



NATO

BLAME NATO, WEST FOR THE INVASION OF UKRAINE —

JOHN MEARSHEIMER

Kim Way: Hello and welcome to World Insight. I'm Kim Way. We are entering into the seventh week of the Russia-Ukraine Conflict. The military and humanitarian stalemate leads to protracted suffering and a prolonged war.

There are some with a pragmatic approach on who should take responsibility for the conflict, among them Professor John Mearsheimer from the University of Chicago who did a recent opinion piece published in The Economist. He argues the Ukraine crisis is the most dangerous international conflict since the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. The West, according to him, especially the U.S., is principally responsible for the Ukraine crisis. For deeper insights and his perspective, I talked to him and here is our conversation.

Professor Mearsheimer, what a pleasure to see you, but tell me more about how do you see the debate people are having regarding your theory that the West has been cornering Russia, which led to the latter's invasion or war against Ukraine?

John Mearsheimer: Well, I think that in the West, especially in Europe and the United States, the mainstream media rejects my argument almost completely, and in-stead of blaming NATO and the West for precipitating this crisis, they prefer for obvious reasons to blame Vladimir Putin and argue that he is highly aggressive. He's interested in recreating the Soviet Union or recreating a greater Russia and he therefore alone is responsible for this crisis and it has nothing to do with NATO expansion. That's the conventional wis-dom and, of course, I'm challenging that conventional wisdom.

Kim Way: One of the reasons for your ar-gument, you cited earlier, is that Russia is not looking at taking over Kiev, and yet people have been looking at the military actions that Russia took over there in that city and beyond. So how do you see the reality? This is your theory many question.

John Mearsheimer: Well, I think if you actually look at the Russian military op-eration, it fits very neatly with my theory. The conventional wisdom, the argument

that the U.S. government and the U.S. media makes, is that Putin was interested in conquering all of Ukraine and making it part of Russia, but he did not attempt to come even close to conquering all of Ukraine. Putin has made it clear he has no interest whatsoever in conquering Ukraine and making it part of Russia.

Since the decision was made in April 2008 to make Ukraine a part of NATO, Putin and his advisers have been saying repeatedly that making Ukraine a western bulwark on Russia's border by bringing it into Nato, bringing it into EU, and making it a liberal democracy that was pro-American was categorically unacceptable to Moscow. They have said it many, many times and the Americans can choose not to believe it but it is a fact in my opinion and it is the principal reason we now have this war.

Kim Way: In many of the cases, the "great powers" are doing things out of strategic reasons rather than moral reasons even though, at times, those two could correlate with one another. Now, in this case what do you think are the actions being taken? Are they strategic or are they moral? Are they strategic and moral? What is your judgment?

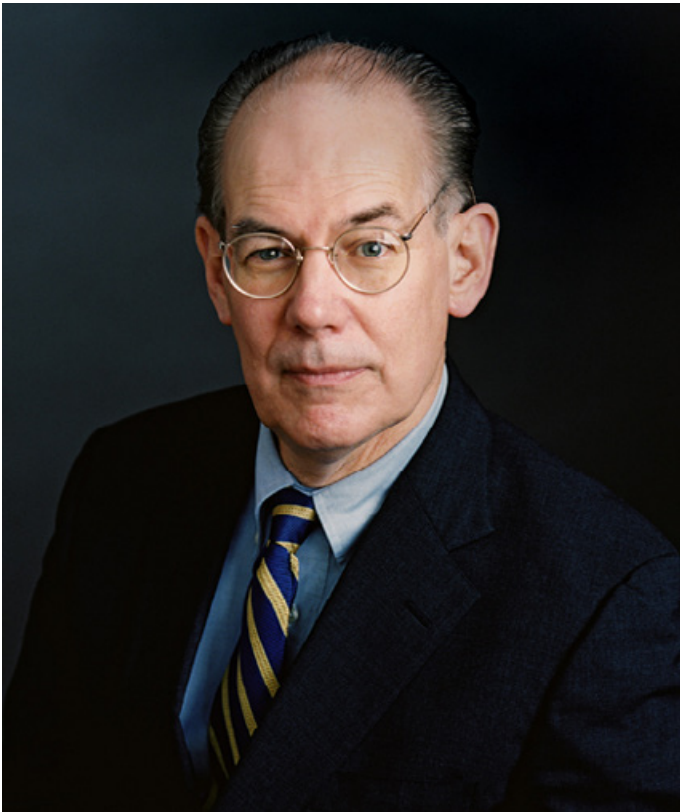
John Mearsheimer: I think from the Russian point of view, this is a strategic threat. It has nothing to do with morality. The Russians view Ukraine becoming a part of NATO as an existential threat. This is why going back to April 2008, Putin drew a line in the sand. He said this is not going to happen. This is a threat to our survival and everything that has happened since then fits that basic paradigm, so this is not an issue of morality from the Russian point of view.

From the American point of view, it's more complicated. The Americans believe, in typical liberal fashion, that Ukraine has the right to choose what foreign policy it wants to pursue and I would emphasize that word "right." Anytime you hear the word "right" you're talking about a liberal foreign policy and going back to April 2008, NATO believed, and in particular the United States be-

lieved, that any country that wants to become part of NATO has the right to do that. So we view our policy towards Ukraine in ideological or moral terms. Now, also in strategic terms, the United States now sees this as a great power competition with Russia as well as a competition with ideological or moral overtones.

Kim Way: Now does this mean anyone is more morally entitled to the ways that they are doing right now? Given your argument, does it really make a difference?

John Mearsheimer: What matters is what's going on here strategically. I actually think what we're facing now is a very dangerous situation. I think that Putin is deeply committed to winning in Ukraine. Putin feels that he cannot lose again. As I said to you before, he views this as an existential threat and by that he means that it is a threat to the survival of the well-being of Russia. He thinks that the idea of NATO on Russia's door-

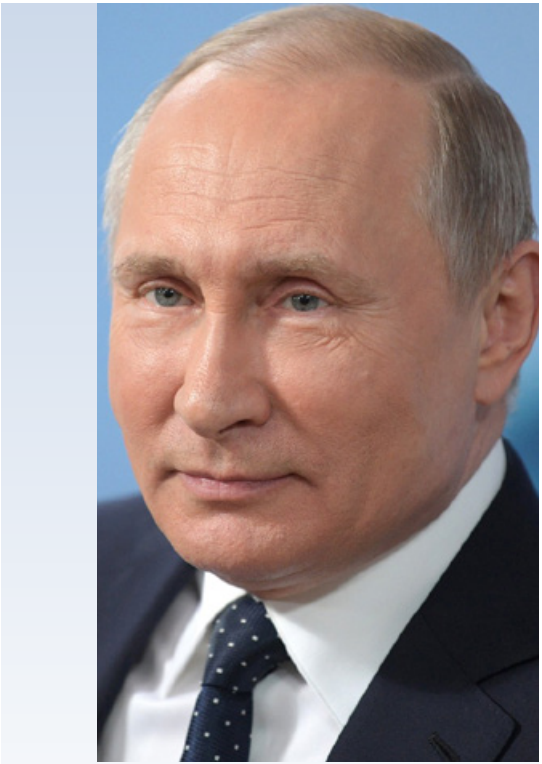


John Mearsheimer – Rebel with a cause

step in Ukraine presents a military and political threat that is simply unacceptable so I think in this case there's not much question what he means when he says it's an existential threat.

Now I will point out to you that there are a good number of people in the West who say that it's not an existential threat, that NATO's presence in Ukraine does not threaten Russia's survival. My response to them is I don't care what they think. The only thing that matters is what Vladimir Putin thinks, and if Putin and his lieutenants think it's an existential threat, we ought to be very careful in dealing with him.

Kim Way: Well, that seems to be pretty much from a great power perspective but what people could also argue is, "What about the Ukrainians?". They



Vladimir Putin, Russian President

can have their choices in whether they want to join the NATO or not, they want to join the EU or not, they want to have a government that's closer to Moscow or closer to Washington or closer not to anyone, so how do you see your argument in that sense?

John Mearsheimer: Well, I fully understand why the Ukrainians want to join the West. I understand why they want to be part of NATO, but the fact is the Russians find that unacceptable and the Russians are much more powerful than the Ukrainians, and they will go to great lengths to prevent that from happening, and if Ukraine were smart, it would not have pursued NATO membership.

I would note to you, by the way, if you look at the western hemisphere, the United States has a Monroe Doctrine. The United States does not believe that countries in the western hemisphere have a right to have their own foreign policy. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, when I was young, we did not believe that Cuba had the right to invite the Soviets to put missiles



President Joseph Biden

in Cuba. The same basic principle that the United States applies in the western hemisphere is the one that the Russians are applying vis-à-vis Ukraine.

Kim Way: So you think the Russians now are similar to the Americans during the Cuban Missile Crisis—the way of thinking?

John Mearsheimer: Absolutely, and by the way, if China were to form a military alliance with Canada and Mexico, and China were to put military forces in Toronto and Mexico City, do you think the United States would be happy about that? Do you think the United States would let that happen? Of course the United States wouldn't let that happen for the same reason that Vladimir Putin is not letting Ukraine become part of NATO.

Kim Way: Well, when we talk about the Monroe Doctrine, that has been practiced for decades. Later, there's also what you call the Bush Doctrine mainly to establish liberal democracies particularly in the greater Middle East so that things will change in that region and beyond. Now, you also see faults in that kind of thinking. How do you see the evolution of thinking from the Monroe Doctrine to the Bush Doctrine and to where we are today in terms of how the U.S. is looking at the world, and with what kind of principle and guiding theories it is facing the world?

John Mearsheimer: Well, there's a fundamental difference between the Mon-

roe Doctrine and the Bush Doctrine. The Monroe Doctrine was strategic in nature and it had to do with keeping distant great powers out of the western hemisphere. The Bush Doctrine was, as you described it, a doctrine that was designed to get the United States to run around the world promoting democracy and it mainly focused on the Middle East, but as everyone in Beijing knows and everyone in Moscow knows, the United States was also interested in regime change in China and in Russia. During the unipolar moment, the United States was deeply committed to a global version of the Bush Doctrine, and countries like China, like Russia, and countries in the Middle East greatly resented that because they thought it was a violation of their sovereignty.

Now, you ask where are we today. The fact is that we've left the unipolar moment behind. There are two new great powers in the system: China, which is effectively a pure competitor of the United States, and Russia. So what's happened is that great power politics has taken over and the United States has actually lost its interest in regime change. We're not interested in regime change with regard to China anymore. What we're interested in is containing China. This is another way of saying great power politics has replaced the Bush Doctrine.



Kim Way: Now, professor, many would say they fundamentally disagree with you about the great power politics because it is emphasizing the desire and also ambition of great powers and mainly great powers while ignoring what many perceive as equal rights.

John Mearsheimer: Well, I think there's no doubt about it that weaker countries are going to make the argument that you just made, but the great powers, the most powerful countries on the planet, are not interested in hearing those arguments. The great powers, states that have a lot of military and economic might, are going to do everything they can to make themselves as powerful as possible. So it's much better to be really powerful relative to other countries in the system because that's the best way to survive. This is a basic notion that's fully understood by countries like the United States and China.

Kim Way: Professor, one might disagree with you coming out of China by listening to the official tongues of China. For example, you talk about the power that great power nations have but many would wonder where does that power come from. Does that power come from exerting your own thinking and your own path unto the others by providing protection to the others or is it coming from the fact that you are representing the weaker countries, the developing countries, emerging economies and representing the thought that everyone should be equal and therefore you are being empowered by others to be able to be powerful in front of the world? Those are two very different roles. It seems that you are always suggesting one could only have the opportunity to use the very first choice which is to exert your own power onto the others by also protecting the others. Well the latter is being ignored. Professor, tell us more about what you exactly are thinking.

John Mearsheimer: What I think you're saying, quite correctly, is that I have a zero-sum game view of power. In other words, if I'm China, I want to have more power than the United States. I want to have more power than any other country on the planet, and if any country begins to get very powerful, that challenges my position in the system, so I think you correctly described me as having what one might call a zero-sum game view of international politics.

One other point. I believe that the two building blocks of power that would matter the most are population size and wealth, and the reason that China is such a formidable country and may even

eventually overtake the United States is that number one, China has many more people than the United States, and number two, it has become an incredibly powerful country economically.

Kim Way: Before we bring in China, this is a very fundamental question that you are using, the zero sum. I have some problem with that because whether the West criticism of Russia now in a war against Ukraine or the United States over the past decades, whether it's Monroe Doctrine or the Bush Doctrine are mainly exercising the great power it has toward weaker countries so that one could be able to be satisfied with whatever the country itself wants. So that is the big problem that's leading to where we are today—the war that is happening right now. At least that's the criticism coming out of the western capitals.

John Mearsheimer: Look, I believe firmly that the United States, after the cold war ended, was much more powerful than Russia. Remember the Soviet Union collapses in December 1991, and you get this very weak country called Russia as a remnant state. The United States, because it is much more powerful than Russia takes advantage of Russia. There's no question about that. The United States pushed too far when it decided to bring Ukraine into NATO and it all blew up in our face, but if there's a lesson that comes out of this for China and for Russia, it's that you want to make sure you are very powerful so that the United States can't push you around.

Kim Way: So you are saying that how the world is run is mainly by the rules of the jungle, as you said the zero-sum game, and everything is being decided by great powers while those who are not being considered as "great powers" will only have to abide by what the great powers set for them. Is that what you're trying to say?

John Mearsheimer: I think that's basically what I'm saying.



John Mearsheimer: Look, there's no question that when World War II ended, there were many people who thought that we could create a peaceful world for the foreseeable future, but I will re-mind you that what happened is we had a cold war between the United States and the Soviet Union that lasted from rough-ly 1947 to 1989. It was a brutal conflict. It was run according to the laws of the jungle. That's what the cold war was all about.

Kim Way: John Mearsheimer. Thank you so much professor for providing your perspective.

John Mearsheimer: Thank you for having me on the show. It was good to be back again.

*A YouTube video
interview of the World
Insight.*

Kim Way: So is this what you call real-ism?

John Mearsheimer: Yes this is realism, and as you know, the name of my famous book is The Tragedy of Great Power Pol-itics. I believe this is a tragic situation. I believe it's inevitable but it's also tragic, and I think the best way to survive in this dog-eat-dog world is to be very power-ful.

Kim Way: So professor, let me ask you a little bit further about how you see the world after World War II. Is it under the rules of the jungle and the parent dream belief of everyone is equal? If that is the case, it's also challenging the very fundamental belief at least the United States has been talking about when it comes to the establishment of the Unit-ed States of America as well that every-one should be equal. So professor, tell me more about that.

