
Near Abroad:

Putin, the West and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus

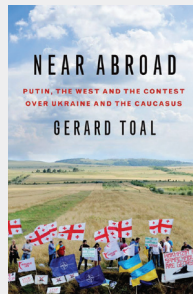
By Gerard Toal

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, 408 pages, \$29.95, ISBN: 9780190253301

Reviewed by Gloria Shkurti, Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University

In *Near Abroad*, Gerard Toal –one of the fathers of critical geopolitics– “aims to examine the making of the geopolitical struggle between Russia and the United States over Georgia and Ukraine” (p. 3) by presenting a synopsis of Russian policies in both of these states. The author then complements these events with the Western responses and discourses. The perspective that Toal adds to the literature is that of critical geopolitics, through which the author aims to present the main reasons behind the corrosion of relations between Russia and the United States under the Putin Administration.

In this book, Toal brings two new perspectives, which will prove to be decisive for the future of critical geopolitical studies. First of all, “this book develops a critical geopolitical analysis by building out three conceptual foundations of this approach” (p. 8). Namely, these notions are: geopolitical field, geopolitical culture and geopolitical condition. *Geopolitical field*, argues Toal, is a “combination between the sociospatial context of statecraft and the social players and rules and the spatial dynamics constituting the arena” (p. 9). More specifically, it means that the international state system is constituted by norms and rules that agree on the territory of the sovereign states. In the case of Russia, the collapse of Soviet Union led to the creation of new states and subsequently to the rise of



popular mobilizations that would challenge the boundaries of existing states. The second notion, *geopolitical culture*, is related to the spatial identity of each state and the debates about it. In this case, through geopolitical culture one can understand how states see the world around them and how they

strategize their priorities and construct the discourses. The last notion is that of *geopolitical condition*, which is related to how “emergent technological assemblages... transform the way in which geopolitics is experienced, understood and practiced” (p. 13). In a plausible way, these three conceptual foundations are applied to the case of Russia and the U.S. throughout the book.

The second conceptual distinction that Toal brings forward is that between “thick and thin geopolitics,” which is explained in detail in the last chapter of the book. Thin geopolitics refers to discourses and thoughts that rely on stereotypes, typical of both Russian and American political thought. Accordingly, thin geopolitics is mainly represented via a moral dichotomy such as democracy vs. authoritarianism, or Russia vs. the West (p. 277). In contrast, Toal prefers to rely on thick geopolitics, which recognizes “the importance of spatial relationships and in-depth knowledge of places and people grounded in the messy heterogeneity of the world” (p. 279).

At the beginning of the book, Gerard Toal highlights some of the main events that are considered to have affected Russia's relations with the West; included here are NATO's April 2008 Bucharest Declaration proclaiming that Ukraine and Georgia would eventually join the organization, the August 2008 Russo-Georgian war, and the events in Ukraine since February 2014. These events include the overthrow of Russian-backed Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich and the subsequent Russian annexation of Crimea, a "strategic blunder for many reasons" (p. 281). A thorough analysis of the above-mentioned events, discussing what happened and why it happened, comprises the main body of the book.

Near Abroad: Putin, the West and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus includes eight chapters and an introduction focusing on how Russian politicians first began using the key term "Near Abroad" in 1992 to denote the former Soviet Republics. In the eponymous Introduction, Toal elucidates the sensitivities involving the usage of specific geographical locations' names, which, as he asserts, are "often chosen to signify ownership of a territory or place, symbolically marking the political and cultural dominance of one group, and one geopolitical relationship, over others" (p. xvii). This chapter serves as an introduction to understanding one of the points of divergence between the Russian and Western understanding. According to Toal, the term 'near abroad' from the American perspective signposts Russia's reluctance to accept the sovereignty of the former Soviet Union states. Moreover, such an argument is generally followed by the idea that Russia has expansionist ambitions towards these states. By contrast, from the Russian perspective, 'near abroad' refers simply to the former Soviet states, and states or territories which were part of the

Russian Empire prior to the creation of the Soviet Union.

In the first chapter entitled "Why Does Russia Invade Its Neighbors?" Toal conveys "deep dissatisfaction with the two prevailing storylines that are used to explain Russia's invasions from the perspective of Western capitals, most especially within the United States" (p. 20). These two storylines can be summarized as the liberal and realist positions. The liberal position, which is more prevalent, argues that Russia's actions are the work of an imperialist power and that geopolitics is used only by revisionist great powers that aim to challenge universal liberal norms. The realist position, as may be expected, is less critical, and contends that geopolitics is used by all great powers: however, it still argues that Russia intimidates its neighbors (pp. 21-22). Toal argues that neither of these approaches fully understands or explains why Russia invaded Georgia and Ukraine.

The second chapter, "Geopolitical Catastrophe," focuses on the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the subsequent Yeltsin and Putin eras. Toal believes that Putin advocates "a conservative statist philosophy, one that has pragmatic respect for what makes the state strong" (p. 88). He follows by saying that revanchism, "a desire ... to recover past position, power, and status, [that is] not inevitably about territorial aggrandizement," symbolizes Putin's stance. In short, Putin aims to "make Russia great again" (p. 89).

Through the remaining five chapters, the author presents a general review of the Russia-Georgia and Russia-Ukraine conflicts. While in the first case more attention is given to chronological developments and an analysis of these events, in the chapters that focus on the Russia-Ukraine conflict the main atten-

tion rests on public sentiment in Ukraine. By focusing on public sentiments, Toal aims to prove that in Ukraine, being a Russian speaker does not infer that you are also pro-Russian.

All in all, it can be said that *Near Abroad* is worth reading, and that it achieves its goal of providing a “deeper intellectual and moral understanding of Russia’s foreign policy” (p. 16). Throughout the book, Toal argues that the Western discourses, especially those in the U.S., are too simplistic and do not present the total reality of the Russian invasion of Georgia and Ukraine. He makes his case by presenting the Russian perspective as well, a perspective which is mostly ignored in the West. However, one of the strongest points Toal makes in this book is his impeccable

distinction between understanding Russia’s policies and approving of these policies. So while in some cases Toal empathizes with Putin to better understand his policies, in other instances he provides the negative aspects of Putin’s leadership by presenting facts.

To conclude, *Near Abroad* is a must-read book for scholars and other readers who are interested in better understanding the relationship between the U.S. and Russia. Without ignoring the importance of other chapters, the introduction, the first and the last chapter are outstanding. Not only do they provide a new approach concerning West/U.S.-Russian relations, but most importantly they create a new framework that can be applied in other cases, such as the Balkans or other secessionist movement in Europe and beyond.

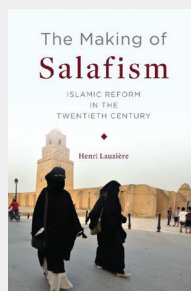
The Making of Salafism: Islamic Reform in the Twentieth Century

By Henri Lauzière

New York: Columbia University Press, 2015, 317 pages, \$55.00, ISBN: 9780231175500

Reviewed by Muhamed Riyaz Chenganakkattil, Indian Institute of Technology

The Making of Salafism is an extensively researched book on the concept of Salafism, about which a plethora of ambiguities prevail among historians of Islamic intellectual history. Henri Lauzière traces the genealogy of the term and concept of ‘Salafism.’ His well-considered endeavour for conceptualizing Salafism departs from the methodologies of other historians who have misunderstood the term and thus misrepresented the history of Salafism. Lauzière, throughout the book, shows the complexities of defining



Salafism, which has gotten a different semantical thrust in different temporal and spatial contexts. For him, grappling with the question, ‘what is Salafism?’ has been the contentious part of the project of defining the term, which cannot alone resolve the deep-seated confusion surrounding the meaning and historical origins of this concept.

Lauzière’s project in this book is not to give the proper definition or even attempt to comprehensively define the term. His project here