

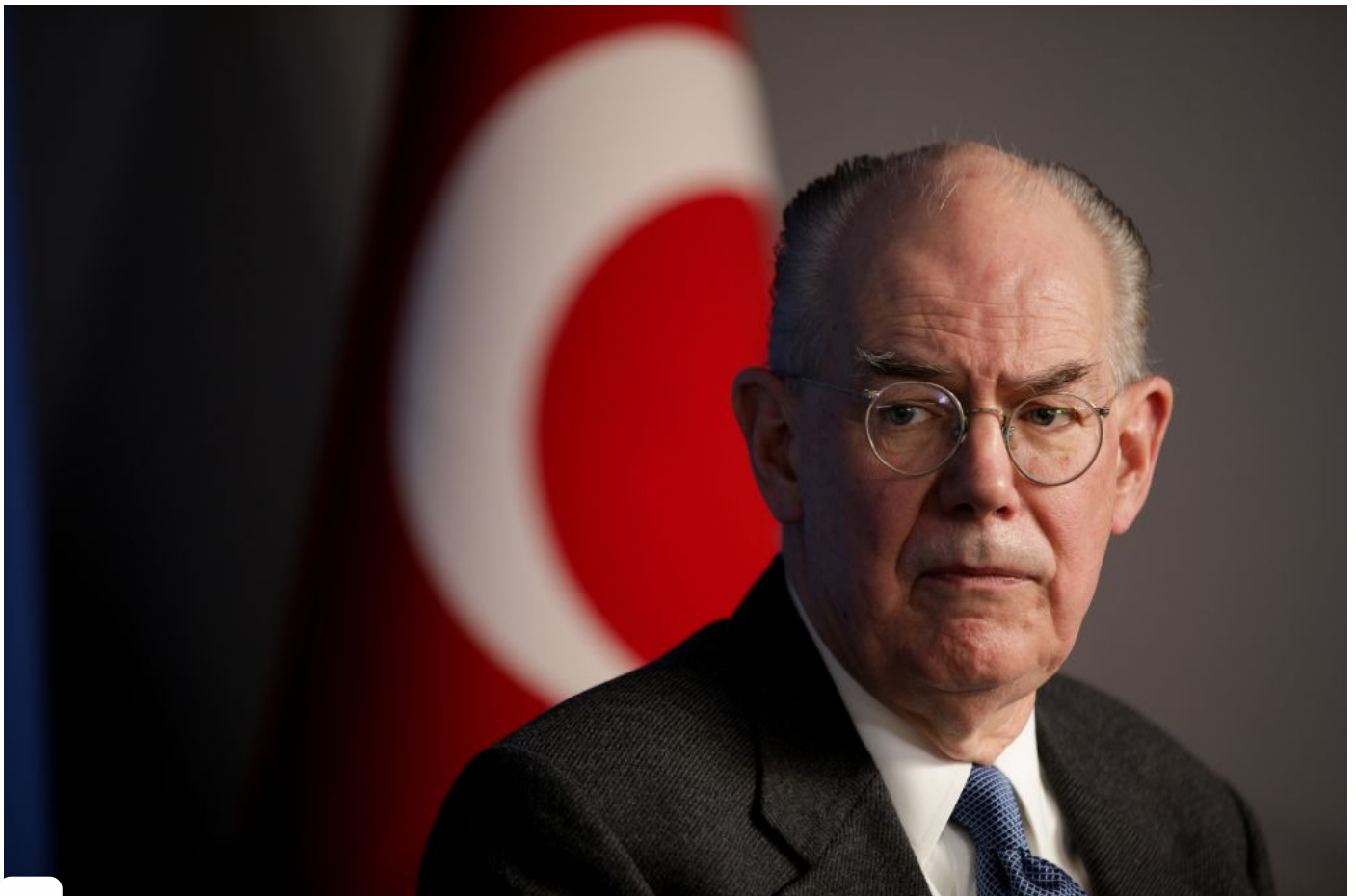
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John Mearsheimer and the dark origins of realism

Rage aimed at the eminent international relations scholar reflects liberal frustration over the West's limited power to prevent Russia's war in Ukraine.

By Adam Tooze



tasim Ozturk/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images.



“**W**hy is Ukraine the West’s fault?” This is the provocative title of a talk by Professor John Mearsheimer – a famous exponent of international relations (IR) realism – given at an alumni gathering of the University of Chicago in 2015. Since it was first posted on [YouTube](#), it has been viewed more than 18 million times.

In 2022 Mearsheimer is still delivering his message, most explosively on 1 March in an ill-advised down-the-telephone [interview](#) to the *New Yorker*. Against the backdrop of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Mearsheimer’s provocation is causing outrage. And it raises the question: what is the realism that Mearsheimer claims to espouse?

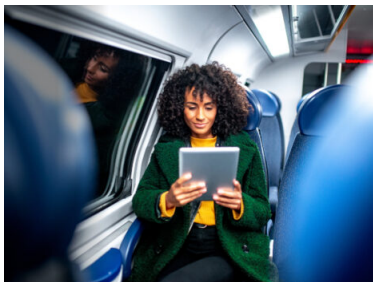
On the one hand, Mearsheimer is disarmingly even-handed. The push for Nato expansion in 2008 to include Georgia and Ukraine was a disastrous mistake. The overthrow of the Moscow-backed Viktor Yanukovich regime in 2014, a revolution supported by the West, antagonised Russia further. The West should accept responsibility for having created a dangerous situation by extending an anti-Soviet alliance into what is left of Russia’s sphere of influence. And then comes the inflammatory conclusion: Putin’s violent pushback should not come as a surprise.

In 2015, Mearsheimer’s stance was already controversial. Today, in light of Putin’s flagrant breach of international law, it has taken on a new life. On 28 February, when the Russian foreign ministry tweeted its endorsement of Mearsheimer’s view, it was pounced on by Anne Applebaum, the noted historian and campaigner for post-Soviet eastern European liberalism.

“[And there it is](#),” Applebaum gloated, with reference to the foreign ministry’s tweet, “now wondering if the Russians didn’t actually get their narrative from Mearsheimer et al. Moscow needed to say West was responsible for Russian invasions (Chechnya, Georgia, Syria, Ukraine), and not their own greed and imperialism. American academics provided the narrative.”

Over the days that followed, Appelbaum’s denunciation attracted a flurry of support, and students at the University of Chicago launched a menacing open letter demanding to know whether Mearsheimer was on the Russian payroll.

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The scandal entails Mearsheimer's refusal to see Putin's aggression as anything other than the behaviour of a great power at bay. Unlike Applebaum, Mearsheimer has little at stake in either Russian or Ukrainian history. What he is doing is simply elucidating the implications of his favourite IR theory, known as "offensive" or "great power" realism. Russia is a great power. Great powers, the theory goes, guard their security through spheres of interest. The US does so too, in the form of the Monroe doctrine and more recently in the Carter doctrine, which extends America's interests to the Persian Gulf. If necessary, those zones are defended with force, and anyone who fails to recognise and respect this fails to grasp the violent logic of international relations.

As for Applebaum's allegation – for which she offered no evidence – Mearsheimer would presumably shrug. After all, Applebaum isn't claiming that Mearsheimer and his ilk – "American academics" – gave the Russians the idea. Putin doesn't need American professors to convince him that Russia is a great power. Great powers use fair means and foul. Instrumentalising arguments from foreign academics is the least of their sins.

In so far as ideas can actually influence international relations, given the determinative force that Mearsheimer accords to geography, economics and military power, the most that one can hope for is to bring decision-makers and the general public to recognise each other's interests and spheres of influence and pull back from unnecessary confrontation. What realism means in this context is clarity about the underlying structure and a resigned acceptance of its logic.

In the 2000s, it was this same stance that motivated Mearsheimer to speak out against what he thought was the undue influence of the Israel lobby over US policy. That influence muddled American policymakers' understanding of their country's true interests in the Middle East. In the current situation, what Mearsheimer demands is that we rid ourselves of the idea that Nato's expansion to the East is either an irresistible trend of history or a crusade we must fight for.

The implications of Mearsheimer's view for Ukrainian sovereignty are, undeniably, grim. It will forever be curtailed by the fate of being within Russia's sphere of influence. But as unappetising as this is, if one fails to recognise the facts of Russian power and interest, the outcome will be even worse. Ukraine risks being battered to pieces. Mearsheimer does not deny Russian aggression, he simply takes it as a given. The entire force of his polemic is directed at the EU and Nato for leading Ukraine "down the primrose path". Given the West's talk about eventual Nato membership and association agreements with the EU, how were politicians in Ukraine to resist the appeal of eventual inclusion? But if they succumb to that temptation they put themselves at risk of Russia's wrath.

If you ask Mearsheimer about the historical source for his lucid but dark view of the world, he will most likely tell you that it is an ancient wisdom that originates in the writings of the Greek historian Thucydides. But that is an invented tradition assembled *ex post* by the discipline of IR as it established itself at American universities in the Cold War era.

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As Matthew Specter's fascinating new history *The Atlantic Realists* (2022) shows us, a more plausible line of descent derives not from the ancients, or even from the realpolitik of the age of Bismarck, which operated within the relatively settled terrain of the 19th-century balance of power, but instead the age of imperialism. It was in the late 19th century, with the closing of the global frontier and the fashion for social Darwinism, that a vision of the world first crystallised in which over-mighty powers jostled for space on a limited planet.

For Specter, a line runs straight from the expansive naval theorists and geographers of the pre-1914 period, such as Friedrich Ratzel and Alfred Mahan, to the German geopoliticians of the interwar period – notably Karl Haushofer and Carl Schmitt – and from there to the classic texts of American realism, notably the writing of Hans Morgenthau. Like Mearsheimer, Carl Schmitt, the Nazi lawyer and theorist of *Grossraum*, envisioned a world order based on dividing the planet between large spatial blocs, each dominated by a major power. A characteristic feature of this body of thought is its moral relativism. This relativism is not founded in philosophy so much as the pluralism of spheres of power. Like Mearsheimer, Haushofer and Schmitt envisioned Germany's *Grossraum* as an equivalent to the British Empire and America's Monroe doctrine. The same point was made by Japanese advocates of the Greater Asian Coprosperity Sphere in the late 1930s.

Part of the reason why this history is obscure is that it has always been scandalous to liberals. The frank assertion of the claims of power sits poorly with an ideal of universal rights. In the Second World War, German geopoliticians like Haushofer found themselves anathematised by the Allied press and put in the dock at Nuremberg. The condemnation was confusing to them, because they openly acknowledged how much they owed to the example of America's own expansion in the 19th century. To overcome this embarrassment, as Specter shows in a series of head-turning chapters, realism in the US had to invent a new history for itself which positioned it as a more abstract theory, detached from its imperialist roots.

Specter is a Germanist. His previous book was an intellectual biography of the Frankfurt School philosopher Jürgen Habermas. Especially for an American audience, linking the kind of IR realism that is taught in American universities to dark roots in the imperialist era is a considerable intellectual coup. But it comes at the price of a narrowing of historical vision. If Mearsheimer is a typical exponent of great power realism, then his interests are defined less by the questions of late 19th-century imperialism than by the question of why the world went to war in 1914. The intellectual genealogy to which he belongs descends above all from the aftermath of the First World War and the anguished, multinational effort to make sense of what went wrong in the July Crisis.

In that debate, the German-American exchange that Specter focuses on, was part of a wider argument that included figures like the historian EH Carr and philosopher Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson in Britain, and left-wing historians of international relations like Charles Beard in the United States. There is still today an affinity between realists like Mearsheimer, and the foreign policy left, who appreciate his unflinching articulation of the logic of power.

It should be acknowledged that his approach offers real insight. Indeed, though it is not stated out loud, Mearsheimer's diagnosis of the Ukraine crisis is shared de facto by a large part of the US foreign policy establishment. The promise of Nato membership bounced through by the Bush administration in 2008, was an act of hubris. The West will not abandon Ukraine, but nor will it intervene militarily. Part of the rage against Mearsheimer is deflected frustration on the part of liberals who recognise in his frankness with regards to the actual limits of Western commitment – and there are good reasons for those limits. A direct confrontation with Russia is something that Nato has always tried to avoid. The US made it clear to Putin that there would be no military participation. Emergency weapons deliveries go a long way towards blurring that line. A no-fly zone would be lethally dangerous.

[See also: [A no-fly zone over Ukraine risks igniting war between Nato and Russia](#)]

But for all that, to claim this as an intellectual victory for Mearsheimer's realism would be perverse. He is no doubt right about the underlying causes of tension. But that is not the same as actually explaining war, any more than gesturing to imperialism is an adequate explanation for why the Kaiser gave the Austrians a blank cheque in July 1914. The realist model is grossly underspecified and fails to grasp the qualitative shift implied by the opening of hostilities. The Prussian general Carl von Clausewitz may have said that war is the extension of policy by other means. But that still raises the question of why anyone, great power or not, would resort to such a radical and dangerous means.

In Moscow itself, none of the serious foreign policy establishment – all devotees to Russia's future as a great power – believed Putin would go to war. They were incredulous not because they do not understand the logic of power, but precisely

because they do. They saw no good reason for Russia to risk employing the means of all-out war, with all its hazards, uncertainties and costs. Events are proving them right.

Morality and legality are one reason for opposing war. The other is simply that over the last century at least, it has a poor track record for delivering results. Other than wars of national liberation, one is hard pressed to name a single war of aggression since 1914 that has yielded clearly positive results for the first mover. A realism that fails to recognise that fact and the consequences that have been drawn from it by most policymakers does not deserve the name. That does not mean that wars will not occur. But to postulate the future as an endless repetition of the hyped-up militarism of 1914 is to deny any capacity for collective learning. And it is counterfactual, especially in an age of nuclear armaments. As Specter shows in his meticulous chapters on trans-Atlantic realism in the postwar period, Vietnam and nuclear armaments led the classic realists to take a decidedly cautious approach towards war. In this regard Mearsheimer's offensive realism, a coinage of the post-Cold War era, fully deserves its name.

In light of war's hazards, it is tempting to say that if Mearsheimer's glib talk about the logic of great power conflict did indeed provide Putin with an excuse for Russia's disastrous invasion, rather than a servant of Russia, Mearsheimer is a secret weapon in the armoury of the West, helping to lure Putin to disaster on the rocks of a grisly new Afghanistan. If we want to understand what happened in the Kremlin to precipitate the criminal folly of the invasion, what we need are not platitudes about the security dilemmas of great powers, but a forensic account of an epic failure of decision-making and intelligence. And we need to understand not only Russia, but also how Ukraine, a state that seemed so weak, has so far been capable of mounting such effective resistance. Above all, we need to start by acknowledging that for the vast majority of analysts, this war has delivered a shock that does not confirm, but puts in question our sense of reality.

It drives home the point that adopting a realistic approach towards the world does not consist in always reaching for a well-worn toolkit of timeless verities, nor does it consist in affecting a hard-boiled attitude so as to inoculate oneself forever against liberal enthusiasm. Realism, taken seriously, entails a never-ending cognitive and emotional challenge. It involves a minute-by-minute struggle to understand a complex and constantly evolving world, in which we are ourselves immersed, a world that we can, to a degree, influence and change, but which constantly challenges our categories and the definitions of our interests. And in that struggle for realism – the never-ending task of sensibly defining interests and pursuing them as best we can – to resort to war, by any side, should be acknowledged for what it is. It should not be normalised as the logical and obvious reaction to given circumstances, but recognised as a radical and perilous act, fraught with moral consequences. Any thinker or politician too callous or shallow to face that stark reality, should be judged accordingly.

[See also: [The world is at financial war](#)]

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Adam Tooze

@adam_tooze

Adam Tooze is a New Statesman contributing writer and the author of *Shutdown and Crashed*.