so, Japan had challenged the idea of White supremacist ideology, which formed the bedrock of European and American colonialism and its 'civilising agenda'.¹⁵ In response, Western disdain for Japanese expansionism was manifested in graphic and derogatory state-sponsored propaganda designed to dehumanise the adversary—Japanese soldiers were depicted as primates, rodents and sub-humans that deserved no quarter on the battlefield.¹⁶

Identity politics was also rife in the Japanese Imperial psyche. The Japanese saw themselves as a pure and superior 'Yamato race', and Caucasians as barbarians, devils and monsters that had to be destroyed for Imperial Japan to achieve its objectives.¹⁷



Japanese troops on bicycles advance into Saigon.

Thus, the politicisation of racial hatred and the dehumanisation of the ‘other’ on both sides, resulted in psychological distances that facilitated atrocities in the Pacific theatre, and in the words of Dower, ‘an obsession with extermination on both sides... an orgy of bloodletting that neither side could conceive of avoiding—a war without mercy.’¹⁸

Identity politics featured in the old wars of South Asia. The 1971 Bangladesh Independence War for instance, traces its roots to Pakistan’s declaration of Urdu, which is a language spoken by the minority elite Mohajirs of then West Pakistan, as its only federal language.¹⁹ This severely disadvantaged the majority Bengali speakers of East Pakistan, who were already marginalised by the state due to low central government funding, as well as systemic exclusion of Bengali speakers in politics, the military and the public sector. Grievances aggravated by ethnic and linguistic fault lines eventually led to a bloody civil war and ultimately, the creation of a newly independent Bangladesh.²⁰ Similarly in Sri Lanka, state-endorsed discrimination of the Tamil ethnic community by the ruling Sinhalese elites gave rise to a secessionist movement led by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). This protracted civil war of identity, which began in 1983, ended in 2009 when local authorities launched a brutal counter-offensive that led to the LTTE’s collapse. However, a decade on, the highly co-ordinated 2019 Easter Sunday bombings of Colombo could very well represent the revival of identity-based violence in the country.

The examples presented suggest that old wars were fought not merely for geopolitical and ideological pursuits, but in the name of identity as well. Thus, contrary to Kaldor’s view that old wars were fought ‘to carry out particular policies in the broader public interest’, identity politics was used as a tool to socially isolate and justify the use of violence against politically manufactured ‘out-groups’.²¹

IDENTITY IN GEOPOLITICS AND IDENTITY IN POLITICAL IDEOLOGY

By drawing a clear distinction between the goals of new and old wars, Kaldor seems to imply that the aims of war, be they identity politics, political ideology or geopolitics, can be distilled into isolated entities. However, as Kaldor herself points out, Clausewitz saw war as a political, and more broadly, a social activity. This presents a potential contradiction to her argument.²² As warfare is also an interplay between social actors, it would seem improbable for the concept of ‘social identity’ to be completely divorced from geopolitics and political ideology. The following sections discuss the links between identity, geography, and political ideology.

Identity In Geopolitics

Walker Connor argues that geopolitics and identity are inextricably linked. He suggests that most ethnonational groups can trace their ‘roots’, an emotive concept which in itself implies ‘soil’, to a ‘geographic cradle’ or homeland.²³ History offers multiple examples of ethnic groups, like the Kashmiris to Kashmir, Flemish to Flanders, and Kurds to Kurdistan, politicising such links to lay claim of birthright to a particular territory. In Nazi Germany, the nationalist slogan *Blut und Boden* (Blood and Soil) was used to connect German lands exclusively with Germanic blood—people of Aryan German-Nordic origins, and consequently invalidate claims by ‘out-groups’ to the land. In the 1980s, Sikh secessionists fought a fierce insurgency against Indian state forces in the name of a Sikh homeland called Khalistan.

Strachan and Scheiper argue that a crucial flaw in Kaldor’s argument lies in her dismissal of key concepts like nationalism.²⁴ Perhaps that flaw lies within Kaldor’s analysis of geopolitics from an inter-state, and not an inter-nation perspective. ‘Imagined Communities’

author Benedict Anderson provides a widely accepted definition of 'nation', which is 'a socially constructed community, imagined by people who perceive themselves as being part of that group.'²⁵ As the world is currently divided into less than two hundred states and over three thousand nations, Connor argues that it is probable that more nations within and between states will begin to demand greater autonomy within a 'homeland', or even resort to violence to achieve full secession.²⁶ Today, Francophone elites in Cameroon are fighting a fierce war against secessionist Anglophones from the self-declared Republic of Ambazonia.²⁷ In Pakistan, ethnic Sindhi activists from Jeay Sindh Muttahida Mahaz (JSMM) continue to make demands for full autonomy of the Sindh province from 'Pakistani occupation'.²⁸

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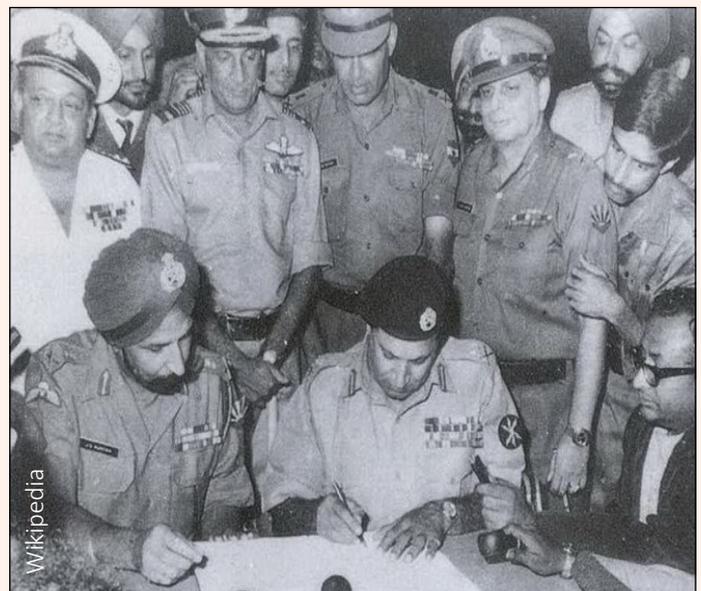
Thus, by claiming that new wars are fought solely in the name of identity, Kaldor seems to ignore the emotive relationship that geography shares with identity politics. While the term 'geopolitics' is generally used in the realm of international relations, Kaldor could have done better by considering the geostrategic interests of secessionist groups, especially when their host states fail to act 'in the broader public interest'.²⁹

Identity In Political Ideology

In responding to critics in the aptly named 'In Defence of New Wars', Kaldor writes, 'Old wars were fought for geopolitical interests or for ideology (democracy or socialism). New wars are fought in the name of identity (ethnic, religious or tribal).'³⁰ By drawing a clear distinction between political ideology and religion, Kaldor fails to consider political ideology based upon religion, like political Islam, which is arguably the greatest galvaniser in the 'new war' on terror today.

Western political ideologies like democracy are founded upon principles like John Locke's separation of

church and state, and Marxism's total denouncement of religion as the 'opiate of the masses'.³¹ However, that is not the case with political Islam. Shaham Akbarzadeh argues that political Islam is best understood as political ideology that is perpetuated through selected or self-professed Islamists who see themselves as agents of change, pursuing the establishment of a polity that embraces a normative framework based upon divine will—the Islamic state. He adds however, that Islamism's greatest irony lies in its predisposition to interpretation by Islamists, who perceive themselves as having an exclusive and incontestable claim to divine wisdom. In extreme cases, gross misinterpretations lead to radical Islamic fundamentalism.³²



Signing of Pakistani Instrument of Surrender by Pakistan's Lt.Gen. A. A. K. Niazi and Jagjit Singh Aurora on behalf of Indian and Bangladesh Forces in Dhaka on 16th Dec, 1971.

It is clear that new war on terror is not merely about identity as Kaldor suggests. Strachan and Scheiper argue that 'ideology, rooted in a deep and genuine sense of grievance' has played a key role in rallying recruits to take up arms in so-called new wars. They provide the example of the Taliban, which contrary to the concept of a common Muslim identity, is held together by the 'strong ideological commitment of its cadres.'³³ Similarly, far from merely fighting in the name of identity, the Islamic State (IS) aims to establish a theocracy, specifically a Caliphate, which is a political entity led by a Muslim civil and religious ruler called a Caliph. The Caliphate is to be governed according to Islamic principles, and transgressors are to be punished according to Sharia Law.³⁴

By adopting a Western interpretation of political ideology, where there is a clear distinction between spiritual and stately affairs, Kaldor fails to consider the synergy of religion and politics in political Islam. Hence, her argument of identity politics being an end in itself, and separate from political ideology, is unconvincing.

A COSMOPOLITAN IDENTITY?

Kaldor makes an appeal for a cosmopolitan approach, grounded in principles of a greater human community espousing Kantian ideals of 'shared rights and obligations', international hospitality and 'tolerance, multiculturalism, civility and democracy' as an antithesis to the particularistic aims of new wars.³⁵ She calls for state and international institutions to participate in what she calls 'cosmopolitan law enforcement rather than war-fighting' and involve local actors and Non-Government Organisations (NGOs), or 'local advocates of cosmopolitanism', in conflict resolution processes.³⁶

However, Kaldor's recommendation for 'perpetual peace' seems to be idealistic at best. In his book 'Ethnic Conflict' S.A Giannakos argues that academics often overlook the importance of historical animosities between groups when studying conflicts.³⁷ It would seem highly improbable for instance, Catholic and Protestant Irish, Shias and Sunnis or the Arabs and Israelis to put aside their historical differences, and embrace the ideal of a cosmopolitan brotherhood of man. Before concepts like civility, tolerance and multiculturalism can be accepted at the international level by consenting states, they perhaps, be institutionalised, and even enforced at the intra-state level.

Southeast Asia provides some positive examples of how state-led initiatives may prevent or resolve identity-based grievances. In mainly Catholic Philippines, years of fighting between the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the state military came to end after the national government agreed to grant provincial autonomy to the newly formed Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao. To avoid the creation of ethnic enclaves, seen in most parts of Europe and America today, the Singapore government, through its public housing programmes, enforced social

integration of its various ethnic communities. In the political arena, Singapore makes special reservations to ensure minority candidates are represented in parliament, and Malaysian coalition politics has seen Chinese and Indian parties play a significant role since independence. Indonesia, despite being the most populous Muslim nation in the world, has based its national policy of Pancasila (five principles) on secular, pluralistic and inclusive ideals. In addition to measures like provincial autonomy, social integration programmes, affirmative action and strict laws to protect minority rights, states should also focus on nation-building institutions that espouse meritocracy, pluralism, impartiality and inclusiveness, as a means to prevent the festering of identity-based grievances. Perhaps only then, may like-minded states come together to advocate some degree of inter-state cosmopolitanism as a counter-movement to identity-based violence.

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CONCLUSION

In this essay, the author has sought to provide an alternative perspective to Kaldor's argument that the goals of belligerents in new wars are about identity politics, and therefore, different from the ideological and geopolitical goals of old wars. Far from being an end in itself, identity politics has been used as a tool to incite violence against out-groups. Identity also shares a strong emotional linkage with the concept of a 'homeland', and has been politicised by interest groups to further their geopolitical agendas. Last, in case of political Islam, political ideology shares an unbreakable link with religion. Thus, identity, geopolitics and political ideology cannot be completely divorced from each

other and viewed in silo. This should apply to both new and old wars.

While cosmopolitanism could potentially be a counter-movement to identity-based violence, it must be balanced with social and primordial realities. Instead of being prescribed as a panacea for international peace, cosmopolitanism should first be institutionalised and enforced at the state-level to promote social integration of the nations that reside within states.

To argue that warfare has gone through a paradigmatic shift after the Cold War is indeed ambitious. Kaldor's new war thesis certainly encourages debate and forces us to think about how contemporary armed conflict has evolved in its ways and means. However, suggesting that the goals of warfare could be anything other than power, territory and the survival of kin, even if it were at the expense of others, might just be a bridge too far.

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ENDNOTES

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