NEW WARS ANALYSIS IN PRACTICE:
APPLYING KALDOR TO CONTEMPORARY CONFLICTS

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Since the end of the Cold War, the outbreak of a succession of bloody, intractable civil conflicts throughout the world has prompted various authors to theorise the emergence of a “new” form of warfare (see Enzensberger, Spence and Chalmers 1994; Kaplan 2000; Van Creveld 1991). A principle proponent of such theories is British academic Mary Kaldor, who argues that warfare has fundamentally changed in the post-Cold War period. Kaldor (2013b: 1-3) claims that there has been a move from “old wars”, based on Clausewitzean conceptions of interstate conflict as an extension of politics, to “new wars” which are rooted in intrastate violence; the targeting of civilians and moderating “cosmopolitan democratic” forces; and the use of warfare for personal financial gain.

Much has been written about the issues surrounding Kaldor’s work, criticising both the qualitative and quantitative changes she claims have occurred in the nature of warfare since the 1990s. Many of the aforementioned key features of new wars have been criticised on qualitative grounds, with debate around whether they can be considered truly novel or unique to post-Cold War conflicts. Authors such as Kalyvas (2001) have critiqued Kaldor’s emphasis on the “difference” or “newness” of new wars as being incongruent with historical analysis, by outlining the similarities between the actors, methods, financing and goals of “new wars” and those of civil wars that occurred before and during the Cold War. Overall, Kaldor’s focus on the change in goals of “new wars” is perhaps the one aspect has been the most soundly criticised. Kalyvas (2001: 99, 109, 117), for example, has argued that the end of the Cold War did not lead to an empirical change in the goals of actors per se, but instead lead to a change in the way these goals and motivations for conflict were perceived by Western analysts. Supporting this, Fearon and Laitin (2003: 75) found little evidence in their rigorous and robust statistical analysis to support the argument that identity politics are statistically linked to the outbreak of civil conflicts.
Instead they hypothesise that the main factors that contribute to such conflicts are conditions that give favor the rise of insurgency, or guerilla warfare. Although such critiques are certainly valid, they do not engage much with Kaldor’s own differentiation between new wars and old wars, which compares “new wars” to which “conventional” interstate warfare, rather than to pre-Cold War civil wars.

In response to these varied criticisms, Kaldor has tended to move her argument away from claims about the “newness” or “difference” of new wars to broader and more abstract arguments regarding the fundamental utility of her logic as a novel guide for policy and research strategy. In her most recent response titled ‘In Defence of New Wars’ she argues that criticisms of the ‘newness’ of new wars “miss the point” insofar as she uses the term as a way of highlighting the need for new policy perspectives and analysis of wars in a way which avoids “old’ assumptions about the nature of war and conflict, rather than a simple description of an empirical difference in the nature of war (Kaldor 2013a: 3, 14).

Unfortunately, Kaldor’s conceptualisation of what “old wars” is problematic for a number of reasons. Firstly, there is the question of whether Kaldor’s conceptualisation fits with historical reality. Overall she gives little explanation of where these fundamental “old war” assumptions about conflict she describes come from, other than describing them as “Clausewitzean” (Kaldor 2013b: 27). Secondly, although she cites Clausewitz, it is unclear whether Kaldor is critiquing Clausewitz directly, or more broadly critiquing the array of other authors and military strategists who have interpreted Clausewitz in different ways. Such a lack of conceptual clarity is troubling when attempting to analyse the usefulness of Kaldor’s theory, especially when the debate about Clausewitz’s ideas is examined in more depth.

Clausewitz’s seminal work *On War* (Clausewitz, Howard and Paret [1832] 1976) is admittedly quite difficult to summarise, covering eight books without ever
being fully completed. Further complicating critical analysis of the work is the fact that publication only occurred after the author’s death, giving him limited opportunity to refine or clarify his arguments. As Strachan (2007) points out in his biography of Clausewitz, *On War* has been interpreted by an array of figures throughout history from his contemporaries in the eighteenth century, to the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century, through to modern superpower strategists in the twenty-first century. This continual reinterpretation by various sources in different historical and social contexts means most analyses and interpretations of Clausewitzean thought have been, at best overly selective and at worst misrepresentative (Kaempf 2011: 549; Strachan and Clausewitz 2007). Furthermore, the unfinished nature of Clausewitz’s work means that it contains numerous contradictions and omissions, while the historical and geographical context of his writing biases him towards a state-centric and Eurocentric approach to conflict analysis (Strachan and Clausewitz 2007).

Some theorists have questioned the fundamental conviction of academics such as Kaldor who claim that Clausewitzean principles cannot be applied to “new wars”. Kaempf (2011: 558-560) uses examples from Clausewitz’s older, untranslated work on ‘small’ or asymmetric wars, as well as reinterpretation of his concepts of “war as a wrestling match” and “war as a chameleon, to demonstrate that asymmetric conflicts are perfectly able to fit within a Clausewitzean framework. Kaempf (2011: 562, 565-566) also supports this claim by highlighting how leading theorists of asymmetric or guerilla warfare such as Thomas Edward Lawrence or Mao Zedong were strongly familiar with and influenced by Clausewitz’s work.

Building on this thought, another potential flaw with Kaldor’s thesis that comes to mind, as yet unexplored in the literature, is that in touting itself as a novel or innovative approach to the understanding of conflict, it misses a wide body of “old” theory from the Cold War era related to dealing with precisely such non-conventional, low-intensity, protracted conflicts. Extensive counterinsurgency
theory, developed primarily by colonial powers such as Britain and France during their involvement with violent decolonisation struggles and by the US during its fight against communism, was largely abandoned with the end of decolonisation and the end of the Cold War and only recently has such theory been slowly picked up again in response to the War on Terror and the US interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan (Marston and Malkasian 2008: 131). Like Kaldor’s “new wars” theory, counterinsurgency theory had to deal with sectarian motivations, protracted conflicts and opposition from a predominant conventional-warfare mindset which Kaldor would describe as “old war” (Marston and Malkasian 2008: 16-17, ). Although primarily a form of military strategy rather than an analytical tool for understanding conflict, the very existence of an historical alternative conceptualisation of conflict not based purely in conventional warfare further calls into question Kaldor’s portrayal of her theory as “novel”, and her depiction of “old” assumptions of war as being entirely based in state-centric, “conventional” visions of conflict.

Given the extensive empirical and qualitative critiques of Kaldor’s theory, this essay, rather than taking a purely empirical approach, aims to evaluate Kaldor’s claims by examining how analytically useful her work is in explaining contemporary conflicts. Specifically, I aim to critically analyse the usefulness of Kaldor’s claims by comparing her “new wars” framework with a more traditional “old wars” framework based on Clausewitzean principles, with the aim of examining whether Kaldor’s work can explain contemporary conflicts in ways traditional conceptions of warfare cannot. If this is the case, then Kaldor’s defense of her thesis as it relates to utility in policy and academic analysis may have some merit. If not, then the defensibility of the new wars thesis falls even more deeply into question.

The structure of my essay will be as follows: first, an overview and synthesis of Kaldor’s “new war” theory and the ways in which she differentiates it from Clausewitzean “old war” theory; second, analyses of two ongoing contemporary
case studies (namely, the War in Ukraine and the Syrian Civil War) within Kaldorian and Clausewitzean frameworks; third, an analysis of which frameworks work better for explaining which wars, and why; and finally, an overall conclusion about the utility of Kaldor’s frameworks for conflict theory.

Summarising the “new wars” framework is no easy task, in part due to the number of revisions Kaldor has made to it over the past decade. Her seminal work, ‘New and Old Wars’ is now in its third edition and, as mentioned above, has moved toward emphasising the utility of the framework as a tool for analysis, although confusingly she still insists on including empirical data as evidence of quantitative changes in the nature of war (Kaldor 2013a: 7-9). In fact, despite claiming that “newness” is not the point of her thesis, Kaldor continues to conceptualise and define “new wars” through the lens of change, or difference. Overall, there are five key features emphasised across Kaldor’s work that serve to distinguish the key features of “new wars” from “old wars”. These can be summarised as changes in actors, methods, financing, goals and logic (Kaldor 2013a: 2).

Actors in new wars are described as “decentralised networks” of state and non-state actors (Kaldor 2013a: 2). This variety of actors makes it difficult to distinguish between combatants and civilians and may include government forces, paramilitaries or militias, mercenaries and private contractors, jihadists, warlords and others (Kaldor 2013b: 161). Furthermore, these actors may alternatively combat or cooperate with one another. This is contrasted with the conceptualisation of “old wars” where actors are principally the regular armed forces of states (Kaldor 2013a: 2).

The methods of new wars focus on the political control of civilian populations via the spreading of “fear and hatred”, with the central method of achieving this being population expulsion (i.e. forced removals, ethnic cleansing or genocide) (Kaldor 2013a: 2). This ultimately means violence is mainly targeted towards...
civilians. This is contrasted with “conventional warfare” where the main method of operation is capturing territory through military force (rather than political means), with battles between opposing militaries being the decisive encounter (Kaldor 2012: 2).

The financing of new wars is dependent on decentralised “predatory private finance” which may include looting, pillaging, criminal activity, illicit trade and external support (such as remittances from diaspora communities), with the latter two sources linked to the growth of a globalised economic and communications network (Kaldor 2013a: 3). This is contrasted with “old wars” which, due to their state-based nature, are generally financed by states, via taxation or external patronage and exhibit war economics which are highly centralised and characterised by high levels of authoritarian government control and civilian participation (Kaldor 2013a: 3).

Finally, the goals of new wars are defined by “identity politics”, which have the ultimate aim of attaining political power for specific, exclusive groups rather than “the public interest” (Kaldor 2013a: 2). This is presented as part of a broader emerging divide between inclusive, universalist “cosmopolitanism” and exclusive “particularism” brought about by globalisation and greater global connectivity. This is contrasted with “old wars” where the ultimate goals are geopolitical and ideological, seeking to expand control over territory or spread specific ideological ideals, such as democracy or socialism (Kaldor 2013a: 2).

Combining all the four features mentioned above, Kaldor highlights the overall logic of new wars as being unique due to the focus they have on persistence rather than “winning”. Actors, she claims, are more invested in continuation of warfare for their own political or economic gains, rather than in a conclusive ending to the conflict (Kaldor 2013a: 3). Thus, “new wars” have a tendency to spread and recur. This fundamental logic of persistence is presented as quintessentially different to that of “old wars” which is based on a Clausewitzean
“contest of wills” between two state actors who each aim to defeat the other militarily as quickly and conclusively as possible, meaning conflicts tend towards a logic of extremes (Kaldor 2013a: 3).

Having outlined the key features of “new wars”, I now move on to examining their analytical utility by testing whether they explain conflict in ways traditional conceptions of warfare cannot. I have chosen to test Kaldor’s conceptualisations by applying them to two contemporary conflicts. The current War in Ukraine and the Syrian Civil War are both ongoing conflicts, with the former leaning towards an (admittedly somewhat concealed) conflict between states, and the latter appearing closer to an asymmetrical intrastate conflict involving a multitude of state and non-state actors. Naturally, finding accurate, peer-reviewed information about ongoing conflicts is difficult. Here I focus primarily on UN reporting and documentation, as well as, out of necessity, some limited journalistic sources.

RUSSIAN INTERVENTION & WAR IN UKRAINE (2014 – present)
Violent conflict in Ukraine has been ongoing since the ousting of pro-Russian president Yanukovych in the pro-EU “Euromaidan” protests of February 2014. Since Yanykovych’s removal, a number of pro-Russian separatist movements have taken hold of territory in Eastern Ukraine namely the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, the Donetsk People’s Republic and the Lugansk People’s Republic (BBC News Europe 2014).

Actors: On the surface, the proliferation of non-state actors may appear to be consistent with Kaldor’s “new wars” with their “decentralised networks” of state and non-state actors. However, such an analysis is problematic when applied to the Ukrainian conflict as it ignores the deep involvement of Russia and its regular armed forces in supporting the Eastern Ukrainian separatist movements. Reports of Russian supply convoys and troop movements along and across the Ukrainian border have reinforced the view that many of the
“separatist forces” are essentially Russian troops fighting a conventional war covertly (United Nations Security Council (UNSC) 2014). Further reinforcing this view, the separatist Republic of Crimea has since become officially incorporated as part of Russia on March 16 after a Russian-supported referendum condemned as illegal by Ukraine and the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) (2014). The Donetsk and Lugansk Republics have since also held referendums, and although there have been no moves as of yet to incorporate them into Russia, both republics have moved towards their own unrecognised confederation, the “Federal State of Novorossiya” (New Russia) (Babiak 2014). Thus, rather than involving a “decentralised network” of actors, the Ukrainian conflict appears highly centralised into two camps: Ukraine and Russia.

Methods: Overall the conflict in Ukraine has been waged using mostly “conventional” or “old war” methods, namely battles and engagements between armed forces, shelling and airstrikes in order to gain territorial control over key areas. Violence has been directed at armed forces, although as the carrying out of military operations in residential areas mean many civilians have been killed, although this appears to be due to collateral damage rather than any focused violence against civilians as a form of population control (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) 2014: para. 4, 26). In fact, while, there are reports of forced disappearances, the kinds of “population control” Kaldor discusses (massacres, mass forced displacement, ethnic cleansing) have been conspicuously absent. Indeed ceasefires and the creation of temporary “humanitarian corridors” meant to allow civilians to escape the fighting seem to indicate that civilians are not a primary target in the conflict, at least not for the Ukrainian side (OHCHR 2014: para. 7, 34).

Financing: Further inconsistent with Kaldor’s “new wars” thesis, the conflict appears to generally be funded by states with centralised economies rather than via looting or criminal activity. Although difficult to verify, Ukraine and other Security Council member states have repeatedly accused Russia of financing
and supplying weapons to separatist forces (United Nations Security Council (UNSC) 2014).

Goals: When viewed through a “new wars” lens, identity politics appear to have played a large part in the conflict, with the main split within Ukraine being along ethnic lines (i.e. between ethnic Ukrainians and ethnic Russians). Russian justification for interference in Ukraine has been framed as “protecting Russian speakers” (Putin 2014). However, the conflict when viewed through an “old war” lens, geopolitical goals appear to emerge. As mentioned above, Russian interference in supporting separatist movements has lead many to conclude that identity politics are being used as a front for Russia’s expansion of territorial control over Eastern Ukraine and Putin’s political hegemony both at home and within Eastern Europe (Strategic Comments 2014a).

Logic: Overall, while it is admittedly too early to tell, there appears to be little evidence of the conflict tending towards “persistence”, at least for Ukraine’s part. As shown by their repeated military assaults, Ukrainian forces evidently aim is to bring Eastern Ukraine back under their control as quickly as possible. At the same time, however, the Clausewitzean tendency towards “extremes” seems somewhat stunted, especially in terms of Russia’s actions. Despite massively outnumbering Ukraine in military force, Russia has not opted for a full-scale invasion, instead aiming for a slow, covert war. The reasons why are not entirely clear, perhaps due to limited public support in Russia for a full-scale war, or for fear of the economic impact of sanctions from the international community (The Economist 2014b). Thus, while the conflict does not fit perfectly with Kaldor’s conception of a persistent and spreading conflict motivated by personal or financial greed, neither does it fit perfectly into a Clausewitzean conception of a war of extremes or “utmost exertion of powers” either.

Overall, a “new wars” analysis when applied to the War in Ukraine appears to explain very little and indeed could be considered misleading insofar as it
obscured Russian participation in the conflict. The actors, methods and financing of the war all are much more conducive to an “old wars” analysis. The goals of the conflict do appear to have a basis the “identity politics” Kaldor describes, however how much of this is a further front for Russian desires for territorial expansionism and political hegemony remains to be seen. Finally, the logic of the conflict appears not to fit with Kaldor’s conceptions of persistence but neither does it fit perfectly into Clausewitz’s logic of extremes either.

SYRIAN CIVIL WAR (2011 – present)
The ongoing civil war in Syria began in a similar way to the Ukrainian conflict, growing out of protests against the dictatorial rule of the country’s president, Bashar al-Assad. In response to a brutal government crackdown on dissent, the conflict eventually lead to full civil war with clashes between pro-government forces and various opposition insurgency groups (Starr 2012; Wieland, Nassif and Almqvist 2013).

Actors: the huge network of different state and non-state actors involved in the Syrian conflict appears consistent Kaldor’s “new war” conception of actors. The original clash between government armed forces and the opposition-lead “Free Syrian Army” of 2011 has since expanded to incorporate “multiple shifting conflicts involving countless actors and frontlines” (United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC) 2014b: para. 136). These actors include numerous sectarian militias, Islamist groups and terrorist organisations fighting on both sides of the conflict, and are increasingly being augmented by experienced and ideologically-motivated foreign fighters from around the world (HRC 2014b: para. 9, 17). Furthermore, the recent expansion of Islamic State (IS) and Kurdish Peshmerga fighters into Syria has introduced a third side to the conflict, with both groups fighting against each other, as well as against both pro-government and anti-government forces.
Methods: Population displacement and atrocities against civilians have featured heavily in the conflict, and have been committed by various actors on all sides. A massive refugee crisis is also unfolding, with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2014) recording over 3 million registered refugees as of October 2014. The Syrian government has been condemned for its indiscriminate, large-scale artillery bombardments of civilian areas, deliberate targeting of civilians, use of starvation of civilians as a method of combat in combination and intentional denial of humanitarian assistance to civilians (United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC) 2014a). Non-state forces have been accused of similar offences, as well as forcible displacement of civilians and spreading terror throughout the civilian population by using suicide bombings, public executions, kidnappings and forced disappearances (HRC 2014b: 1). Such methodologies fit well within Kaldor’s “new wars” conceptualisation of the methods of war being focused strongly on political control of the population through fear, rather than purely military or territorial domination.

Financing: External financial support is present on both sides of the conflict, with Iran and Russia openly supporting the Syrian government, while opposition forces have allegedly received support from Saudi Arabia and Western governments. Other actors, such as the Islamic State (IS) are known to have gained significant resources and weaponry from looting in Iraq (HRC 2014b: para. 16) as well as kidnapping, extortion and from private overseas supporters. There are also numerous reports of fighters being drawn from around the world to fight for the various factions in the conflict (Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (IICIS 2012: para. 10, 18). This is in line with Kaldor’s claims about “predatory financing” and globalised communication and support networks being key features of and contributors to new wars.
Goals: Overall, “identity politics” as described by Kaldor appear to be playing a central role in the conflict. A United Nations report commissioned in 2010 has described the conflict as “overtly sectarian” (IICIS 2012), while other authors have described strong splits along ethno-religious lines between Sunni Muslims supporting the rebels and Syria’s Shi’a, Alawite and Christian minorities supporting the government (Starr 2012: 53, 54). Clearly Kaldor’s observation about the rise of exclusive “particularism” in new wars fits well into such an analysis of the Syrian conflict. Other authors, however, have criticised the overemphasis of analysts on the sectarian nature of the conflict, noting that ideological goals can still be found at the root of the conflict (Malantowicz 2013), and that sectarianism alone cannot explain the disunity and proliferation of armed opposition groups (Cheterian 2013).

Logic: The Syrian conflict is now in its fourth year and shows little sign of progress to a resolution. Indeed, the conflict certainly seems to be in danger of spreading, with the movement of IS forces across the Iraqi border, the increasingly dire refugee situation in surrounding countries, and the continuing flow of foreign fighters into the country from overseas. Furthermore, the proliferation of actors means that the chance of any decisive victory in the conflict appears slimmer and slimmer (Greig 2013). Given this point of view, the Syrian broadly appears to be following what Kaldor describes as new wars “logic of persistence”.

Overall, a “new wars” analysis when applied to the Syrian Civil War appears to explain quite a lot about the nature of the conflict. The actors, methods and financing and logic of the war all fit well within a “new wars” analysis. The goals of the conflict also appear to be strongly based in the “identity politics” Kaldor describes, however it is important to realise that too strong a focus on sectarianism and identity politics may be obscuring deeper ideological goals.
In conclusion, when applied to two contemporary conflicts, Kaldor’s “new wars” thesis obtains remarkably different results. As summarised in Table 1, almost all the factors in the War in Ukraine are more consistent with what Kaldor describes as “old wars”, with the possible exception of ‘goals’ which do not appear to be entirely consistent with either conceptual category. Indeed, applying a new wars conceptualisation to the Ukrainian conflict risks obscuring the crucial role that Russia plays as a “covert” player in the conflict. In contrast, when examining the Syrian Civil War, we find almost all the “new wars” features that Kaldor describes to be predominant, although the consistency of the ‘goals’ of the conflict appear to be debatable.

TABLE 1: Summary of the applicability of Kaldor’s five differentiating features of old and new wars to ongoing conflicts in Syria and Ukraine. († = consistent with “new wars”; * = consistent with “old wars”; ‡ = potentially consistent with both?)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conflicts</th>
<th>War in Ukraine (2014- present)</th>
<th>Syrian Civil War (2011-present)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Actors</td>
<td>State armed forces, centralised actors *</td>
<td>Complex decentralised network of state &amp; non-state actors †</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methods</td>
<td>Conventional battles, rocket attacks, airstrikes *</td>
<td>Sieges, insurgency tactics, rocket suicide bombings, civilian population displacement †</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financing</td>
<td>State financing *</td>
<td>State and private financing, looting, kidnapping, extortion. †</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goals</td>
<td>“Identity politics”, or territorial and geopolitical control? ‡</td>
<td>Identity politics and particularist sectarianism or ideological underpinnings? ‡</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logic</td>
<td>Tending towards extremes, both sides envision victory *</td>
<td>Tending towards intractability, no clear victory in sight for anyone †</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Overall, this analysis has shown that Kaldor’s “new wars” thesis can be analytically useful in describing modern conflicts, however “old wars” conceptualisations can be equally as valid and applicable, depending on the context of the conflict. The ultimate implications of these findings hark back to the debate about the “newness” of new wars.

If Kaldor’s analysis is useful in describing some newly emerging conflicts but not all of them, then perhaps it is an analysis that is not suited to all new conflicts, but rather to specific types of conflict, namely, civil wars. More simply put, if, as Kaldor has argued, the point of “new wars” isn’t that they are “new”, then why not apply the thesis to historical conflicts where they may also fit? If Kaldor’s thesis is so analytically useful, surely there is the potential gain valuable new insights and understanding of past conflicts, as well as future ones. To fully test this hypothesis, further research would need to be done, ideally attempting to apply Kaldor’s thesis to pre-Cold War civil conflicts in order to see if it is of equal analytical use.
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