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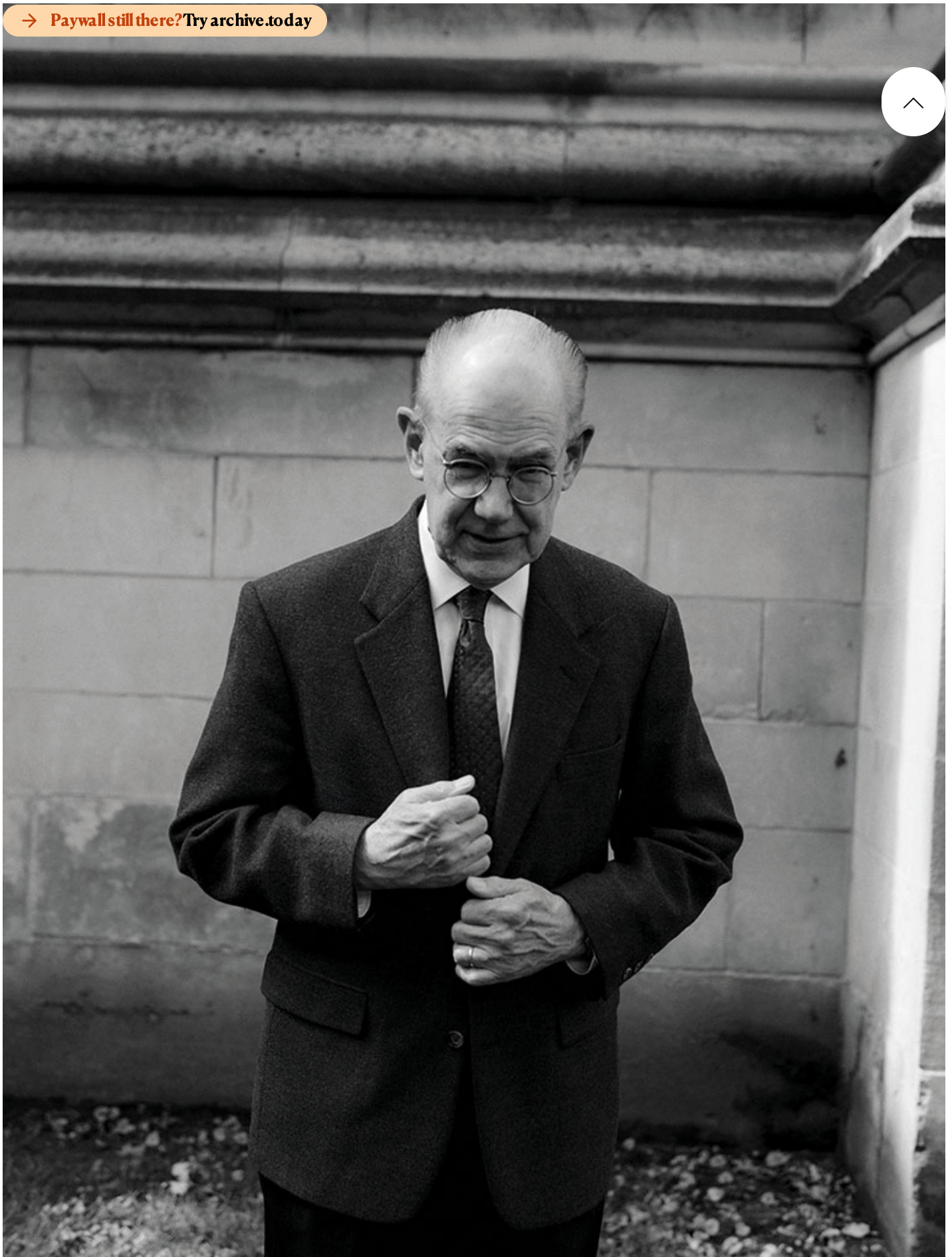
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## The tragedy of John Mearsheimer

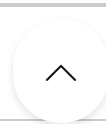
How the American realist became the world's most hated thinker.

**By Gavin Jacobson**

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Academic outlier: John Mearsheimer, photographed in Chicago for the New Statesman by Lyndon French



Late at night on 23 February 2022, John Mearsheimer was at home in the suburbs of Chicago finishing an article for *Foreign Affairs* magazine on the escalating crisis in Ukraine. In the preceding weeks, Russian forces had amassed on Ukraine's border even as military officials in Moscow denied any plans to attack. Mearsheimer, a professor of political science at the University of Chicago, was tasked with explaining to readers the prospect of war in Europe. He had just completed the final draft of the essay when he received an urgent message from his friend and fellow academic Stephen Walt: "Check the news before you hit send on your piece. Something is happening in Ukraine."

More than 5,000 miles away, Russian troops and armour poured across Ukraine's border, driving towards Kyiv from Belarus in the north and Crimea and the Donbas in the south. The biggest attack on a European state since the Second World War, it was an invasion that in articles and lectures Mearsheimer had confidently predicted wouldn't happen, having assumed that Vladimir Putin had absorbed the lessons of American misadventures in Afghanistan and Iraq.

"I was surprised," Mearsheimer, 75, told me from his office in Chicago. "At a gut level it was hard to imagine a war of this sort in Europe." Mearsheimer said that he hadn't appreciated the extent to which the West had armed and trained Ukraine to the point where it was becoming a de facto member of Nato. "I didn't understand the logic of preventive war in Putin's thinking," he explained, "because I thought Ukraine was a weak power. But once it was clear in the early stages of the battle that Ukraine was a potent fighting force, you could see that Putin had been thinking in terms of preventive war – I had missed that."

In the days and weeks following the invasion, as Russian units shelled cities, killed civilians, and forced thousands from their homes, conventional wisdom about its causes set in. The *New York Times* described it as "an unprovoked invasion". The *Financial Times* called it a case of "naked and unprovoked aggression". The *Economist*

said that “Russia’s president has launched an unprovoked assault on his neighbour”. Putin was portrayed as an imperialist bent on creating a greater Russia, and, as this magazine put it, “an agent of chaos”. In Europe, Ukraine’s blue and yellow flag bloomed across government buildings, households and Twitter handles.



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The coverage in the media galvanised international solidarity with the country and its president Volodymyr Zelensky, a former actor who swapped the suits and fresh face of a peacetime politician for the khaki and stubble of the wartime commander.

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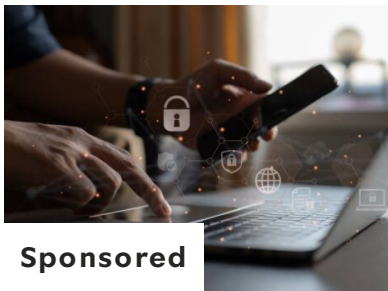
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Calls to end the conflict came in the same breath as demands for its escalation: send Javelin missiles, drones, and munitions, as well as jet fighters to enforce a no-fly zone. As the conflict intensified, Finland and Sweden abandoned their policies of neutrality and applied to join Nato. The left-wing academic Alexander Zevin wrote that the “pitch of hysteria is as high as anything after 9/11 – the free world, civilisation, good and evil, all hang in the balance once again”. Few dissented from this narrative. John Mearsheimer was the most prominent exception.

The world’s leading “realist” scholar of international relations, which argues that a state’s priority is being more powerful relative to its neighbours to ensure its survival, Mearsheimer had been warning of a possible Russian attack on Ukraine since the 1990s. In one essay, “The Case for a Ukrainian Nuclear Deterrent” (1993), he wrote that the West’s attempt to press Ukraine to become a non-nuclear state was a huge mistake.

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A nuclear Ukraine made sense, he claimed, because it would ensure “that the Russians, who have a history of bad relations with Ukraine, do not move to reconquer it”. In subsequent writings, he sounded the alarm that if Nato continued to expand eastwards, Russia would feel threatened and be forced to act.

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Several dignitaries of American foreign policy had made similar arguments in the past, including George Kennan, the architect of “containment” strategy against the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

Even the former US president Barack Obama understood Putin’s 2014 invasion of Crimea in realist terms. In a 2016 interview with the *Atlantic*, he said that “Putin acted in Ukraine in response to a client state that was about to slip out of his grasp.... Ukraine, which is a non-Nato country, is going to be vulnerable to military domination by Russia no matter what we [the US] do... [My position is] realistic... this is an example of where we have to be clear about what our core interests are and what we are willing to go to war for.”

Mearsheimer has struck contentious positions in the past. In 1990 he dissented from the prevailing optimism by arguing that international life would be characterised by tension, crisis and brutal struggles for power. The article, “Why We Will Soon Move to the Cold War”, published in the *Atlantic*, triggered a vociferous response from academics and pundits, including in *Time* magazine. Then in 2006, along with his co-author Stephen Walt, he wrote “The Israel Lobby”, which examined the complex of organisations that sought to encourage the US to provide material aid to Israel, often against American strategic interests. It was subsequently published as a book in 2007, and the argument saw Mearsheimer and Walt labelled as anti-Semitic, liars and bigots.

So when on 28 February 2022 the Russian Foreign Ministry promoted another *Foreign Affairs* article that Mearsheimer had published in 2014 titled, “Why The Ukraine Crisis is the West’s Fault”, the backlash against him was similarly emphatic and ranged from respectful disagreement to fierce condemnation. Stephen Kotkin, the preeminent historian of the Soviet Union, and Michael McFaul, the US ambassador to Russia between 2012 and 2014, acknowledged that Mearsheimer was “a giant of a scholar” and “one [of] the clearest, most logical realist theorists out there”, but he was wrong to blame the US for Putin’s invasion.

In a more excoriating key, the journalist Anne Applebaum accused Mearsheimer of being Putin’s useful idiot, tweeting that his article had given the Kremlin its talking points for the war. As Mearsheimer explained his thinking on the Ukraine war in media interviews, he became the most infamous, perhaps even most hated, academic in the world.

John Mearsheimer was born in New York City in 1947, and he still retains the faint registers of a Brooklyn accent. As with most of his generation, the formative experience of his youth was the Vietnam War, during which time he served in the US military between 1965 and 1970. It was a strange choice for someone who had previously described his aversion to the garrisoned life – “I hate shaving. I hate sleeping in the woods. I hate uniforms. I hate guns. I hate authority.” The one authority he didn’t hate was his father, a civil engineer and powerful force in his life who was determined that the young Mearsheimer attend the US Military Academy at West Point.

Although he never saw combat, Mearsheimer's experience under arms, along with the catastrophe in the jungles of southeast Asia, influenced his views about the use of force. "Those were difficult times to be in the military and I often wondered during that ten-year period how we got into that disaster," he told me.

An answer was soon provided by one of the most brilliant books published on American foreign policy and its thinkers, and a key work for understanding Mearsheimer's life-long allergy to the Brahmin class in Washington DC: David - Halberstam's *The Best and the Brightest* (1972).

Halberstam's book profiled the coterie of intellectuals inside John F Kennedy's administration – McGeorge Bundy, Robert McNamara and others – whose hyper-intelligence was left untamed by an absence of wisdom. These "Brilliant Atlantic provincials", Halberstam showed, had led America into Vietnam with all the hubris befitting their class and social status. Mearsheimer was hooked.

"*The Best and the Brightest* really mattered to me," he said, and the book explains why Mearsheimer remains scathing about those who work in the councils and think tanks of the Beltway. "They have the Midas touch in reverse, and Halberstam's description remains an excellent one for the foreign policy establishment. They think they are geniuses, but look at their record – they aren't."

Life in the military also taught Mearsheimer about the limits of armed interventions. "Military are good at fighting conventional wars and breaking things, but once you get into nation-building everything falls apart. Most of my colleagues in the foreign policy establishment haven't served in the military. They think it's a magical tool but anyone who has been in the military understands that it is a blunt instrument, especially for social engineering."

Serving in the US Army and then the Air Force gave Mearsheimer an insight into the relationship between huge, almost unintelligible systems, and the making of foreign policy. It was a lived experience reinforced and clarified by the publication of Graham T Allison's *The Essence of Decision* (1971), a seminal text in the history of international relations. It argued that foreign policy decisions don't reflect the priorities of rational states, but are driven by proliferating bureaucracies and



increasingly complex organisations. Foreign policy, in other words, is about process, not values.

After completing his PhD at Cornell University in 1980, and following a stint at the Brookings Institute, Mearsheimer spent two years at Harvard. It was there that he encountered Samuel Huntington, the political scientist who would become best known as the author of *The Clash of Civilisations* (1993). Huntington counts as one of the most influential thinkers on Mearsheimer, not for his theories about how culture would become the dominant source of conflict, but the way he held fast to those theories under fire.

“I think *The Clash of Civilisations* is a fundamentally flawed work,” Mearsheimer told me, “but what I admired about Sam was how he was willing to stake out bold positions that ran contrary to the conventional wisdom. He liked a good intellectual fight, and I love to fight, I love intellectual combat.” (Huntington’s appreciation that scholarship “is not a popularity contest,” is the reason why Mearsheimer and Walt dedicated *The Israel Lobby*, their most controversial work, to him).

Unlike many academics in the US, Mearsheimer has refused to serve as a functionary in the security state, finessing warrants for the use of American force in the world. One gets the sense that he believes scholarship is the higher calling. This is what makes him, as he put it, “an armadillo”, seemingly impervious to legitimate attacks on his work, as well as the hostile reception to his opinions on subjects such as the war in Ukraine.

Huntington’s most famous student was Francis Fukuyama who had joined the Rand Corporation in 1979, a prominent American think tank, the year before Mearsheimer arrived at Harvard. But during the 1980s Mearsheimer and Fukuyama got to know each other well on the academic circuit and engaged in heated debates about how the US should contest the Cold War. It was around this time that Mearsheimer became a realist.

***[See also: [The left must embrace law and order](#)]***

It is commonly understood that the realist tradition emerged as a response to the collapse of European liberalism in the 1930s. Yet as the historian Matthew Specter shows in *The Atlantic Realists* (2022), realism developed in the 1880s and 1890s, an era of imperialist globalisation in which industrialising states such as Germany and the US jostled for mastery with Britain and France on a finite planet.

A so-called structural realist, Mearsheimer's theory is based on five assumptions: the international system is anarchic (there is no supreme authority or nightwatchman that can limit the behaviour of states); all great powers possess offensive military capability; states can never be certain about other states' intentions; survival is a state's paramount goal; and states are rational actors that think about how they can survive in a time of anarchy.

Examined from this realist perspective, Mearsheimer says that Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine "should have come as no surprise". As he wrote in that now infamous 2014 article, "Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault", with the prospect of Nato enlargement and the EU's expansion eastwards, as well as the pro-democracy movement in Ukraine – beginning with the Orange Revolution in 2004 – "the West had been moving into Russia's backyard and threatening its core strategic interests".

I asked if it could be considered a "just war"? "Russia's invasion of Ukraine was a preventive war," he said, "which is not permissible according to just war theory. But Russian leaders certainly saw the invasion as 'just', because they were convinced that Ukraine joining Nato was an existential threat that had to be eliminated. Almost every leader on the planet would think that a preventive war to deal with a threat to its survival was 'just'."

This argument is controversial, even reckless, and has seen Mearsheimer labelled a disgrace. It has also made him a YouTube sensation. In 2015 he gave a lecture at the University of Chicago on "The Causes and Consequences of the Ukraine Crisis", in which he blamed the West. A recording of the talk was uploaded to YouTube, and I asked him how he felt about it having so far received 25 million views. "Twenty-nine and a half million!" he corrected me, perhaps revealing a greater interest in his own celebrity than he lets on.

Lawrence Freedman, the *New Statesman* contributor and a world authority on theories of war, has known Mearsheimer since the 1980s, but he spoke for many of his detractors when he described his position on Ukraine as “unforgivable”.



“John simply can’t explain Russian behaviour because he is too focused on the international system and ignores the domestic forces at play. He suggests that Ukraine was about to join Nato, but it wasn’t, and he seems to find it reasonable to deny Ukraine the right to chart its own course. He also can’t detect Russia’s colonial attitudes towards Ukraine. I would consider myself a realist, but it is a realism brd on assessing the situation as you find it rather than how you wish it to be brd on some dogmatic theory.”

Even those who once championed Mearsheimer’s work believe that on the subject of Ukraine he has lost his way. In 2012 the author Robert D Kaplan published a profile of Mearsheimer in the *Atlantic* titled “Why John J Mearsheimer Is Right (About Some Things)”, in which he wrote that the Chicago professor “topples conventional foreign-policy shibboleths and provides an unblinking guide to the course the United States should follow in the coming decades”. But as he told me over email, Kaplan now thinks Mearsheimer “goes too far. Putin’s decision to invade was very individualist – much of the Russian elite itself were caught by surprise and shock – and so the Russian leader bears the moral blame for the carnage; not the West.”

**W**hat darkens Mearsheimer’s realism against the wider tradition is his emphasis on tragedy. “The tragedy,” he told me, “is that you could have two states who are content with the status quo and have no interest in fighting or competing for power. Nevertheless, because they cannot know each other’s intentions, and because they operate in an anarchic system, they have to assume the worst about each other and have to compete for power. Most people reject the idea that we can’t transcend this logic, but what I am saying is that we are condemned forever to a world where great powers compete for security and sometimes end up fighting wars.”

Such a stark, minatory world-view, in which powers are trapped in an “iron cage” where they must compete for power, is at radical variance with the creeds that prevailed in the West after 1989. Mearsheimer was at the University of Chicago when

the conservative philosopher Allan Bloom, author of *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), invited Fukuyama to give a talk on the end of the Cold War, during which he famously declared the End of History. As he sat in the lecture hall, Mearsheimer thought the argument that liberal democracy was the terminus of ideological evolution was “naïve”.

He understood, however, why Fukuyama’s assertion of capitalist triumph ended up defining both the outlook and objective of US foreign policy. “Most people in the West are committed to figuring out how to escape the tragedy of great power politics and move into a more peaceful world. That’s why Frank’s [Fukuyama] essay was so attractive to so many because he was saying that we are in the process of transcending that logic.”

Anarchy, iron cages, states of nature, tragedy, power, war – Mearsheimer concedes that his version of realism “is not a pretty story”, especially compared to the uplifting idiom of US politics: progress, human rights, cooperation, open markets, democracy. “Embedded in liberalism,” he told me, “is the belief in progress, the belief that it is possible to make the world a better place. Realism says that you can’t do that. International politics is a tragedy – it always has been, it is today, and it always will be. Those who believe that you can escape the iron cage, and transcend this Hobbesian world, are delusional. My argument disturbs liberals greatly.”

This is why, outside of the academy, Mearsheimer has few friends in Washington. If he dislikes the foreign policy elite the feeling towards him is mutual. “I never get invited to think tanks or get asked to consult by policymakers. I’m a fish out of water in the capital.” This is ironic, since Mearsheimer has long argued that as a great power, the US has talked like a liberal but acted like a realist.

During the unipolar moment between 1991 and 2017, when the perimeters of American power extended to the ends of the Earth, foreign policy elites dispensed with the dictates of realism and made liberalism – making the world safe for capital – the software that guided US foreign policy. “But,” Mearsheimer explained, “during the Cold War we behaved as you would expect from a realist perspective. And since the emergence of this new multipolar world in 2017, we have pursued a realist strategy, especially towards China and India.” But realism has always been alien to

American sensibilities. Fukuyama himself called time on the tradition in the 1990s, after the prospect of great power conflict appeared over, when he wrote that “treating a disease that no longer exists, realists now find themselves proposing costly and dangerous cures to healthy patients”.

Rejected in the homeland, Mearsheimer has been embraced by its enemies abroad. In 2016 he was a guest at the Valdai Club in Sochi, Russia, a conference on “The Future in Progress: Shaping the World of Tomorrow”. At the end of the event, Mearsheimer saw Putin up close when the Russian president spoke at a Q&A. When I asked him about his impressions of Putin, his answer was like a reference he may have written for a prize student: “It was clear to me – and I think to all the others who were at the conference – that Putin is remarkably knowledgeable and has first-rate analytical capabilities, coupled with real command presence. I didn’t agree with everything he said, but there was no doubt in my mind that he is a first-class strategist and that the West is dealing with a formidable opponent.”

Mearsheimer’s stardom also extends to China. “When I go to Beijing, I feel more at home intellectually, and in terms of thinking about foreign policy, than I am in Washington. The Chinese are realists to the core.” When he gives talks in China (his last trip was to Wuhan in 2019), Mearsheimer often starts by saying, “it’s good to be back among my people”. “What I mean by that,” he explained, “is the Chinese are realists and speak my language and are deeply interested in what I have to say, the way people in Washington do not.”

Mearsheimer said that he speaks to academics and those associated with the Chinese government. They like to challenge him on the question of China’s rise as a peer competitor to the US. “China believes that there must be a way for it to rise peacefully. But it’s not going to happen. If China continues to rise, there is going to be a security competition with the US. They are interested in engaging with me for the purpose of undermining my argument.”

Mearsheimer thinks that a great power war between the US and China is “an ever-present possibility”. Leaving aside the prospect of a nuclear exchange, any conflict between the two would resemble the First and Second World Wars. “I don’t think



the basic nature of conventional warfare has changed – it still looks a lot like it did during the First and Second World Wars.”



“What has changed,” he continued, “is the advances in surveillance and reconnaissance, which makes it hard for warring parties to surprise each other. I also think that the lethality of modern weapons has increased significantly. It’s easier for the other side to spot you and it’s easier for the other side to kill you and that makes it more difficult to launch a successful offensive as we’ve seen recently with the Ukrainian counter-offensive.”

When you open John Mearsheimer’s website, you are greeted with a painting of him, with his head superimposed on the body of the renaissance diplomat-philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli. The painting was a gift from students at the University of Pennsylvania. There, in 2016, Mearsheimer gave a lecture to the Philomathean Society. The painting, which now hangs on the wall of the Society, is called “Merchiavelli”.

It is a fitting moniker. Machiavelli is often considered as the first realist theorist because he denied the relevance of morality in politics. When his guidebook for rulers, *The Prince*, was circulated in 1532, five years after Machiavelli’s death, his name was condemned across Europe. One English cardinal, Reginald Pole, pronounced the Florentine “an enemy of the human race”. The 16th-century scholar John Case said that Machiavelli was a defender of tyranny and “one of the major threats to the continued peace, stability, and prosperity of the Age of Astrea”. In the 20th century, Bertrand Russell called *The Prince*, “a handbook for gangsters”.

But despite this sinister reputation, no one can think about modern politics without confronting Machiavelli’s ideas about how to acquire and use power. Mearsheimer’s theories of great power politics made him, as Robert Kaplan put it to me, “one of the most clairvoyant voices in the political science community”. But his views on Western foreign policy, and how it has wrought havoc across the world since the end of the Cold War, have seen him denounced as a stooge of its enemies. Lawrence Freedman told me that Mearsheimer was now an “isolated” figure.

But if, as the American political scientist Richard K Betts has noted, Fukuyama's End of History thesis caught the spirit of the age when the Berlin Wall fell, and Huntington's theory about the clash of civilisations did the same after 9/11, the disturbing force of Mearsheimer's work may soon have its turn. In years to come, in a new age of great power conflict, with Ukraine and Russia perhaps still locked in a state of un-peace and the US and China facing off over Taiwan, people will be forced to reckon with this thinker who specialises in voicing harsh truths. None more so than his chilling message about the tragedy of the world from which we will forever be trying to escape.

*[See also: [Europe's false dawn](#)]*

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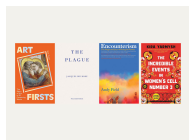
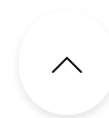
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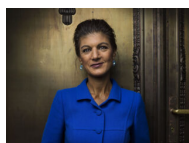
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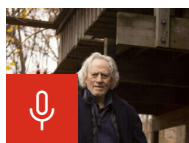
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