

John Mearsheimer: U.S. Grand Strategy in a New World Order

Prof. John Mearsheimer is the R. Wendell Harrison Distinguished Service Professor in the Political Science Department at the University of Chicago Follow Prof. Glenn Diesen: Substack: <https://glennDiesen.substack.com/> X/Twitter: https://x.com/Glenn_Diesen Patreon: <https://www.patreon.com/glennDiesen> Buy merchandise: <https://diesen-shop.fourthwall.com/en-nok> Support the research by Prof. Glenn Diesen: PayPal: <https://www.paypal.com/paypalme/glennDiesen> Buy me a Coffee: buymeacoffee.com/gdiesen Go Fund Me: <https://gofund.me/09ea012f> Books by Prof. Glenn Diesen: <https://www.amazon.com/stores/author/B09FPQ4MDL>

#Glenn

Welcome back, everyone. Today we are joined by John Mearsheimer, a professor at the University of Chicago, to discuss grand strategy, offensive realism, and try to link this to events in the world. So thank you very much for coming back on the program.

#John Mearsheimer

As always, Glenn, I'm glad to be here.

#Glenn

So, you know, everyone now seems to recognize that, well, we live in somewhat historical times. That is, the international distribution of power, it's shifted from the West to the East very fast, which is quite remarkable for having occurred during peacetime. Now we see that the unipolar moment is over. And even on a greater timeframe, we can argue that a period of 500 years has come to an end since the European maritime powers reconnected the world in the early 19th—sorry, the early 16th century—and, yeah, to different degrees, organized the world under its administration ever since. Now, the response in the West, and I would say especially Europe, to these massive ongoing shifts in the international distribution of power, they tend to be very, well, they tend to be these narrow knee-jerk reactions.

They don't really reflect much upon how the world has changed, how our position in the world is changing. And they don't really take a step back and assess what are our options and what should our objectives be to maximize security, prosperity. So I guess, in short, there's an absence of strategic thinking at a time when we need it more than ever before. So what I really want to discuss

with you today, as I said first, was if we take a few steps back and we begin with grand strategy, I guess I want to ask you: what is grand strategy, and what do you see being the main challenges, I guess, in terms of aligning potentially unlimited aspirations with limited means?

#John Mearsheimer

Okay, let me define for you what I mean by grand strategy, because, as you know well, Glenn, you can define grand strategy in different ways. And there's no such thing as a correct definition. Definitions are just definitions, and you can define grand strategy any way you want. My view is that the best definitions are those that are most useful for helping you make sense of the world. So, in other words, you could define the term great power to include Iran, and the question you have to ask yourself is whether you think that makes sense. And I don't think it does. That's not to underestimate the power that Iran has, but it's not a great power.

So I would want to have a definition of great power that I thought included countries like the United States, China, and Russia, but excluded countries like Iran. But the basic point I just want to make clear to the viewers is that there's no such thing as an approved solution as to what the definition of grand strategy is. Now, when the Vietnam War ended in 1975, which is when I was entering graduate school, there was all of a sudden a huge interest in the subject of grand strategy. It had not been a subject that was talked about much before in academia up until the mid-1970s. And then a whole cottage industry grew around that subject.

So in a very important way, I was present at the creation. And we came up with what I thought was a quite useful definition of what grand strategy was at the time. And I still think it's a quite useful definition, especially if you think about how great powers act. And what I'll do is I'll just quickly lay out my definition of grand strategy. And to make it as clear as possible, I'll contrast it with how I would define foreign policy. In other words, I distinguish between grand strategy and foreign policy. Now, my definition of grand strategy is that it's all about balancing a state's most important foreign policy goals.

To put that in slightly different terms, it's vital interests with the military means it has available to achieve those goals. So, in other words, you have to first define what are the most important foreign policy goals, right? The vital interests. And then you have to think about what military means you have to protect those goals. And foreign policy, for me, doesn't discriminate among your goals. You can have lots of different foreign policy goals. What I'm saying is that grand strategy is all about looking for a state's vital interests. Now, what exactly do I mean by that? There, the question is: what areas of the world are worth fighting and dying for? Where are you willing to expend blood and iron?

Those are the vital interests. And to get way ahead of myself, in the case of the United States, the vital interests outside of the Western Hemisphere have historically been Europe, East Asia, and the Persian Gulf. Those were the three areas where almost everybody agreed we should be willing to

expend blood and iron. We should treat them as vital interests. But foreign policy deals with interests all over the world. Now, with regard to the military means, you have to make all sorts of choices about what kind of means that you want to deal with when you're protecting those vital interests. And diplomacy is another means, right? Sanctions is another means. But what people of my persuasion argued back in the day, and most of us still do, is that you want to look at the kind of military forces that you would build to protect your vital interests.

And to put a little more meat on the bone, you have to choose between land power, air power, and sea power. And then you have to think about how much you're going to rely on nuclear weapons versus conventional weapons, or, to put it in slightly different terms, how much you're going to rely on nuclear deterrence versus conventional deterrence. So what I'm saying, Glenn, is for me, grand strategy is all about figuring out what a state's vital interests are. What are the most important areas of the world? Those areas of the world where you're willing to fight and die. And then what kind of military forces do you build to defend your interests in those areas? Now, there's one question I've left out of this analysis, which I'll just turn to now.

I said you have to identify those areas of the world that are of great importance. The question I left out that you want to throw in is: what are the threats to those areas or threats to those interests? Because the particular nature of the threat determines what kinds of military forces that you build. So when you boil this all down, there are three big questions you ask if you're doing grand strategy: What are your vital interests? What are the threats to those vital interests? And then what kind of forces do you build to protect your interests around the world? So that's the basic framework here that a number of people who I hung around with starting in the mid-1970s employed as a definition of grand strategy.

And again, it's not an approved solution, but I think it's a very useful definition for thinking about the subject. And again, as I tried to make clear, it's different than asking the question, what is a state's foreign policy? Because if you're talking about a state's foreign policy, you're talking about all of its goals, all of its interests, not just its vital interests. And you're talking about all of the instruments that it has available to it, not just the military instrument, which I'm focusing on when I talk about grand strategy: diplomacy, sanctions, so forth and so on. So I hope that's sort of a good template of how I think about the general subject. And then, if you want, I can tell you how I think it applies to the United States.

#Glenn

Yeah, well, that was actually my next question because, again, the United States, it has to start to make more priorities, especially, again, as the distribution of power shifts. It has to focus on and prioritize some things above others. Or, to use your words, what are the priorities for the United States in terms of what it's willing to fight and die for? What is worth fighting and dying for? I mean, is it security, or is it its position, its power in the world? Well, at the moment, the U.S. does face, well, we can say challenges, that is, to its power at least, from China, Russia. Of course, the Middle

East is also seemingly being reorganized. How do you see the challenge for the United States in terms of prioritizing what to focus on? And there will always be trade-offs, given that there's limited resources. And again, as you said, the need is to prioritize as we come to everything. So not necessarily what the U.S. should do, but what are the dilemmas it's facing here?

#John Mearsheimer

Okay, let me tell you what I think are the four areas of the world that the United States really cared about, and how to think about those areas. And then we could talk a little bit about the threats to those areas. I think there is no question that the most important area of the world for any great power is its backyard, its neighborhood, or the surrounding area. And all of this is a way of saying that, in the American case, the Western Hemisphere is the most important area of the world. There's just no question about that. It is our backyard. Nevertheless, because the United States is a regional hegemon in the Western Hemisphere, it's usually taken for granted that the United States considers the Western Hemisphere its most important area, its most vital interest. So, in other words, people don't talk much about that.

And what people do talk about are the areas outside of the world that the United States should care about because that's where its vital interests are located. And in this case, historically, the two most important areas have been Europe and East Asia. And the reason is that's where the other great powers are. And the United States has always cared about those areas where there are other great powers, because smaller powers really can't challenge the United States in any meaningful way. It's just the other great powers. And if you look at Europe, of course, that's where you saw countries like Napoleonic France, Imperial Germany, Nazi Germany. It's where the heart of the Soviet threat was located. It was in Eastern Europe. And then, of course, East Asia mattered greatly because of Japan mainly.

And today it matters greatly because of China mainly. And it's very important to understand, Glenn, that for the United States, over the course of its history, going back to when it got its independence in 1783, and I would say ramping forward to about 2017, again, for almost all of America's history, Europe was the number one area outside of the Western Hemisphere. And East Asia was always number two. And the reason is because the great powers in Europe were more powerful than the great power in East Asia, which was Japan. And you remember that even though the Japanese attacked us at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, we had a Europe-first policy. And the reason that we had a Europe-first policy was because Nazi Germany was a greater threat to the United States than Imperial Japan was, because Nazi Germany was much more powerful.

After 2017, for the first time in our history, the most important area for the United States outside of the Western Hemisphere is East Asia because China is by far the most powerful great power on the planet besides the United States. The Russians, as you know, are the other great power. The Russians, the Chinese, the Americans—those are the three great powers. But the Russians are the weakest of the three great powers. China is really a peer competitor of the United States in almost

every sense of that term. So, for the first time in American history, East Asia has become the most important area, and Europe is of secondary importance. Now, the third area that I haven't talked about is the Persian Gulf.

This is not the whole Middle East, just the Persian Gulf. And the Persian Gulf has been a very important area to the United States for most of the 20th century and up till today, because that's where the oil is. And oil is such an important resource for making the international economy work. So the United States has always cared greatly about who controls the oil in the Middle East, or let me put it differently, who controls the oil in the Persian Gulf. So that's why, when we talk about grand strategy, and my colleagues and I have talked about grand strategy in the past, we've said there are four areas of the world that matter.

First of all, the Western Hemisphere; second, Europe; third, East Asia; and then the Persian Gulf. Now, the big debate that has always taken place in the realm of grand strategy was, how do you think about the developing world, or the rest of the world? In other words, do you compete in areas where there are no great powers or there is no oil? For example, does Africa matter to the United States in terms of its basic vital interests? And the answer that someone like me would make is no. What about an area like Southwest Asia, India, Pakistan—that region of the world during the Cold War? Was that an area worth fighting for? Was it strategically important?

And the answer was no. And I would argue the answer is still no today. It's hard for me to imagine the United States expending blood and iron in Southwest Asia. Okay. Now, the best example to illustrate this, Glenn, is the Vietnam War, and to compare how Americans thought during the Vietnam War from a grand strategic point of view with how they think today about Southeast Asia. Southeast Asia was where, or is where, Vietnam is located. And during the Vietnam War, basically all of the realists argued that it was remarkably foolish for the United States to fight in Southeast Asia, to fight in Vietnam. It made no strategic sense at all.

And as you know, virtually all of the realists of the day, including people like Ken Waltz, Hans Morgenthau, George Kennan, just to name a few, were adamantly opposed to the Vietnam War because it was in Southeast Asia, and the Soviet Union was not physically located in Southeast Asia. In fact, the Soviet Union was located in Northeast Asia. So when the United States fought the Korean War in Northeast Asia, which is right next door to the Soviet Union, everybody understood that Korea was a strategically important area to the world, and it made strategic sense for the United States to contain the Soviet Union in Northeast Asia. But that logic did not apply in Southeast Asia, because Southeast Asia was not considered to be a vital interest by most realists or students of grand strategy.

However, if you look at Southeast Asia today, because of the rise of China and the fact that China is the state that the United States cares the most about today in East Asia, and it's not the Soviet Union like it was during the Cold War, you now have a situation where the United States considers all of East Asia a vital threat—excuse me, a vital interest—and considers China and Chinese

hegemony in East Asia as a threat to American national interests. So you can see that you have to think long and hard about what areas of the world you consider to be vital interests. Then you have to think about what the threats are to those interests. And then you have to think about what kind of military forces to build to deal with those threats.

#Glenn

Well, it seems that historically, if you want a successful grand strategy, you need, I guess, strong political consensus at home because everyone kind of has to agree, so it's consistent. Often this requires slow developments in the world so politicians can adjust, and, of course, political cohesion as well. We kind of see the opposite happening now, though. The world is spinning very fast, and also political cohesion at home is fragmenting, well, not just in the U.S., Europe as well. But as a result, how can the U.S. form a clear grand strategy, a successful one? Because you would think all of this is kind of up in the air. So should the U.S. prioritize Europe? You know, for some, they would say, well, that's traditionally what we've done.

They can still be a force amplifier. Others are saying, no, they're holding us back. They're costing a lot of resources, and it comes with further costs by pushing the Russians to the Chinese. They're bogging us down there when we should pivot to Asia. So all of these different options, they haven't really been settled, it seems, because, again, the world is changing fast. And, again, the political polarization isn't helping either. So, in other words, the U.S., what seems to be grand strategy, could shift in an election if Trump hands power over to the Democrats, for example. So how—to what extent is this a challenge, or do you see eventually the distribution of power imposing grand strategy on the politicians? Well, a couple of points.

#John Mearsheimer

One is there are a variety of grand strategies that you can choose among, which we've not talked about. And there's no such thing as a final agreement on what American grand strategy should be. And to illustrate this, one of the four grand strategies that the United States can choose among is isolationism. And isolationism says that there is no area of the world outside of the United States where it's worth fighting and dying. It's very important to understand that. And in the run-up to World War II, the United States was a thoroughly isolationist country. Franklin D. Roosevelt could not move the United States away from isolationism in any meaningful way until Pearl Harbor happened on December 7th, 1941. And it's because all sorts of Americans thought that what happens in Europe is of no strategic importance to the United States.

I want to contrast this with foreign policy. This is not to say that isolationists believed that the United States didn't have interests in Europe, or it didn't have interests in East Asia, where Imperial Japan was on a rampage. It did have interests, but those interests were not vital interests. And therefore, most Americans believed it was not worth expending blood and iron to fight against Nazi Germany or Imperial Japan. Just want to think about that. You want to remember that the United States is

separated from the rest of the world by two giant moats. And it's very hard for any country in Europe or East Asia to get at the United States.

Launching an amphibious operation across the Pacific Ocean or across the Atlantic Ocean is not in the cards. And when you marry that to the fact that the United States has nuclear weapons today, you can make a very powerful case for isolationism. Now, this has great relevance for the rise of China, because the question from a grand strategic point of view is, how do you think about the possibility that China will dominate East Asia the way the United States dominates the Western Hemisphere? As you know, Glenn, there are many of our friends who believe that the United States should not contest China in East Asia. It should not try to contain China.

If China becomes a regional hegemon, that's no big deal. How you think about the China threat is all about grand strategy. It's all about the question of whether you think China dominating East Asia is a threat to America's vital interests. And those people who argue that it's not basically reflect the isolationist view of grand strategy. Now, there's another whole group of people, and I'm included in that camp, who believe it's important that the United States not allow China to dominate East Asia the way the United States dominates the Western Hemisphere. The United States, in my story, does not want a rival regional hegemon. But that's not a settled issue.

It's just very important to understand that. And all this is to say that what is the proper grand strategy is really never settled once and for all. And let me give you one more example to highlight this point that will be dear to your heart as a European. When the Cold War ended, the Soviet Union pulled out of Eastern Europe, the Warsaw Pact dissolved, and then the Soviet Union itself broke apart. The question that immediately came to the fore is, what should the United States do with NATO? What should happen to the American military presence in Europe? Now, there were really two schools of thought on this. Put isolationism aside; that was not an issue at the time. There were two schools of thought.

One school of thought is commonly called offshore balancing, and it's a view that I share, okay? The offshore balancing grand strategy says that the United States should only keep troops in Europe if there is a country that threatens to dominate all of Europe, to become a regional hegemon, that the local great powers cannot contain. In other words, the United States had to stay in Europe after World War II because the Soviet Union was a threat to dominate all of Europe. And there were no Western European countries in the late '40s, early '50s who could come together to contain the Soviet Union. So the United States had to come onshore and balance or contain the Soviet Union.

But then the Soviet Union went away. So my view was the United States should pull out of Europe. There's no threat to our vital interests in my story. Now, most of my fellow students of grand strategy argued differently. Their strategy was called selective engagement. They believed Europe is important, just like I do. But they believed that the United States should remain in Europe to serve as a pacifier. The argument here among the selective engagers is that it's in America's vital interest to keep the peace in Europe. And of course, this was an argument that resonated with the Soviet

Union and, later on, with Russian leaders, because they understood that the Americans did serve as a pacifier.

So this is the selective engagement grand strategy. I was not in favor of the selective engagement grand strategy. I was interested in pulling the Americans out of Europe, bringing them back home, spending less money on defense, and had an interest in spending more money on the American public. So you can see how different selective engagement and offshore balancing are when it comes to dealing with Europe. And this all gets back to the question of what you think America's vital interests are and what you think the threats to those vital interests are. The selective engagement people believe peace in Europe is a vital interest. The offshore balancers like me.

I mean, I'm not saying that I'm interested in seeing war break out in Europe, but peace in Europe is not a vital interest to the United States, in my opinion. What's a vital interest to the United States, in my opinion, is to make sure that no country, be it the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, Imperial Germany, or Napoleonic France, dominates all of Europe the way we dominate the Western Hemisphere. So you get a flavor for, you get a feel for the different ways that people think about grand strategy. And my final point—I apologize for being long-winded here—is, you know, we've talked about isolationism, we've talked about offshore balancing, and we've talked about selective engagement. The fourth grand strategy is global hegemony.

And that's a grand strategy that says every area of the world matters to the United States. I mean, just think about the term global hegemony. Every area of the world matters to the United States. We don't prioritize, and we see threats everywhere, and we build military forces to deal with every potential threat that might be out there. And of course, that's the polar opposite of isolationism. And it's a strategy that I have long argued is deeply flawed. And that's why I favor offshore balancing. But as I said to you before, I think since the Cold War ended, the selective engagers have provided, by and large, the most popular grand strategy among the people in my crowd.

#Glenn

Well, I take your point, though, that, as you said, with grand strategy, you have to prioritize and recognize dilemmas. So, of course, it's fine and well and dandy to be a pacifier in Europe. But if one chooses to do this, this comes at an expense. That is, there's fewer resources at home to rebuild or strengthen the U.S. Also, the pivot to Asia will be less feasible. So, yeah, it is how you see the threats, the priorities to deal with this. But let me just ask about—you mentioned that you do think that the U.S. should contest China's attempt to be a regional hegemon. Indeed, this is also, as you said, built into your theory on offensive realism, arguing that states are power maximizers. So if they can achieve hegemony for security, then they will go for it. I'm sorry for oversimplifying the theory.

#John Mearsheimer

I think that's accurate.

#Glenn

Yeah, but I was wondering if it could be in the benefit of the United States to have some kind of Chinese hegemony in the East. That is, you know, some would argue that the fall of the Soviet Union, that hegemony had a huge cost for the United States. For example, your colleague and friend Stephen Walt, he was making—I forgot which book it was—but he wrote that the main problem for the U.S. was that after the Cold War, it was essentially, I think he used to say, like a 500-pound gorilla who has no constraints on itself. And the problem here would then be it would punch in every direction. It would exhaust its resources and make a lot of enemies. And I'm thinking... there is some point to this, though.

Without a balance, that is, to be a hegemon, it can also be a curse. That is, if the U.S. can do anything, it means it can be everywhere. It doesn't have to do these priorities. It doesn't have to have that much strategic thinking. It can make a lot of mistakes and absorb the costs. It has incentive to embrace ideologies of being a benign hegemon, that is also one that has to intervene anywhere to save other peoples. It's easy to have ideologies of civilizing missions or humanitarian interventionism. You have the military option always available to transform the world, which would then give rise to a class of hawks, which would argue for war as the solution to everything.

You can accept, you know... If the whole periphery has to be managed, you would see the core being drained, diplomacy would begin to falter, lack of fiscal discipline, moral compass would fall apart. I'm just thinking... Overall, it would exhaust the resources and incentivize collective balancing by the other powers, although not great powers in a unipolar system. But wouldn't it be an argument that the hegemon itself has not been great for the United States? Again, as realists suggest, if states do not constrain themselves and there's a problem with this, wouldn't it be in the U. S. interest to be constrained? If the whole world is at the feet of the United States, it's the only great superpower in the world, would you see a lot of problems for the United States? It could invite disaster, it seems.

#John Mearsheimer

I know exactly what you're saying, but let's be clear here. The Soviet Union was not a hegemon. The United States stayed in Europe after World War II ended for the purposes of containing the Soviet Union. And of course, the Soviet Union was contained. It never dominated all of Europe. It was not a regional hegemon. And my argument is, you don't want China to be a regional hegemon. My argument is, the best situation for the United States is to be the only regional hegemon on the planet. Now, I think the issue that Steve Walt raised, and you're raising, which is what I don't disagree with, is a somewhat different issue. And that is that the United States needed some rival great powers, not a rival regional hegemon, but it needed a rival great power like the Soviet Union, or like China and Russia today, to prevent it from spinning out of control.

And I think the key point here is that once the Soviet Union breaks apart, the Cold War ends, the Soviet Union breaks apart, and you have this badly weakened Russian state replacing the Soviet Union. And that Russian state cannot be considered a great power. We're in the unipolar moment, and there's no one, or hardly anyone, to check the United States. And the United States doesn't have to prioritize. And this is why you can make a very good case that the grand strategy that the United States adopts once it's the unipole is global hegemony, or what people like us sometimes call liberal hegemony. And we felt there were hardly any checks and balances on us.

And you want to remember that in the early 1990s, China was nowhere near as powerful as it is today. Nobody considered China a great power in 1992, and the Soviet Union was gone by December 1991. So the United States was Godzilla. And I often think of Lord Acton's very famous phrase that—what is it about absolute power? You remember that phrase, Glenn? Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. I think it was something to that effect. But we had absolute power, and we were, you know, not in a position where we thought we had to prioritize, and we thought we could run the globe and got into all sorts of trouble. So I don't disagree with the basic point that Steve, even you, were making.

#Glenn

Well, if we would, I guess, well, take off our American shoes and jump into the Russian ones, how would you assess their, I guess, options, strategic options? Because I always thought that, you know, after the Cold War, the best approach for them would be to integrate with the Western countries, that is, for economic security issues. But of course, you know, this was not forthcoming. They weakened, and then they saw all these strategies, or all these plans and deals for pan-European security architecture, went out the window. And the West said, well, we're going to go with collective hegemony instead. That is, you know, to cement the unipolar moment. And so you saw then manifest itself in NATO expansion. They start to see, you know, this essentially restarting the logic of the Cold War.

Everything becomes zero-sum bloc politics again. And, of course, as the CIA director, William Burns, wrote, Ukraine was the reddest of red lines. And in 2014, this huge shift happened. They decided, okay, this is the time where we essentially stand our ground. We will have to take back Crimea. And they also began then arguing, well, we can't connect our developing economy anymore with the West. Let's reorient it all to the East, with China and others, and this is the only path to a multipolar world. But now, of course, during the war, what are the strategic options for Russia now? What is it that they can do? Well, not should do necessarily, but what is it that they can do? Or how do you read their grand strategy altogether, not just policies?

#John Mearsheimer

I think that when the Cold War ended, what the Russians wanted to do was create some sort of security architecture in Europe that they were firmly integrated into, and it would produce a stable order on the continent. I don't think, as I tried to make clear before, that the Russians saw the United States as an adversary. The Soviets before them and the Russians were interested in keeping the United States in Europe and keeping NATO intact. The Russians understood that the Americans served as a pacifier in Europe. And that was especially important vis-à-vis the German problem, because when the Cold War ends, of course, Germany is reunited, and the Russians care about that. But it's much less of a problem if the Americans are there.

And the Americans in the 1990s—it's hard to believe this today—but in the 1990s, the Americans didn't view Russia as a meaningful threat. It wasn't a meaningful threat. And as I often say, NATO expansion in the 1990s was not aimed at containing Russia. This was the era of global hegemony, or the era of liberal hegemony. And the United States was interested in spreading NATO, the European Union, and other institutions eastward. We were interested in promoting democracy through the color revolutions in Eastern Europe. And I don't think it was directed at Russia. I think it was mainly us trying to spread the order that existed in Western Europe during the Cold War into Eastern Europe. We foolishly didn't want to bring the Russians into that order.

And I think that the reason we didn't want to bring the Russians in is we understood that Russia, although it was no longer a great power, was still quite a powerful country and would stand up to us if we tried to push it around inside those institutions that we dominated. For example, there was no way the United States was ever going to let Russia into NATO, not because they were worried about the Russian threat, but because Russia was a reasonably powerful country that would not be easily pushed around by the United States. And the United States likes to run institutions in which it can push other countries around. That's what we always liked about the Europeans: the Germans, the Norwegians—not the French so much—but the British.

They did what we told them to do for the most part. That wouldn't be the case with the Russians. So we didn't want the Russians in NATO. But anyway, it all blew up in our face, as you well know. Now we're in a situation where the United States and Russia are basically mortal enemies, and the United States and Europe—excuse me, the Russians and the Europeans—are basically mortal enemies. So the question is, what do the Russians do at this point in time? It's quite simple. They go to great lengths to have good relations with China, and they go to great lengths to have good relations with North Korea and with Iran.

Those are the four countries that are at the top of the American hit list: China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea. And unsurprisingly, the Russians are working with all three of those other countries. We see all sorts of evidence that there are North Korean troops in Russia today that may be involved in an offensive in the northern part of Ukraine. Who knows for sure, but who have fought in Ukraine

on the Russian side before. So this is hardly surprising. And there's all sorts of evidence that the Russians and the Chinese are helping the Iranians. So I think at this point in time, from a Russian point of view, countering the United States is of enormous importance.

And then furthermore, what they have to do, and they're trying to do, is cause trouble inside of Europe itself. Right. The Russians view the Europeans as an enemy, and they want to do everything they can to sow dissension in Europe and cause trouble in Europe moving forward so that Europe can't cause them trouble. And then finally, I think they will go to great lengths to turn Ukraine into a dysfunctional rump state that can't threaten them. But I think, for the moment, those are the principal goals—not the only goals, but the principal goals—that Russia has.

#Glenn

Yeah, about consensus. In the '90s, when there were some discussions around NATO or Russia joining NATO, I remember the American ambassador to NATO, he made the point that NATO was about a consensus culture. That's the—you know, the Europeans falling in line. It was referred to as a consensus culture, and it would be difficult to get Russia into this. I guess, yeah, the size, the more independent policymaking as its own center of power kind of prevented this. But, well, for the Russians, they did, you know, in the '90s, they were hoping that the OSCE would be this inclusive security architecture, all built on the Charter of Paris for a New Europe.

When that was, you know, essentially, well, hollowed out by NATO expansion, first Yeltsin and then Putin suggested, you know, we can join NATO. That didn't work. After 9/11, we know that Putin, he wanted to be the first one to call Bush and say, you know, let's find a way of cooperating, essentially putting us in the same camp. It didn't prevent another round of NATO expansion. In 2008, under Medvedev, they proposed this new European security architecture. It was kind of brushed away. In 2010, they wanted the EU-Russian Union. Also, the Europeans threw cold water on it. And by 2014, it was kind of the breaking point, though.

This is when, by pulling in Ukraine, that signaled very clearly that all the people in Russia who still had some dreams of a gradual integration with the West, they realized that this was the ultimate test. This is the West deciding that Russia should be a frontline state, not a bridge, by essentially putting a new dividing line there. So, you know, given that the Russians are now in this position that they see it's not possible to make peace anymore with the West, they're effectively fighting a war. It's in their interest to cause some disruption and problems in Europe and will more or less destroy Ukraine, as you pointed out.

What can the Europeans do with this, though? I mean, in Europe, they're watching the Americans, how they see the world, how they have to adjust. They see the position the Russians have, that is, the incentives they have, how they should make their priorities. I mean... well, how do you see the European options in this? Because I just, is there a hard—I mean, for me, this, you and I talked about this before, this is often the most confusing part for me. I don't understand quite what they're

doing, because if there's no off-ramp for the Russians, I mean, except winning this war, why escalate the war? I don't understand what they're going for.

#John Mearsheimer

Well, I think at this point they're just locked in, and they're flailing around. It's just hard to see what alternative—it's hard for them to see what alternative strategy they have. The sunk costs here are just enormous. Look, if you go back to the early 1990s, Glenn, when the Clinton administration first started NATO expansion, at that point in time, the Clinton administration and the Europeans had a deep-seated interest in having good relations with the Russians. It's just very important to understand that as NATO expansion proceeded throughout the 1990s—remember, the first tranche of expansion was 1999—at the same time the Clinton administration was pushing NATO expansion, it was going to great lengths to tell Yeltsin it was not a threat to Russia and that the Clinton administration wanted friendly relations with Russia for the foreseeable future.

It's very important to understand that. But what the Clinton people didn't understand, but many people did understand at the time, is that once you set the train in motion for NATO expansion and you effectively opened the door to endless expansion right up to Russia's border, you had created the situation that at some point was going to blow up in your face. People like Kennan said this loudly and clearly. But the Clinton administration and subsequent administrations, as well as the Europeans, did not believe this logic. They thought that you could have your cake and eat it too.

They thought that you could continue to expand NATO on and on and on and still have good relations with the Russians. Of course, as you point out, it really blew up in their face in 2014. But they were so committed to this belief that NATO expansion was a wonderful thing, and that countries like Ukraine had a right to become a member of the alliance, and that there was nothing that could get in the way of that. And therefore, they had to soldier on. So after 2014 happens, there's no backing off. The Europeans and the Americans continue to push forward. Then comes late 2021. This is a couple months before the war breaks out on February 24th, 2022. Right.

The Russians are desperately trying to work out some sort of diplomatic solution so that Ukraine doesn't become part of NATO and we don't have a war. But the Europeans and the Americans simply won't listen. They don't try to accommodate the Russians. It's actually quite amazing. Just go back and watch the footage from the Munich Security Conference in February of 2022, the year the war broke out. It's very clear from watching the American and European leaders that they're not worried about a war breaking out. Right. So what you see here is that the Europeans are so deeply committed to NATO expansion and so deeply opposed to the idea that Russia could prevent that from happening that they're at a point where they almost can't turn around. They just have to keep pushing forward. The sunk costs are just so great.

And that's the reason you see virtually no evidence today, even though the war is going badly for the Ukrainians, and even though the Americans are reducing their commitment to Europe and to the

Ukraine war, there seems to be no ability for the Europeans to sit back and say, things have not gone well, we're in deep trouble, it's time to reflect on this and time to come up with a new policy. You see none of that. It's just more of the same. And the point that I'm making to you, Glenn Diesen, is if you go back to when the decision was made to expand NATO in the early 1990s, or mid-1990s is when the decision was firmly made, it's just been this inexorable march towards more and more expansion, just a profound commitment to this basic precept that we have to have an open-door policy and Ukraine has to be a member, period. End of story.

#Glenn

Yeah, no, it's, yeah, the point of being locked in, it seems about right, because they kind of made not just a commitment, but an ideological commitment as well. So it's very hard to break away from this. But I think also in the '90s, some of the people even recognized that this would alienate Russia. If you listen to people like Madeleine Albright, they did recognize this is going to cause problems with Russia. But if that problem comes in the future, then at least we'll have NATO there. That was the main point. So, in other words, NATO expands, the Russians will become more unhappy and more concerned. However, as NATO expands, the power distribution shifts as well. And this would essentially force the Russians to adjust to new realities. That is essentially the hegemonic piece. If you're not happy, tough luck, but this is the way it's going to have to be.

But I guess one thing that went wrong with it is that, yes, if the European continent would be isolated in the world, but at the periphery, you have this rise of other powers, primarily China, I would say, which gives suddenly... I remember Brzezinski was pointing out that the worst deal we give the Russians is still the best deal on the table, but suddenly they have this offering in the East that is, why not just lean towards the Chinese or the Indians or any country in the East? But, yeah, this just took me to my last question. And I know we're running a bit out of time, so it's a short one, I guess. But given we now see that the U.S. not just challenged China, but the U.S. effectively has been defeated in Iran, at least that's what it looks like today. What does this mean for countries like Russia and China? I mean... How would it work to their advantage, or would it work to their advantage?

#John Mearsheimer

Well, this is a huge question. I mean, not simple to answer. I think one could argue that after the United States is driven out of the Persian Gulf completely, or almost completely, the last thing the United States will want to do is think about fighting another war in the Persian Gulf, and that we will focus laser-like on East Asia, and that this could be bad news for the Chinese. It's very important to understand that China's position in East Asia and Russia's position in the Ukraine war has improved because of the war against Iran. What's happened here is that, you know, we've pulled all sorts of military assets out of East Asia to fight in the Middle East.

And if you look at our Navy, which is really only capable at this point in time, given the limited number of ships we have, of fighting in one theater at a time, and you look at the wear and tear on the U.S. Navy that's taking place in this war in the Persian Gulf, it's quite clear that that is to Iran's advantage—excuse me, to China's advantage. U.S. military forces in East Asia have been greatly weakened. And by the way, this is why the United States is now talking about putting more emphasis on tactical nuclear weapons. The United States is talking about shifting its doctrine. I think the last time we emphasized tactical nuclear weapons was in the 1950s, when the Eisenhower administration was in control.

But here we are talking about emphasizing tactical nuclear weapons because we've so badly damaged our conventional deterrence in places like East Asia. So I think in the short term, this has worked to China's advantage for those reasons. But I think over the long term, it may be the case that the United States, after this debacle in the Persian Gulf comes to an end, will end up focusing much more on East Asia than we have, certainly in recent months. But one key point you want to keep in mind here, Glenn, is that the United States is an incredibly powerful country. And what's happening in the Gulf and what's happening in Ukraine is not going to weaken the United States in terms of its actual power.

We're going to remain as powerful as ever in terms of our capabilities. Where we're in deep trouble is more in terms of our ability to use that power, our ability to project power, our ability to win friends and allies around the world. All that has been badly damaged as a result of this fiasco in Iran and as a result of the Ukraine fiasco as well. There's no question about that. But you don't want to underestimate the fact that the United States remains a remarkably powerful country and will remain a remarkably powerful country moving forward. This is analogous to what happened in Vietnam. The United States lost in Vietnam.

It was a decisive defeat. But 14 years later, we won the Cold War and we emerged as a unipole. We emerged as the most powerful state on the planet. And all of this just illustrates that even though we're going to lose, if we haven't already lost the war in Iran, and I believe the Ukrainians and therefore the Europeans and the Americans are going to lose against the Russians in Europe, this pair of defeats will not weaken the United States in the sense that our power, our raw power, will be reduced. But we will be weakened in terms of our ability to project power and to influence countries diplomatically.

#Glenn

Yeah, I guess that's the problem of viewing security in terms of complete zero-sum, also when it's defined as defeating adversaries. Because, well, if the US now is facing defeat in Iran, as you said, then they would have to lean more into tactical nuclear weapons. You see the same in Europe,

though, when they started to acknowledge that they will likely be defeated in Ukraine and the US is pulling a bit back from the continent. Suddenly you hear the Germans, the Poles, suddenly starting to flirt about nuclear weapons. Same as in Asia.

I mean, if China gets its will that the US pulls out of Japan, for example, the Japanese might lean into nuclear weapons instead. So you should be careful what you wish for. Of course, the same applies for Russia. I think the whole idea that pushing Russia into a corner, escalating and assuming that it only has the option of capitulating—I think not. I think as well, they will then only go up that escalation ladder. And, yeah, I think that's what we're seeing now. But anyways, do you have any final thoughts before we wrap up?

#John Mearsheimer

I would just say we live in very dangerous times. No question about that. Your point about Japan reminds me that Vladimir Putin recently visited the southern Kuril Islands, which the Japanese say belong to them. And this, of course, angered the Japanese greatly. And this just tells you that relations between Japan and Russia are terrible these days. And this is in large part because the Japanese have sided with the Ukrainians against the Russians recently. But also, the North Koreans recently launched a missile that landed in the waters just to the west of Japan. And furthermore, Japan and China have terrible relations today because of some comments that the Japanese prime minister made that enraged the Chinese. So here you have Japan that has significant problems with Russia.

North Korea and China, and at the same time, the United States, which is supposed to provide a security umbrella, certainly have its nuclear umbrella over Japan's head, has pulled forces out of Japan, out of South Korea, and has pivoted away from Asia in recent months because of the war against Iran. And the question you have to ask yourself is, what is the lesson that the Japanese are going to learn from that? And then this gets to the whole question of possible nuclear proliferation in Japan and the whole issue of where that leads. So you can just tell all sorts of stories today about how things are getting worse and worse rather than better and better, not just in the Gulf and in Ukraine, but also in East Asia now. So we are in a lot of trouble in a lot of different places where the potential for disaster is very great.

#Glenn

So Putin makes the point that from now on, they will start to seize ships of the Europeans, given that the Europeans have engaged in piracy. So, as you said, it's all spiraling out of control. It's just, usually, you would see with huge shifts in the distribution of power, a new order would only be established after a great war. That is when everyone's been bled out. That's when we can sit around the table and accept to, well, really reset the board, if you will, and come to some compromises. It's just, you would hope that there would be some great power diplomacy where all our leaders would meet and try to work out something before we all bring out our guns. Unfortunately, there's not

much historical precedent for this, though. Anyways, as always, thank you so much. I appreciate very much your perspectives and your views on grand strategy and especially offensive realism. So thanks again. You're welcome, Glenn.

#John Mearsheimer

Thank you for having me.