

Geopolitics, Noopolitics, and the Fight for Ukraine

David Ronfeldt, April 27th, 2022

Thanks for the opportunity to append a written comment to the video. Since six months have passed, I shall treat it as an epilogue or postscript to point out that recent events — particularly the conflict in Ukraine — are bearing out our analysis and forecast: (1) that the long-predicted *noosphere* is indeed emerging atop the continued spread of advanced information and communications networks around the world, and (2) that as the noosphere grows, information-age *noopolitik* will begin to rival traditional *realpolitik* as an approach to strategy and statecraft. Or, to use somewhat different phrasing, strategy and statecraft will increasingly revolve around information-age *noopolitics*, even as classic geopolitics continues to matter.

Confirming this view, the Russo-Ukraine conflict has become the world's first major conflict where noopolitical forces and calculations appear to be mattering as much as geopolitical ones. The war is revolving around a cluster of ideational, ideological, cultural, religious, spiritual, identity, morale, and narrative — in sum, noöpolitical — factors in unexpected ways, to intense degrees. In its totality, the war is being waged as much over ideational terrain (the noosphere) as on physical terrain.

Great credit is owed to Volodymyr Zelensky and the Ukrainian people for their innovative bottom-up efforts to rally, cohere, and resist using noopolitical strategies and tactics, while fighting militarily in new ways as well. Zelensky's frequent exhortations on CNN and other world-wide media platforms have been especially effective. Moreover, top-down leaders in Europe and America have rallied to support Ukraine for noopolitical as well as geopolitical reasons — e.g., the defense of democracy. Their combined efforts have both benefitted from and further ballooned the growth of the noosphere around this conflict. This is not being explicitly noticed yet, but it is implicit in all their remarks about the significance of shared values, narrative strategies, media structures, and alliance capabilities. Peace talks, if they occur, will surely be about future noopolitical as well as geopolitical stakes.

Vladimir Putin and the Russian strategists who have influenced his thinking over the years (notably, Alexander Dugin, Ivan Ilyin, Patriarch Kirill, and Vladimir Surkov) have erred in their assessments of geopolitical and especially noöpolitical conditions in Ukraine (e.g., presuming that Ukrainians lacked a national identity, and that Russia's military would be welcomed). Putin has attempted a land grab that was also meant to be a mind grab. But he has grossly misjudged an array of ideological, spiritual, religious, cultural, and other noopolitical conditions in Ukraine and elsewhere. And he has done so to such an extent that if Russia can be repelled in this conflict, Ukraine's victory will have world-wide noopolitical as well as geopolitical repercussions.

Meanwhile, many expert analyses keep viewing this as a geopolitical war that confirms realist tenets about strategy and the importance of hard power. While they are not wrong, excellent push-back has occurred showing that realism misses a lot that is crucial for understanding this conflict. However, no one has yet discussed the war as a noospheric and noopolitical phenomenon. Perhaps it's time we and others do so.

Our past work has emphasized *noopolitik* as an alternative and potential successor to *realpolitik*; and our stream of analysis about *realpolitik*/*noopolitik* should be sustained. At the same time, follow-on thinking, particularly about this war, suggests that a geopolitics/*noopolitics* stream should now be developed as well. It may even work better for calling the attention of at least some national-security theorists and strategists to the

nascence of the noosphere and noopolitik/noöpolitics — concepts and realities they have hesitated to grasp so far. Whichever concept — noopolitik, or noopolitics — may gain better traction (in a Darwinian struggle within the noosphere?), it will surely increase traction for the other concept as well. Were both concepts to gain traction, each would probably appeal most to different audiences. In any case, recognition would be enhanced about the noosphere's emergence and its implications.

I am very pleased, as is John, that Human Energy's project on the "Science of the Noosphere" is spreading awareness of these matters, including by way of this and other interviews here. I remain hopeful that U.S. theorists, strategists, and policymakers will start to heed noosphere-related concepts as well. We are wary that, in some respects, such concepts are receiving greater attention in Russia and China, as in Alexandr Dugin's recent theorizing about "noomakhia" (wars of minds) and China's new ideas about "discourse power" and "cognitive war." It is surely time for us and others who favor democratic ways of life to press ahead with determining the implications the noosphere's emergence may have for both war and peace in the decades ahead. Its emergence promises new possibilities in both directions; improving the prospects for peace to prevail will depend on achieving a correct understanding of the noosphere, scientifically as well as spiritually.

If so, two clarifications about the noosphere and noopolitics may be worth adding right now. The war in Ukraine substantiates both of them,

The first is about hard versus soft power: As John and I have long pointed out, geopolitics and realpolitik, mainstays of the realist school of international relations, are primarily about "hard power," whereas noopolitik and its broader variant, noopolitics, are primarily about "soft power." Yet it would be an error to view noopolitics as simply new jargon for repackaging the concept of soft power.

Just as geopolitical actors are often concerned about making moves that have psychological and ideational (i.e., noopolitical) effects — e.g., as in foreign port visits by a mighty U.S. aircraft carrier, or a "shock and awe" bombing campaign — so does noopolitics require a hard physical basis: vast technological installations, systems, networks, and other physical infrastructures for information and communications around the world — e.g., myriad undersea cables, land-based towers, space satellites, server farms, plus vast arrays of surveillance and monitoring systems, as well as what is usually mentioned, the Internet, cellphones, computers, all sorts of media platforms, etc.

Hardly any of this infrastructure existed when Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's prophetic best-selling books first circulated about the noosphere concept in the 1950s-1960s. Today, decades later, this hard infrastructure is still in its infancy, still blossoming. Its continued expansion will make it evermore difficult to be dismissive about the rise of the noosphere and noöpolitics.

Without what exists today, Russia's invasion of Ukraine would probably have been viewed as an isolated conflict in a far-away place of limited geopolitical significance; and Zelensky and his fellow Ukrainians would not have been able to develop an effective noopolitical response. Their success so far should not be viewed simply as a triumph of soft power over hard power. The noosphere's soft-power potential depends on building a hard-power foundation that circles the globe, thereby making the metaphorical pen ever mightier than the sword.

My second point is about concept power: Just as geopolitics is a very broad concept — an aggregator of all sorts of mostly material factors and forces that drive territorial interests and actions — so is noopolitics a very broad concept. It encompasses not only cyberspace and the infosphere, but also concepts about values, ideas, ideology, philosophy, religion, culture, cognition, psychology, propaganda, public diplomacy, identity politics, etc. Of all these concepts, noopolitics is the most encompassing; thus only it will be able to stand on a par with geopolitics.

So long as national-security strategists and analysts continue to use the narrower concepts and categories — such as, ideology, culture, credibility, or identity — in their contrasts to geopolitics, they risk being slow to see that these concepts and categories are all overlapping, interwoven, and interactive facets of the noosphere and noopolitics. They risk leaving the strategic and analytical high ground to experts on geopolitics, at a moment when we are entering an era when it will be advisable, even essential to think in terms of noopolitics as being on a par with geopolitics.

Decades ago strategists generally viewed the Cold War as both a geopolitical and ideological struggle, with the former usually taking precedence. Today, however, the Ukraine war involves so much more than ideology alone, it would be more accurate to view it as both geopolitical and noopolitical in nature. For in the broadest sense it is a battle for control of the nascent noosphere, and not just in Ukraine.

A final few words in closing: To many conventional strategists' eyes, realpolitik seems far more pragmatic and hard-headed an approach than noopolitik, which they may deem too idealistic, soft-headed. But as the noosphere's hard foundations grow, noopolitik will become as pragmatic in the future as realpolitik has been in the past. The same goes for geopolitics and noopolitics. Both are all just different ways of being pragmatic, attuned to the nature of their times. The Ukraine war looks to become a pivot point for realizing this.