

# Jan Eichler: NATO and the War in Ukraine: Geopolitical Context and Long-term Consequences

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In *NATO and the War in Ukraine: Geopolitical Context and Long-term Consequences*, Jan Eichler, a well-established scholar at the Institute of International Relations in Prague, contributes to the scholarly discourse surrounding NATO's expansion, its geopolitical impacts and the impact of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. By combining historical revisionism with theoretical insights, Eichler crafts a compelling narrative that critiques prevailing perspectives on NATO's post-Cold War role. The book offers an engaging mix of empirical rigor, theoretical depth and a revisionist spirit, which makes it a significant intervention in international relations (IR) scholarship.

Eichler's academic contributions place him squarely within the critical realist tradition of IR, which is informed by both classical realism and neorealism. His engagement with the works of Kenneth Waltz, Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer situates him in dialogue with some of the most influential theorists in the field. However, Eichler distinguishes himself through his willingness to critically assess NATO's post-Cold War trajectory, an area often dominated by uncritical endorsements. His alignment with revisionist scholars like Andrew Bacevich adds depth to his critique of triumphalist narratives that celebrate NATO expansion without grappling with its unintended consequences.

Eichler's central thesis is that while NATO's expansion is often framed as a stabilizing force, it has instead contributed to escalating tensions with Russia, which culminated in the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. By framing NATO expansion as a "zero-sum game" (p. 5) and examining its progression from "positive peace" (p. 5) to "negative peace," (p. 5) Eichler challenges the dominant discourse that portrays NATO as an unmitigated guarantor of security. The book's dual objectives are to critically evaluate NATO's role in reshaping Europe's geopolitical landscape and to analyze the long-term consequences of its policies for international security relations (ISR).

The book unfolds over seven chapters, each meticulously structured to advance Eichler's argument. The opening chapter establishes the theoretical and methodological foundations, which are rooted in neorealism and complemented by Charles Glaser's theory of "security-seeking vs. greedy states" (p. 22). Eichler's methodological clarity is commendable, as he outlines five research questions that guide the analysis.

Chapters two and three explore the history of NATO's expansion, describing this process as starting with the initial post-Cold War reflections under George H. W. Bush and culminating in the second wave of enlargement under George W. Bush. Eichler provides a nuanced examination of the contrasting arguments surrounding NATO's actions, juxtaposing the celebratory narratives of its supporters with the warnings of critics like George Kennan and John Mearsheimer. His analysis of NATO's "expansion by invitation" (p. 23) challenges simplistic interpretations, revealing the intricate dynamics between the alliance and former Soviet satellites.

Chapters four and five shift the focus to the militarization of the Baltic and Black Sea regions and the immediate consequences of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Eichler's exploration of NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence and the European Deterrence Initiative highlights the alliance's strategic recalibrations in response to Russia's actions. At the same time, he critically examines Russia's internal balancing strategies and the doctrinal shifts that have fueled its increasingly assertive posture.

The penultimate chapter introduces a rich discussion on competing narratives about the war in Ukraine. Eichler contrasts Western claims of NATO's defensive nature with Russia's portrayal of the alliance as a direct threat. His engagement with thinkers like Francis Fukuyama and Jeffrey Sachs underscores the ideological dimensions of the conflict, adding depth to the geopolitical analysis. By examining these opposing narratives, Eichler uncovers the complexity of the war's origins, providing insights into the interplay of security dilemmas and great power politics.

The final chapter broadens the scope to consider the implications of NATO's expansion into Scandinavia, with Finland and Sweden's accession serving as a case study for the evolving dynamics of European security. Eichler's exploration of their motivations, strategic importance and military capabilities enriches the book's overarching theme of NATO's transformation and its geopolitical consequences.

Eichler's critical approach is one of the book's greatest strengths. By framing NATO expansion as a "zero-sum game," (p. 47) he disrupts the celebratory narratives that dominate Western academic and political discourses. His insistence on examining the "thorns" (p. 8) of NATO's

“rose” (p. 8) – the unintended consequences of expansion – is a refreshing departure from mainstream accounts that often ignore these complexities. By emphasizing the unintended outcomes of NATO’s policies, Eichler challenges readers to consider the broader implications of alliance-building in a contested international system.

However, Eichler’s critique is not without its limitations. While he effectively highlights the security dilemmas exacerbated by NATO’s policies, his treatment of Russia’s agency occasionally leans towards determinism. The portrayal of Russia’s actions as inevitable responses to NATO’s expansion risks underestimating the role of domestic factors and individual decision-making in the shaping of Russian foreign policy. Additionally, Eichler’s revisionist lens, while valuable, could benefit from a more balanced consideration of the benefits that NATO’s presence has provided to its newer members, particularly in terms of political stability and economic integration. These dimensions, while acknowledged in the book, deserve more attention so that one would fully appreciate the multifaceted impact of NATO’s policies.

Eichler’s work contributes to a growing body of scholarship that examines the post-Cold War international order. By engaging with neorealist and revisionist perspectives, he situates the book within broader debates about the nature of security alliances, the dynamics of great power competition, and the ethics of intervention. His critique of NATO’s “triumphalism” (p. 2) resonates with scholars who question the uncritical export of Western models of governance and security. At the same time, Eichler’s analysis invites further exploration of alternative security frameworks. His call for a transition from “negative peace” to “positive peace” (p. 109) – a concept drawn from peace studies – aligns with efforts to re-think international security beyond militarized responses. This aspect of the book has the potential to inspire interdisciplinary dialogues between IR scholars, peace researchers and policymakers.

The book’s emphasis on revisionism aligns with the broader academic trend of challenging mainstream narratives. Eichler’s exploration of NATO’s “zero-sum” (p. 47) approach offers a counter-narrative that highlights the complexities of alliance-building in a multipolar world. Eichler broadens the scope of the debate by engaging with critical perspectives,

encouraging scholars to revisit the assumptions underpinning post-Cold War security policies. The book also raises important questions about the role of historical memory in the shaping of contemporary geopolitics, as Eichler critiques the “selective memory” (p. 3) that often dominates discussions of NATO’s expansion.

One of the book’s most significant contributions is its analysis of the war in Ukraine as a “proxy war” (p 135) Eichler’s examination of the military, political and economic dimensions of the conflict underscores the far-reaching consequences of NATO’s policies. By framing the war as a culmination of longstanding tensions, he sheds light on the structural factors that have shaped the conflict, providing a nuanced understanding of its origins and trajectory. This analysis is particularly valuable for policymakers seeking to navigate the complexities of European security in a rapidly changing international environment.

Eichler’s work serves as both a critique of past policies and a call to reimagine the future of NATO and international security. His insistence on acknowledging the unintended consequences of alliance-building challenges readers to think critically about the trade-offs inherent in security policymaking. As the war in Ukraine continues to reshape the global order, Eichler’s book provides a critical framework for grappling with its geopolitical and ethical implications. By emphasizing the need for a balanced and inclusive approach to security, Eichler’s analysis offers valuable lessons for addressing the challenges of the twenty-first century.

Jan Eichler’s *NATO and the War in Ukraine* is a timely and thought-provoking contribution to the study of international relations. Its critical engagement with NATO’s post-Cold War trajectory, combined with its revisionist approach, offers a valuable counterpoint to dominant narratives. While not without its shortcomings, the book’s analytical rigor and theoretical depth make it essential reading for scholars, policymakers and anyone interested in understanding the complexities of European security. Eichler’s work challenges us to rethink the foundations of international security, offering a nuanced and critical perspective on one of the most pressing issues of our time.

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Alfred Marleku is a professor of International Relations and Comparative Politics at the University for Business and Technology (UBT) in Kosovo. He earned his PhD in Political Science from South East European University. His research interests include international relations, foreign policy, international security, geopolitics, and the pedagogy of Political Science. He has authored and co-authored numerous scholarly articles published in both regional and international journals.