

Public intellectual and the prison of theory: John J. Mearsheimer

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Abstract

This article explains the relationship between Mearsheimer's theoretical work and role as a public intellectual on three contemporary issues: Russia, China and Palestine. The argument is twofold. First, Mearsheimer's theory sets limits on state behaviour that are dictated by the requirement of survival, while offering little normative theorisation on how policymakers should address the consequences of these limits. Second, the combination of too much limit and too little normative theorisation turns Mearsheimer's theory into a prison that he seeks to escape in his public commentary through inconsistency and/or referring to rhetorical hopes. These rhetorical hopes absolve Mearsheimer of the responsibility to explore alternative actions to address the normative challenges in these cases. By surrendering these alternatives, Mearsheimer's hope serves his theory's ideological rationalisation of the status quo. Mearsheimer's experience showcases that IR theorists should not restrict theories to the point where they enclose future possibilities of political action and become ideologies of state power in the status quo. Theorists can discharge this responsibility by taking seriously the role of power in the operation of their concepts and limiting their concepts' elevation above the political as the realm of the contestation of interests.

Keywords

IR theory, John Mearsheimer, neo-realism

I am always attracted to an elegant theory, even if I think it is wrong-headed (John Mearsheimer).¹

If public engagement were a competitive sport, John J. Mearsheimer would deserve gold for achievements in public attention and appearances in recent years. As of July 2025, Mearsheimer's public lecture on YouTube 'Why is Ukraine the West's Fault?' has 30 million views.² Mearsheimer's appearance on the Lex Fridman podcast to discuss Russia, Palestine and China brought the attention of 8 million viewers.³ In addition to his widely

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viewed public lectures, Mearsheimer appears daily in the media, in outlets ranging from *The Economist*, *The Spectator*, *Al-Jazeera* and *UnHerd*, to YouTube appearances on ‘Piers Morgan Uncensored’ and ‘Judging Freedom’, among others.⁴ No less influential are Mearsheimer’s scholarly and theoretical works. According to Google Scholar, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* is cited 16,791 times. *The Israeli Lobby and US Foreign Policy* (co-authored with Stephen Walt) is cited 2517 times. The *Foreign Affairs* article ‘Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West’s Fault’ has 2500 citations.⁵ By any measure, these are impressive numbers. This article asks: what is the relationship between Mearsheimer’s theoretical work and commentary as a public intellectual?

Mearsheimer’s public commentary, particularly on Russia/Ukraine, drew criticism from a broad range of scholars and public commentators.⁶ Mearsheimer’s theoretical work, meanwhile, was separately critiqued for advocating a ‘sterile’ realism in the liberal international order,⁷ theoretical inconsistencies regarding state behaviour,⁸ methodological inconsistencies in the nuclear age,⁹ downplaying agency¹⁰ and putting too much emphasis on material power.¹¹ Yet, the *relationship* between Mearsheimer’s theory and commentary as a public intellectual has rarely been theorised. Indeed, Mearsheimer’s public appearances and policy advocacy is often seen as separate from his theoretical work. Take, for instance, Mearsheimer’s colleague in Chicago, Paul Poast. In response to the backlash against Mearsheimer on Ukraine, Poast writes in *Foreign Affairs* that Mearsheimer’s public commentary should not be confused with his realist theory: one may reject the former but retain the latter’s analytical value. Thus,

Realism is both an analytical school of thought and a policy position. The errors of the latter don’t obviate the utility of the former. In explaining the war in Ukraine, realism, like any theoretical framework, is neither good nor bad. But even when its prescriptions can seem unsound, it retains value as a prism through which analysts can understand the motivations and actions of states in an inevitably complex world.¹²

But should we separate Mearsheimer’s theory from his public commentary? Does Mearsheimer apply his theory consistently in practice? While erroneous commentary does not discredit a theory, particularly if the commentary does not apply the theory consistently, this article explains the relationship between Mearsheimer’s theory and public commentary on three contemporary issues: Russia, China and Palestine. In particular, the article advances two arguments. First, Mearsheimer’s offensive neo-realist theory sets limits on state behaviour that are dictated by the requirement of survival, while offering little normative theorisation on how political actors or policymakers should address the consequences of these limits. Second, the combination of too much limit and too little normative theorisation turns Mearsheimer’s theory into a prison that he seeks to escape in his public commentary through inconsistency and/or referring to rhetorical hopes.¹³ Mearsheimer’s rhetorical hopes in his public commentary represent what theorists refer to as a ‘false’ hope.¹⁴ A ‘false hope’ is a hope fixated on pre-determined solutions, thus absolving Mearsheimer of the responsibility to explore alternative actions to address the normative challenges in these cases. By surrendering these alternatives, Mearsheimer’s hope serves his theory’s ideological rationalisation of the status quo.

A point of clarification is in order here. Little normative theorisation does not imply that offensive neo-realism does not have a normative agenda. Neo-realism clearly has a normative agenda: as Mearsheimer writes in the opening pages of *The Tragedy*, it explains how states ‘should behave’ under constraints posed by anarchy.¹⁵ Little normative theorisation in this article means little theorisation of the ‘should’ beyond the limits that are imposed by the theory – little, that is, which is offered to policymakers to make moral and political judgements that cannot be dictated by these limits, due to either their irrelevance to the context at hand or paradoxical conclusions if their logic is pursued.¹⁶

The article proceeds in three steps. First, it outlines Mearsheimer’s theory to unveil the limits it sets and the little it offers in terms of normative theorisation. Second, it showcases the implications this has for Mearsheimer’s inconsistency and recurrent use of rhetorical hopes in his public commentary on Russia, China and Palestine. Third, it offers an account of these rhetorical hopes and their relation to Mearsheimer’s theory. The conclusion draws lessons for IR theorists. The central lesson is that theorists should accept responsibility not to restrict theories to the point where they enclose future possibilities of political action and become ideologies of state power in the status quo. Theorists can discharge this responsibility by taking seriously the role of power in the operation of their concepts and limiting their concepts’ elevation above the political as the realm of the contestation of interests.

Mearsheimer’s theory: the limits it sets and its limits

This section outlines Mearsheimer’s offensive neorealist theory and argues that it sets limits on state behaviour that are dictated by the requirement of survival, whilst offering little normative theorisation on how political actors or policymakers should address the consequences of these limits.

Mearsheimer’s offensive neo-realist theory draws on five underlying assumptions: (1) the international system is anarchic, (2) states possess offensive capabilities, (3) states can never be certain about other states’ intentions, (4) survival is states’ primary goal and (5) states are ‘rational actors’ in the sense that they ‘are aware of their external environment and think strategically about how to survive in it’.¹⁷ Mearsheimer carries two of these assumptions, anarchy and survival, from Kenneth Waltz.¹⁸ To these assumptions, Mearsheimer adds three: states’ possession of offensive capabilities, rationality and uncertainty about other states’ intentions. ‘When these five assumptions are married together’ Mearsheimer writes, ‘they create powerful incentives for great powers to think and act offensively with regard to each other’.¹⁹ A pattern of behaviour arises among states: ‘fear, self-help, and power maximisation’.²⁰ Offensive neo-realism thus argues that the international system is populated by aggressive great powers trying to overthrow each other. ‘Great powers’ writes Mearsheimer, ‘do not merely strive to be the strongest of all the great powers . . . Their ultimate aim is to be the hegemon – that is, the only great power in the system’.²¹ Here offensive neo-realism ‘parts company’ with Waltz’s defensive neo-realism ‘over the question of how much power states want’.²² To Waltzian defensive neo-realism, ‘the international structure pushes [states] to maintain the existing balance of power’.²³ To Mearsheimer’s offensive neo-realism, by contrast, there are ‘no status quo powers in the international system’; all powers ‘almost always have

revisionist intentions, and they will use force to alter the balance of power if they think it can be done at a reasonable price'.²⁴ The additional assumptions, particularly states' uncertainty about other states' intentions, explain this revisionist behaviour. As Mearsheimer clarifies in a later interview,

[I]n an anarchic world where states have offensive military capabilities and might have offensive intentions, states have no choice but to fear each other . . . There is no way any leader can know what will be the future intentions of other states . . . states invariably understand this logic; they know . . . that the best way to survive in such a world is to be especially powerful. That way, no other state will dare attack you.²⁵

Uncertain about other states' intentions, states quickly 'recognise that the more powerful they are relative to their rivals, the better their chances of survival'.²⁶ Ideally, states would wish to attain 'global hegemony'.²⁷ This goal, however, is 'virtually impossible' – therefore, 'the best outcome a great power can hope for is to be a regional hegemon' and 'check aspiring hegemons in other regions because they fear that a rival great power that dominates its own region will be an especially powerful foe that is essentially free to cause trouble in the fearful great power's backyard'.²⁸

Mearsheimer accepts that offensive neo-realist theory, like all theory, is a simplification of a complex reality and, as such, may encounter 'anomalies'. More will be said about such anomalies in the following section. For now, it suffices to say that, to Mearsheimer, offensive neo-realism explains how the world works at least most of the time, or as Mearsheimer puts it, 'tell[s] us a lot about the history of international politics' and makes predictions 'about great power politics in the twenty-first century' accordingly.²⁹ While primarily explanatory, offensive neo-realist theory also has a normative purpose: its prediction enables theorists and policymakers to comment on how states should behave if they seek to be secure. Offensive neo-realist theory, while 'mainly descriptive', is also 'prescriptive':

Offensive neo-realism is mainly a descriptive theory. It explains how great powers behaved in the past and how they are likely to behave in the future. But it is also a prescriptive theory. States *should* behave according to the dictates of offensive neo-realism, because it outlines the best way to survive in a dangerous world.³⁰

Mearsheimer's normative argument here, the *should*, operates under conditions that limit the choices available to states that wish to survive.³¹ Seeking survival under these conditions, states, tragically, find themselves in a constrained position where they *have to* seek power. In Mearsheimer's words, this situation, which 'no one designed or intended', is 'tragic' in the sense that states who 'are merely concerned with their own survival' find themselves with 'little choice but to pursue power and to seek to dominate the other states in the system'.³²

Offensive neo-realism, as with neo-realism more generally, is not devoid of ethical considerations. 'The structure of survival' writes Tom Lundborg, creates 'the condition for the very possibility of international ethics'.³³ For without it, the agents of ethical action, the states whose independent existence is a requirement for ethical action and

decision-making, would be eliminated. Universal ethics, imposed by one state on others, would 'cancel out' the states' independent existence and action in a contingent and uncertain future. But while 'chance and contingency' are 'central features of the anarchic system', these features 'make states simultaneously free and insecure' only to an extent.³⁴ For states in the neo-realist story, as Sebastian Schindler argues, also live under 'anarchic unfreedom'.³⁵ States are no more and no less free than firms in the open market: their freedom of action is constrained by a system that rewards and punishes behaviour leading to real consequences that can push them, like firms, out of competition.³⁶ Thus, 'everyone is constrained by the need to consider the "relative strength" of others as a possible threat to one's own security. Everyone is unfree to the extent that they must prioritise security over other concerns'.³⁷

Mearsheimer's ethics operate within the conditions of (un)freedom set by survival. Survival, as an overriding consideration, creates room for an ethic of restraint. In concrete policy terms, this translates to two ethical arguments: first, a rejection of hubristic wars, and second, a rejection of 'eliminationist' policies that do not necessarily contribute to the state's survival. Mearsheimer's examples of the first category (of hubristic wars) are US wars in pursuit of liberal hegemony in the Middle East.³⁸ Mearsheimer defines the second category (of eliminationist policies) as policies that aim 'to eliminate any potential threats once and for all' and offers the example of what 'Rome did to Carthage in 146 BC'. 'In that instance', Mearsheimer writes, 'the Romans enslaved or killed most of the Carthaginian population, destroyed Carthage's towns and cities, and eliminated it as an independent political and territorial entity. Athens had earlier imposed a similar solution on Melos in 416 BC'.³⁹ Mearsheimer argues that such 'an eliminationist policy' is 'not only morally bankrupt but also strategically unnecessary according to realist logic'.⁴⁰ An ethic of restraint that is geared at, and limited by, survival, logically follows from offensive neo-realist theory.

Both of Mearsheimer's ethical arguments as a theorist are problematic in that they offer little in terms of normative theorisation. The rejection of hubris is difficult to disagree with in general terms. Practically, however, it is problematic. It is easy to criticise what the US *could have done* otherwise, namely not engage in x war, when the costs of not engaging are not discussed and only the failure of engagement is revealed after the war. Loyalty to tragedy, by contrast, means evaluation of costs at both ends, of not engaging as well as engaging, assessing them and offering a judgement contextually. A blunt rejection of 'hubristic wars' not aimed at survival, does not offer such an evaluation. Thus, on the one hand, offensive neo-realism does not reject wars of choice to pursue non-security goals, if these goals do not contradict the balance of power logic. The passage on this from *The Tragedy* reads as follows: 'Great powers . . . occasionally try to foster human rights around the globe . . . Offensive neo-realism certainly recognises that great powers might pursue these non-security goals . . . so long as the requisite behaviour does not conflict with balance of power logic'.⁴¹ It is difficult to believe that Bosnia, Kosovo, Libya or Rwanda conflicted with the 'balance of power logic' or threatened America's survival. On the other hand, however, offensive neo-realism offers little normative theorisation on these wars, beyond that, in an anarchic world where survival is paramount, it was 'hubristic' for the US to intervene in some of these cases. Thus, the limits on state behaviour are set by the requirement of survival, while little normative

theorisation is offered to address the consequences of these limits. In the form, for example, of a contextual evaluation of the consequences of intervention and non-intervention in cases of genocide or ethnic cleansing as in Rwanda, Bosnia or Kosovo. How, to be precise, should policymakers avoid hubris without turning restraint into indifference to genocide or ethnic cleansing?

Mearsheimer's second ethical argument for restraint is even more problematic. What guarantees that a security competition will not escalate to nuclear war? Mearsheimer says that 'once a dangerous rival is knocked out of the great power ranks, there is no reason to erase it from the planet'.⁴² Surely, in the nuclear age, it is plausible to think that great powers might erase each other in the very attempt. Mearsheimer is aware of this and of the dangers of escalation, driven by nationalism, the military's dislike of limited wars and the dynamics of war.⁴³ Offensive neo-realism predicts however that war is a tragic result of the international system and cannot be stopped. This reduces the choice to limiting escalation. Mearsheimer thus concludes: 'it is imperative that political leaders understand escalation dynamics and be able to control them'.⁴⁴ Offensive neo-realism makes two moves here: first, in the name of security, it limits the available options to 'knocking out' other great powers. Second, it puts the burden on policymakers to accomplish this task without risking an all-out nuclear war. Having limited the policymakers' options to and in war, the theory says little about how these limits should be achieved in practice. How, to be precise, should policymakers avoid an all-out nuclear war? A particularly urgent task, given that a key difference between Mearsheimer and his predecessor, Waltz, is precisely his belief in the likelihood of nuclear war.⁴⁵

What is the thread that runs through these criticisms? Mearsheimer's theory limits too much in the name of survival and says too little about how political actors or policymakers should address the consequences of these limits. In particular, on what political actors or policymakers should do to avoid the consequences of the theoretical limits for non-security issues or nuclear war. Where does this leave Mearsheimer as a public intellectual? The following section answers this question by reference to three contemporary issues on which Mearsheimer has been an outspoken public intellectual: Russia, China and Palestine.

Mearsheimer as a public intellectual

This section outlines Mearsheimer's public commentary in relation to three contemporary issues: Russia, China and Palestine. It argues that the problem raised above with regards to Mearsheimer's theory – its strict limits and little normative theorisation of the consequences of these limits – turns Mearsheimer's theory into a prison that he seeks to escape in his public commentary through inconsistency (such as stipulating, contrary to his theory, that Russia has no hegemonic aims) and/or referring to rhetorical hopes for de-escalation (Russia and China) and ending the genocide (Palestine).

Case 1: Russia

In his 2014 article in *Foreign Affairs*, Mearsheimer outlined his position as a public intellectual vis-à-vis Russia and its annexation of Crimea. 'The taproot of the trouble'

Mearsheimer wrote, 'is NATO enlargement, the central element of a larger strategy to move Ukraine out of Russia's orbit and integrate it into the West'.⁴⁶ Thus,

Putin's pushback should have come as no surprise. After all, the West had been moving into Russia's backyard and threatening its core strategic interests, a point Putin made emphatically and repeatedly. Elites in the United States and Europe have been blindsided by events only because they subscribe to a flawed view of international politics.⁴⁷

This 'flawed view of international politics' is the liberal worldview or what Mearsheimer refers to as 'liberal hegemony'. This is the belief 'that the logic of realism holds little relevance in the twenty-first century and that Europe can be kept whole and free on the basis of such liberal principles as the rule of law, economic interdependence, and democracy'.⁴⁸

At first glance, it seems that Mearsheimer offers a rational analysis of Russia's actions that logically follows from his theory. This analysis, the crisis in Crimea illustrates, 'shows that realpolitik remains relevant – and states that ignore it do so at their own peril'.⁴⁹ Russia behaves as Mearsheimer's neo-realist theory predicts; it is seeking to protect its security interests against NATO's intrusion in its sphere of influence. It is the West's fault that it has neglected Russia's legitimate security interests (and Mearsheimer's neo-realist theory), by attempting to expand NATO in the name of democratic enlargement. As Mearsheimer later reiterates in *The Great Delusion*, 'The United States and its allies are mainly responsible for the crisis [in Ukraine]. The taproot of the trouble is NATO expansion'.⁵⁰ To this argument, Mearsheimer adds that Russia has no ambitions beyond Ukraine. In his 2014 article, written as Putin annexed Crimea, Mearsheimer for instance opposes those who argue that Putin is 'testing the waters to see if the time is right to conquer Ukraine, or at least its eastern part, and he will eventually behave aggressively toward other countries in Russia's neighbourhood'.⁵¹ 'This argument' says Mearsheimer, 'falls apart on close inspection'.⁵²

Mearsheimer's argument that Putin has no aggressive ambitions in the rest of Ukraine and beyond is neither in line with his offensive neo-realist theory, and nor stood the test of time. Mearsheimer's theory predicts that Russia's objective is hegemony and will seek to take advantage of its opponents' weakness to choose the right time to achieve this objective. This means that, in Ukraine, if Russia stands to gain land it will do so; and the stronger its position, the further its demands to roll back NATO will be. Scholars such as Paul Poast and Campbell Craig therefore portray Mearsheimer's position on Russia as defensive neo-realist.⁵³ Nor did Mearsheimer's prediction that Russia has no further ambitions in Ukraine stand the test of time, as seen with the full-scale invasion in 2022. In 2022, Mearsheimer writes a second piece on Russia and NATO in *Foreign Affairs*, not to correct his previous error – that Russia had no further territorial ambitions in Ukraine – but to double down on his conclusion that Russia initially had no such ambitions. Thus, while 'it appears that Russia's territorial goals have expanded markedly since the war started', Mearsheimer continues to retain his argument that Russia's objectives were defensive:

Contrary to the conventional wisdom in the West, Moscow did not invade Ukraine to conquer it and make it part of a Greater Russia. It was principally concerned with preventing Ukraine

from becoming a Western bulwark on the Russian border. Putin and his advisers were especially concerned about Ukraine eventually joining NATO.⁵⁴

What explains this double paradox in Mearsheimer's position, which is neither in line with his theory nor corrected by empirical reality? Craig offers a convincing answer: it is the question of nuclear escalation that Mearsheimer, rightly, shies away from. Indeed, the central concern in Mearsheimer's 2022 piece is precisely that the war will escalate, and nuclear weapons will be used. This, after all, is in line with his theory: great powers will escalate if they think they can gain strategic advantage from it, even if the 'tragic' result is ultimately war – including, possibly, nuclear use. Does Mearsheimer have a theory to address this consequence? The short answer is no. Mearsheimer, instead, offers a pessimistic conclusion and a 'hope' that the war will not lead to 'catastrophic escalation' (i.e. nuclear use):

Russia, Ukraine, and the West are stuck in a terrible situation with no obvious way out. One can only hope that leaders on both sides will manage the war in ways that avoid catastrophic escalation.⁵⁵

The 'hope' to avoid escalation is limited by the structural imperatives of security, which, after all, drive Russia's ambition to hegemony and opportunism. Should Russia abandon its 'survival', as conceptualised by Mearsheimer? Do Putin, Zelensky and – now – Trump have room for their agency in a tragedy that is structurally imposed? Survival sets the limits of action, meanwhile the recourse to a rhetorical hope of de-escalation does not only lack an underpinning theory but also runs contrary to the limits set by offensive neo-realism. Mearsheimer the theorist set a prison from which Mearsheimer the public intellectual seeks to escape through a rhetorical hope that runs contrary to the theory.

Case 2: China

While Mearsheimer's conclusions about Russia's objectives were deemed outside the bounds of his offensive neo-realist theory, his analysis of China falls within his theory. Mearsheimer argues that China seeks regional hegemony and that this will lead to intense competition, possibly war, with the US. Where does this theoretical position leave Mearsheimer the public intellectual? The answer is that it sets not a theory that illuminates but a prison that limits the choices available to policymakers. The only choice available is intense competition that can escalate to a catastrophic nuclear war. How can policymakers avoid this outcome? Mearsheimer's recourse, once again, is to a rhetorical hope.

'Can China rise peacefully?' Mearsheimer asks, and his response does not spur optimism. 'If China continues to grow economically' writes Mearsheimer,

it will attempt to dominate Asia the way the United States dominates the Western hemisphere. The United States, however, will go to enormous lengths to prevent China from achieving regional hegemony.⁵⁶

What should the US do? The answer, according to Mearsheimer, is containment: contain China like the US contained the USSR during the Cold War. 'The ultimate aim would be

to build an alliance structure along the lines of NATO'.⁵⁷ 'Containment', says Mearsheimer, 'is essentially a defensive strategy, since it does not call for starting wars against China. In fact, containment is an alternative to war against a rising China'.⁵⁸ Mearsheimer accepts that there is a 'serious chance of war between China and the United States'.⁵⁹ The war, however, will remain limited due to the threat of nuclear escalation.⁶⁰ Mearsheimer's analysis begs the question: would the US accept to leave the region following defeat in a 'limited war', particularly if its 'survival' is defined to be at stake? Would China accept defeat in a 'limited war', if there is a reasonable chance it might gain from escalation? As Craig writes, 'it is difficult to see how Mearsheimer could deny that the course of action he demands the US undertake increases the likelihood of nuclear war'.⁶¹ Indeed, Mearsheimer does not deny it, as he clearly states that nuclear war with China is a plausible scenario following, for instance, an escalation on Taiwan.⁶²

It is worth recalling that *The Tragedy* is not a guide for states to be aware of history lest they repeat it. Rather, Mearsheimer's argument is clear that states should behave like offensive neo-realist theory stipulates; namely to pursue their hegemonic goals if they seek to survive. In the case of US relations with China, this implies a competition over hegemony at the risk of nuclear war, in the defence of survival. That this proposition is paradoxical was not missed on Mearsheimer's critics. One critic, Jonathan Kirshner, replies:

Is China's "survival" really in jeopardy if it does not aggressively bid to dominate all of Asia? Will the United States not "survive" if it fails to reach across the Pacific Ocean in an effort to crush a rising China before it is too late? . . . What exactly threatens the survival of these great powers? Given their military establishments, their nuclear deterrents, their economic might, their continental size, and their vast populations, is their survival really imperilled if they do not act as offensive realists? Or is it *only* imperilled if they irrationally act as offensive realists, pushing everything, including the few precious chips that hold the prospects for their destruction, across the poker table in a reckless bet to win it all?⁶³

As a theorist, Mearsheimer perceives a tragic situation that is over-determined by structure. As Kirshner and others such as Seán Molloy argue, this approach problematically omits the role of contingency and choice by policymakers.⁶⁴ Indeed, as a public intellectual who comments on world affairs as they contingently arise, there is no reason why Mearsheimer should be constrained by his theory, particularly if the theory leads to paradoxical policy conclusions on nuclear escalation in the name of necessity.

Nor is Mearsheimer constrained by his theory when he proclaims in his public commentary that he 'hopes' the 'security competition' will not result in a 'hot war': 'my great hope is that moving forward the security competition in East Asia, which will not go away, will not result in a hot war'.⁶⁵ Note that Mearsheimer's 2022 piece in *Foreign Affairs* also relies on the 'hope' that Russia's invasion of Ukraine will not escalate into a nuclear war. This hope is not premised on the offensive neo-realist theory, but is a mechanism by which Mearsheimer deals with the theory's paradoxical conclusions as it comes face to face with reality. The theory itself is deterministic: it stipulates little choice in a tragic world. Mearsheimer the public intellectual seeks to escape this determinism by contradicting the theory or – as is the case here – referring to a rhetorical hope that holds no ground in his theoretical premises.

Case 3: Palestine

Unlike the cases of Russia and China, in the case of Palestine Mearsheimer accepts that his theory is inapplicable. The case presents an anomaly to offensive neo-realism because of the role of domestic politics – the Israeli lobby – that impacts America’s behaviour. Along with Walt, Mearsheimer outlines this argument in *The Israeli Lobby and US Foreign Policy*. The central thesis of this book is that domestic politics, not structure, explains US behaviour in the Middle East generally and in relation to the question of Palestine in particular. Despite its emphasis on domestic politics, however, there is a remarkable similarity between the theoretical work done by the lobby and survival: both limit the choices and actions of policymakers and leave no escape from theoretical determinism, except in a rhetorical hope that runs contrary to what is stipulated theoretically.

Mearsheimer (and Walt) offer a critique to the role of the Israeli lobby in diverting US foreign policy away from neo-realist lines. According to offensive neo-realism, a state such as the US, which has already attained regional hegemony in the Western hemisphere, should only intervene militarily in other regions to contain potential hegemon. The Middle East, unlike Southeast Asia, is not a region where there is a potential hegemon. Neither Israel nor Iran are great powers by Mearsheimer’s definition.⁶⁶ Therefore, the US should disengage from the region. Mearsheimer, loyal to his neo-realist premises, calls for a strategy of restraint and rejects attempts to remake the region in America’s image of liberal democracy.⁶⁷ Furthermore, Mearsheimer is a critic of Israel and believes that America should distance itself from Israel’s policies against Palestinians.

The key obstacle to America distancing itself from Israel’s policies against Palestinians and pursuing a strategy of restraint in the Middle East, according to Mearsheimer, is the Israeli lobby. But assume for a moment that the Israeli lobby does not exist and US foreign policy as a result can follow Mearsheimer’s call to distance the US from Israel. Does this call follow from his theory? The US, Mearsheimer writes (with Walt) in *The Israeli Lobby*, should treat Israel as a ‘normal state’ and aid Israel only when its survival is at stake, but not when it transgresses Palestinians’ rights:

It is time for the United States to treat Israel not as a special case but as a normal state . . . the United States should support Israel’s continued existence — just as it supports the existence of France, Thailand, or Mexico — and Washington should be prepared to intervene if Israel’s survival were ever threatened.⁶⁸

There is no requirement, under offensive neo-realism, for a state to defend the survival of another state. Unless the latter state helps contain a potential regional hegemon. Is Iran a potential regional hegemon? The answer, to Mearsheimer, is no: the argument for restraint is premised on the fact that Iran is neither an actual nor a potential hegemon. The defence of Israel’s survival, therefore, is not a normative proposition premised on offensive neo-realist theory, and it is irrelevant in this case whether or not there is an Israeli lobby constraining the actions of policymakers.

The problem however goes beyond the fact that Mearsheimer’s arguments as a public intellectual do not stem from his theory. It is, rather, that the theory itself becomes a prison that limits the options available to political actors and policymakers. In a talk in

Doha on 13 October 2024 Mearsheimer reiterates the point that the root cause of the conflict in the Middle East is the Palestinian issue, whose roots are, in turn, in US domestic politics – that is, the Israel lobby blocking its resolution.⁶⁹ While this theory is not structural in the sense that it draws on the anarchic international system, it remains structural in the sense that it constrains the agency of the political actors, US Presidents in particular, from bringing about change. In a recent interview, Mearsheimer thus concludes that President Trump unfortunately cannot do much about the genocide in Gaza due to the lobby.⁷⁰ ‘The lobby owns Rubio. The lobby owns Trump. The lobby owns JD Vance’, Mearsheimer repeats to Judge Napolitano on 30 October 2025, highlighting Israeli control over US Middle East policy and US leaders’ inability to act on Palestine.⁷¹ The work that this alternative theory of domestic politics does is remarkably similar to what survival does in the case of Russia and China. It offers not only an explanation but also a limitation. Both theories – international or domestic – are in effect prisons that Mearsheimer seeks to escape through a recourse to a rhetorical hope that holds no ground in his theoretical premises. The conclusion is the same: agency is constrained, options are limited, the theorist can only hope that the worst will not happen even as the theory stipulates that it will happen anyway.

Indeed, how should policymakers treat Israel like a ‘normal state’, when the lobby prevents them from treating it so? Is Israel a ‘normal state’ or a settler colonial, apartheid, state that has little interest in a two-state solution, as Mearsheimer argues more recently?⁷² If Israel has little interest in a two-state solution, what action should US policy makers take against the lobby and the state of Israel? What are the moral and political trade-offs in these actions? Given that Mearsheimer has been an outspoken critic of the genocide in Gaza,⁷³ what actions should US policymakers take against Israel to stop this genocide? What are the moral and political trade-offs involved in these actions? How can they take these actions, given the power of the lobby? Mearsheimer’s answer is simply that they cannot and will not – due to the limits posed by the lobby. Thus, in a recent interview with Judge Napolitano on 26 June 2025, Mearsheimer reiterates his ‘hope’ in answer to the question of ‘what will stop the slaughter’ of Palestinians in Gaza. Mearsheimer’s hope, once again, runs contrary to a tragic reality depicted theoretically. In Mearsheimer’s words: ‘it is categorically depressing but there is no other country around the world that will step in . . . the Trump administration shows no evidence switching gears on this and putting an end to the genocide. One hopes that will happen, but it doesn’t look it’s going to happen’.⁷⁴

What to conclude from the three cases? In none of the cases does Mearsheimer the public intellectual follow through with his theory. In all three cases Mearsheimer hopes for the best even though his theory says the worst will happen anyway. What explains this? The answer lies in the way Mearsheimer constructed his theory: the theory sets limits but offers little normative theorisation to address the consequences of these limits for non-security issues and/or nuclear war. Mearsheimer’s theory, therefore, does not enable him as a public intellectual but presents restrictions that he seeks to escape through inconsistency and/or referring to rhetorical hopes.

The reference to hope is, of course, not part of Mearsheimer’s theoretical mechanism, whose task is to explain how conflicts emerge, not how they end.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, its

recurrent featuring across all cases highlights an important role in his public commentary.⁷⁶ What is this role? How does it relate to his theory?

Hope: its role and relation to Mearsheimer's theory

Mearsheimer's rhetorical hopes represent what theorists refer to as a 'false hope'.⁷⁷ This is a hope that is fixated on a pre-determined solution, thus absolving Mearsheimer of the responsibility to explore alternative actions to address the normative challenges in these cases. By surrendering these alternatives, Mearsheimer's hope serves his theory's ideological rationalisation of the status quo.

Mearsheimer's hope is fixated on thwarting regional hegemons or ending the role of the Israeli lobby as key solutions to US survival and changing US stance on Palestine. This offers little or no space for 'the wider practical landscape, including more realistic alternatives' to attain these goals.⁷⁸ These alternatives were proposed by other scholars, including fellow realists. In the case of China, for instance, Walt suggests that the historical conditions that led to US regional hegemony are absent from contemporary East Asia. East Asia is crowded with 'major industrial powers with considerable potential to check Chinese ambitions'.⁷⁹ Falsely assumed and acted upon as the *only* option in East Asia, Walt says, Mearsheimer's theoretical premise – the requirement of regional hegemony for survival – is a recipe for disaster. 'If there is a war' Walt writes, 'it is likely to arise from China's efforts to establish an unchallenged position in East Asia and a U.S.-led effort to prevent it from achieving this goal'.⁸⁰ In other words, war will result from the US and China believing that the only route to security is regional hegemony (China) or an aggressive policy of containment to thwart it (the US). 'Instead of waging the intense, zero-sum competition that offensive realism prescribes', Walt suggests an alternative: a 'managed strategic competition' that is 'intended to minimise the risks of war and preserve as many benefits of cooperation as possible'.⁸¹ Walt's of course is not the only alternative, and nor is the point here that Walt is right and Mearsheimer is wrong. Rather, Walt's example illustrates the problem with Mearsheimer's hope fixating on one solution that is pre-determined by theory.

On Palestine, critics challenge Mearsheimer's fixation on the lobby as a constraint on political action. Kenneth Roth refers to Germany stopping sending arms to Israel and the UK government's stance on recognising a Palestinian state. 'The real question is how we put pressure on Trump to in turn stop the genocide' Roth concludes, 'that is not as impossible as it may seem, because Trump has already distanced himself from Netanyahu in various respects . . . He cut a deal with the Houthis [and] repudiated Netanyahu's false denial of starvation in Gaza'.⁸² Contrary to the lobby theory, alternative possibilities of political action exist. One alternative action in Ukraine would follow Mearsheimer's own theory and deny Russia's quest for regional hegemony. This, however, does not validate Mearsheimer's theory. Since, unlike what Mearsheimer's theory stipulates, it is not structurally ordained and requires an assessment of Russian decision-making, whose aim, according to critics, is not 'survival' but the eradication of Ukrainian national identity.⁸³

By fixating on one pre-determined solution, Mearsheimer's hope represents a 'false hope' that absolves him of the responsibility to engage with the range of possible actions required to address the normative challenges in the three cases. It is this type of false hope

that Hannah Arendt refers to in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, when she writes that ‘reckless optimism’ and ‘reckless despair’ are ‘two sides of the same medal’.⁸⁴ ‘Reckless optimism’ and ‘reckless despair’ surrender political action in time and space to the determinacy of the future. A ‘worldly hope’, by contrast, embraces ‘the indeterminacy and contingency inherent in sharing the world and acting with others’.⁸⁵ A worldly hope is premised on the exploration of possibilities to act and engage with others spatio-temporally.⁸⁶ Mearsheimer’s hope surrenders these possibilities to theoretical determinism. In its abdication of alternatives, it is the twin sister of despair. In effect, it absolves Mearsheimer, the public commentator, of the responsibility to explore these alternatives.

By surrendering alternative courses of action, Mearsheimer’s hope offers its stamp of approval to his theory’s ideological rationalisation of the status quo. Ideologies disguise the reality of politics as consisting of conflicting interests whose outcome is decided by power.⁸⁷ Ideologies are therefore instruments of deception over the reality of power and the political actors’ role in the pursuit of power. Theories become ideologies when they turn into instruments of deception over the reality of power. They obscure this reality by offering moral, legal or biological rationalisations to political interests, making it seem as though their object is not power. Theories *qua* ideologies thus rationalise power – the maintenance, demonstration or increase of power – under the guise of morality, legality or biological necessity.⁸⁸ How is Mearsheimer’s invocation of survival as a biological necessity ideological? When Mearsheimer says that containment is ‘a defensive strategy’ aimed at survival through maintaining the ‘balance’,⁸⁹ what he really means is not that the balance will be maintained but a distribution of power that is favourable to the US. In this context, the ‘balance’ refers to a status quo that is favourable to US power and ideologically rationalised under the guise of survival. What is obscured here is that it is not survival that the US pursues with containment, since this policy, as critics note, *threatens* America’s survival,⁹⁰ but America’s hegemonic position in the status quo. By absolving him of the responsibility to explore alternatives to containment, Mearsheimer’s rhetorical hope, in effect, serves his theory’s ideological rationalisation of this status quo.

By way of conclusion: lessons from Mearsheimer to IR theorists

‘More than Waltz’ writes Joseph MacKay, ‘Mearsheimer has established himself as a public intellectual’, and yet ‘it is less clear that he has shaped American policy on any major issue’.⁹¹ This discrepancy, between engagement and shaping policy, should be especially disappointing to Mearsheimer, given that his theory, unlike Waltz’s, makes a claim to explaining state behaviour and therefore does not exclude foreign policy.⁹² This article challenged this claim. It argued instead that, rather than describe and prescribe state behaviour, Mearsheimer’s theory presents restrictions that he seeks to escape through inconsistency and/or referring to rhetorical hopes that absolve him of the responsibility to explore other possibilities of political action. By surrendering these possibilities, Mearsheimer’s hope serves his theory’s ideological rationalisation of the status quo.

While Mearsheimer represents a limit case of realism’s self-constraint,⁹³ the lapse of theory into ideology is inherent in the parsimonious style of theorisation that neo-realists broadly share. By substituting theoretical universalism for historical contingency,

Hartmut Behr and Amelia Heath argue, neo-realism became an ideology serving US power.⁹⁴ Indeed, in substituting survival for power and deducing its universal necessity from the unchanging structure of anarchy, neo-realists abandoned the earlier realists' counter-ideological critique of power – a critique that opened possibilities to negotiate power in a historically contingent world and bring about social change.⁹⁵ Defensive neo-realists, such as Walt, reject Mearsheimer's assumption that states can never be certain about each other's intentions. Accordingly, they allow comparatively more room for contextual judgement on other states' status quo or revisionist intentions. Walt thus rejects blanket calls to contain China.⁹⁶ Despite their differences, however, both offensive and defensive neo-realists are status quo theorists. Their disagreement is on the best method to maintain US hegemonic position in the status quo, couched in the language of 'survival' and retaining the 'balance'. The 'balance' applies to everyone bar the hegemon, whose power and imperial ambitions are either unchecked or disguised. Critics refer this issue back to Waltz. John Hobson for instance refers to Waltz's 'denial of the presence of American neo-imperialism in the post-1945 era' as an attempt to 'sanitise' the 'post-colonial era of its American neo-imperialist properties'.⁹⁷ *The Great Delusion* and *The Hell of Good Intentions*, the titles of Mearsheimer and Walt's latest books respectively, are telling in this regard: both imply that the US is deluded by 'liberal ideals' and has 'good' – rather than power and/or imperial – ambitions.

How can theorists ensure their theories do not enclose future possibilities and risk lapsing into ideologies? The answer is not to abandon concepts (such as tragedy or survival) but accept limits on their incorporation into a theoretical apparatus that rationalises power. This article's critique does not imply a rejection of survival as a valid aim for states, but its misuse as a concept to rationalise state power. To address this misuse, the key lesson here is that theorists need to take seriously the role of power in the operation of their concepts and limit their concepts' elevation above the political as the realm of the contestation of interests. Put simply, theory should remind the state of its disguise of power, not offer a rationalisation for power under the guise of survival. The earlier realists, from whom Mearsheimer claims inspiration,⁹⁸ offered this counter-ideological critique of power, as a steppingstone to open the space for normative judgement and its negotiation among nations with different interests. Morgenthau's concept of the national interest, for example, meant that 'we look at all nations, our own included, as political entities pursuing their respective interests defined in terms of power'.⁹⁹ This acknowledgement of 'our own' power opens new possibilities for political action in security as well as non-security matters.¹⁰⁰ It is true that, with regard to these possibilities, the earlier realists accepted ethical limitations in the political sphere, drawn by its tragic character.¹⁰¹ Nevertheless, by not elevating their concepts to universal categories above the contestation of interests, they guarded against their theories becoming ideologies that serve state power in the status quo. Their 'hopes', accordingly, were more akin to the 'worldly hope' outlined in this article.¹⁰² This can be seen in Morgenthau's hope that 'a revived diplomacy' will contribute to 'the cause of peace'.¹⁰³ Notable here is that, to Morgenthau, this hope or 'promise' (as he refers to it) can only be achieved by exploring the various possibilities of working with other nations spatio-temporally, and accounting for their interests as well as one's own. 'Diplomacy' thus to Morgenthau, 'must look at the political scene from the point of view of other nations'.¹⁰⁴ In an age where nuclear

weapons threaten to bring an end to humanity, this counter-ideological role of theory is not only urgent, but also – as the example of Mearsheimer demonstrates – saves the theorist the contradictions that arise from rationalising power. Contradictions that are settled through inconsistent commentary and/or rhetorical hopes.

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Notes

1. John Mearsheimer, 'Conversations in International Relations: Interview with John J. Mearsheimer (Part I)', *International Relations*, 20(1), 2006, p. 107.
2. John Mearsheimer, 'Why Ukraine is the West's Fault', YouTube, 25 September 2015, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JrMiSQAGOS4> (accessed 26 June 2025).
3. John Mearsheimer, 'Israel-Palestine, Russia-Ukraine, China, NATO, and WW3 | Lex Fridman Podcast', 17 November 2023, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r4wLXNydzeY> (accessed 26 June 2025).
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5. All data is available at: <https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=nHE2XZEAAA&hl=en> (accessed 26 June 2025).
6. Mathew Spectre, 'Realism's Imperial Origins', *Dissent*, 69(3), 2022, pp. 70–72; Ned Lebow, 'International Relations Theory and the Ukrainian War', *Analyse & Kritik*, 44(1), 2022, pp. 111–35; Felix Roesch, 'Realism, the War in the Ukraine, and the Limits of Diplomacy', *Analyse & Kritik*, 44(2), 2022, pp. 201–218; Jan Dutkiewicz and Jan Smolenski, 'Epistemic Superimposition: The War in Ukraine and the Poverty of Expertise in International Relations Theory', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 26(1), 2023, p. 623; Elias Götz, 'Neorealism and Russia's Ukraine Policy, 1991-Present', *Contemporary Politics*,

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 8. Brian Schmidt, 'Realism as Tragedy', *Review of International Studies*, 30(3), 2004, pp. 427–44; Christopher Layne, 'The "Poster Child for Offensive Realism": America as a Global Hegemon', *Security Studies*, 12(2), 2002, pp. 120–64; Glenn Snyder, 'Mearsheimer's World-Offensive Realism and the Struggle for Security: A Review Essay', *International Security*, 27(1), 2002, pp. 149–73; Arash Heydarian Pashakhanlou, 'Back to the Drawing Board: A Critique of Offensive Realism', *International Relations*, 27(2), 2013, pp. 202–225.
 9. Campbell Craig, 'The Normative Problem of Nuclear War in the Thought of Kenneth Waltz and John Mearsheimer', *International Relations*. Epub ahead of print 23 April 2025. DOI: 10.1177/00471178251334947.
 10. Jonathan Kirshner, *An Unwritten Future: Realism and Uncertainty in World Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022); Harald Edinger, 'Offensive Ideas: Structural Realism, Classical Realism and Putin's War on Ukraine', *International Affairs*, 98(6), 2022, p. 1892.
 11. Haro Karkour and Felix Rösch 'Towards IR's 'Fifth Debate': Racial Justice and the National Interest in Classical Realism', *International Studies Review*, 26(2), 2024, pp. 1–20.
 12. Paul Poast, 'A World of Power and Fear: What Critics of Realism Get Wrong', *Foreign Affairs*, 15 June 2021, para.3.
 13. The 'too much' here is relative to the normative challenges; it does not enable meeting them.
 14. Antonin Lacelle-Webster, 'Democratic Politics and Hope: An Arendtian Perspective', *European Journal of Political Theory*, 23(4), 2024, p. 484; Jakob Huber, 'Hope from Despair', *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 31(1), 2023, pp. 80–101; Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986).
 15. John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Co., 2014 [2001]), p. 11; see also John Schuessler, 'Should Realism Return to its Roots?', *International Studies Review*, 12(4), 2010, p. 589.
 16. For clarity, like other realists, Mearsheimer grounds the 'should' in prudence and self-interest. Where his theory differs is the extent to which he embraces this constraint.
 17. Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, pp. 30–32.
 18. Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 21.
 19. Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 32.
 20. Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 32.
 21. Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 2.
 22. Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 21.
 23. Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 21.
 24. Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 2.
 25. John Mearsheimer, 'Conversations in International Relations: Interview with John J. Mearsheimer (Part II)', *International Relations*, 20(2), 2006, pp. 231–32.
 26. Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 3.
 27. Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 40.
 28. Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, pp. 41–42.
 29. Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, pp. 7–8.

30. Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 11. Emphasis in original.
31. 'Normative theories can be valuable tools for understanding the constraints imposed on states by the international system, whether or not states actually heed them, and they can affect how states interact with each other', quoted from John Mearsheimer, 'Reckless States and Realism', *International Relations*, 23(2), 2009, pp. 253–354.
32. Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 3.
33. Tom Lundborg, 'The Ethics of Neorealism: Waltz and the Time of International Life', *European Journal of International Relations*, 25(1), 2018, p. 232.
34. Lundborg, 'The Ethics of Neorealism', p. 240.
35. Sebastian Schindler, 'Anarchic Unfreedom: Critical International Theory Versus Neoliberalism and the New Right', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 52(3), 2024, pp. 566–89.
36. Schindler, 'Anarchic Unfreedom', p. 574.
37. Schindler, 'Anarchic Unfreedom', p. 575.
38. John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, 'The Case for Offshore Balancing', *Foreign Affairs*, 95(4), 2016, pp. 70–83.
39. John Mearsheimer, 'War and International Politics', *International Security*, 49(4), 2025, p. 27.
40. Mearsheimer, 'War and International Politics', p. 27.
41. Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 46.
42. Mearsheimer, 'War and International Politics', p. 27.
43. Mearsheimer, 'War and International Politics', pp. 29–36.
44. Mearsheimer, 'War and International Politics', p. 35.
45. 'I think that the difference in our positions is that Waltz comes close to saying that it is almost impossible to have a war between two states with nuclear weapons. I am more doubtful on that point. I can posit numerous scenarios showing how a nuclear war might come about; they may not be likely, but they are plausible' quoted from Mearsheimer, 'Conversations in International Relations (Part II)', p. 240.
46. John Mearsheimer, 'Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin', *Foreign Affairs*, 93(5), 2014, p. 77.
47. Mearsheimer, 'Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault', pp. 77–78.
48. Mearsheimer, 'Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault', p. 78.
49. Mearsheimer, 'Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault', p. 78.
50. John Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), p. 171.
51. Mearsheimer, 'Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault', p. 83.
52. Mearsheimer, 'Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault', p. 83.
53. Poast, 'A World of Power and Fear'; Craig, 'The Normative Problem of Nuclear War'.
54. John Mearsheimer, 'Playing with Fire in Ukraine', *Foreign Affairs*, 17 August 2022, para.6.
55. Mearsheimer, 'Playing with Fire in Ukraine', para.29.
56. Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 361.
57. Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 384.
58. Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 385.
59. Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 395.
60. 'Nuclear weapons make it extremely unlikely that China will end up fighting a major conventional conflict resembling World War II', quoted from Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 410.
61. Craig, 'The Normative Problem of Nuclear War', p. 14.

62. 'One could also posit a plausible scenario in which the United States and China get into a war over Taiwan and nuclear weapons are employed' quoted from Mearsheimer, 'Conversations in International Relations (Part II)', p. 240.
63. Kirshner, *An Unwritten Future*, p. 186. Emphasis in original.
64. Molloy, 'Theorizing Liberal Orders', p. 328.
65. John Mearsheimer, 'Too Late to Prevent the Rise of China', Interview, 27 May 2025, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iV5XpJck2RA> (accessed 16 June 2025).
66. Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 61.
67. Mearsheimer and Walt, 'The Case for Offshore Balancing'.
68. John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, *The Israeli Lobby and US Foreign Policy* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2007), p. 341.
69. John Mearsheimer, 'Gaza and its Global Implications', *Middle East Council*, Talk, 13 October 2024, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AuFB-T9gMfo> (accessed 16 June 2025).
70. John Mearsheimer, 'Can Iran Defeat Israel?', 13 June 2025, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eX2NDHmfJXw> (accessed 16 June 2025).
71. Judge Napolitano, 'Prof. John Mearsheimer: The Dangerous Marco Rubio', 30 October 2025, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fFLTgNGjhvs> (accessed 8 November 2025).
72. Freddie Sayers, 'John Mearsheimer: There is No Two State Solution', *UnHerd*, 16 December 2023, available at: <https://unherd.com/2023/12/john-mearsheimer-there-is-no-two-state-solution/> (accessed 3 July 2025). On Israeli settler colonialism, see Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007); Maxime Rodinson, *Israel: A Colonial-Settler State?* trans. D. Thorstad (London: Pathfinder Press, 1973); Patrick Wolfe, 'New Jews for Old: Settler State Formation and the Impossibility of Zionism: In Memory of Edward W. Said', *Arena Journal*, 37/38, 2012, pp. 285–321; Lorenzo Veracini, 'The Other Shift: Settler Colonialism, Israel and the Occupation', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 42(2), 2013, pp. 26–42; Laurie King-Irani, 'Exiled to a Liminal Legal Zone: Are We All Palestinians Now?', *Third World Quarterly*, 27(5), 2006, pp. 923–36.
73. John Mearsheimer, 'Genocide in Gaza', *Substack*, 5 January 2024, available at: <https://mearsheimer.substack.com/p/genocide-in-gaza> (accessed 16 June 2025).
74. Judge Napolitano, 'Prof. John Mearsheimer: Why Israel Will Fail', *Judging Freedom*, 26 June 2025, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T3PpjVOCLsQ&list=WL&index=1> (accessed 30 June 2025).
75. I thank reviewer 2 for reminding me of this.
76. On this I agree with reviewer 1.
77. Lacelle-Webster, 'Democratic Politics and Hope'; Huber, 'Hope from Despair'; Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*.
78. Huber, 'Hope from Despair', p. 94.
79. Stephen Walt, 'Hedging on Hegemony: The Realist Debate over How to Respond to China', *International Security*, 2025, 49(4), p. 62.
80. Walt, 'Hedging on Hegemony', p. 37.
81. Walt, 'Hedging on Hegemony', p. 69. Walt's alternative is comparatively more conciliatory but remains ideological vis-à-vis US power as will be noted in the next section.
82. John Mearsheimer, Christina Lamb and Kenneth Roth, 'A World Without Morality', Institute of Arts and Ideas, 1 November 2025, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dh8kwdsH87k> (accessed 8 November 2025).
83. I agree with reviewer 1 on the importance of Russian decision-making. Examples of these critics include Kseniya Oksamytna, 'Imperialism, Supremacy, and the Russian Invasion

- of Ukraine', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 44(4), 2023, pp. 497–512; Maria Popova and Oxana Shevel, *Russia and Ukraine: Entangled Histories, Diverging States* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2024); Jade McGlynn, 'Russia is Committing Cultural Genocide in Ukraine', *Foreign Policy*, 23 April 2024.
84. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York, NY: Meridian, 1962), p. vii.
 85. Laclelle-Webster, 'Democratic Politics and Hope', p. 486.
 86. Joel Alden Schlosser, 'Hope, Danger's Comforter: Thucydides' History and the Politics of Hope', *The Journal of Politics*, 75(1), 2013, p. 179.
 87. This definition is shared by the older generation of realists; for instance, it is in E. H. Carr's critique of the 'harmony of interests' and Morgenthau's discussion of ideologies in chapter 7 in *Politics Among Nations*, which this article draws upon because it is the most sustained engagement with the concept among realists. Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 5th ed. (New York, NY: Alfred Knopf, 1978). Their differences notwithstanding, Mearsheimer considers his realism to follow the footpath of the older realists in contrast to 'idealists'. See John Mearsheimer, 'E.H. Carr vs. Idealism: The Battle Rages On', *International Relations*, 19(2), 2005, pp. 139–52.
 88. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, p. 42.
 89. 'An American-led balancing coalition to check China's rise' as Mearsheimer puts it. Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 384.
 90. Notably Walt in this section, and Kirshner and Craig above.
 91. Joseph MacKay, "'Making Democracy Safe for the World": Kenneth Waltz on Realism, Democracy, and War', *International Studies Quarterly*, 68(3), 2024, p. 9.
 92. 'Waltz maintains that his theory explains outcomes, but not state behaviour. In contrast, my theory explains behaviour and outcomes. I do not need a separate theory of foreign policy', quoted from Mearsheimer, 'Conversations in International Relations', p. 112.
 93. I thank reviewer 1 for this formulation.
 94. Hartmut Behr and Amelia Heath, 'Misreading in IR Theory and Ideology Critique: Morgenthau, Waltz and Neo-realism', *Review of International Studies*, 35(2), 2009, p. 345.
 95. Molloy, 'Theorizing Liberal Orders', p. 328.
 96. Walt, 'Hedging on Hegemony', p. 68.
 97. John Hobson, *The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 211–12. Hobson refers to Waltz's defence of US hegemony in the final pages of *Theory of International Politics*. In particular, chapter 9, pages 206–210 in the first edition.
 98. Mearsheimer, 'E.H. Carr vs. Idealism'.
 99. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, p. 11.
 100. In the case of Palestine (and Middle East more generally) this involves interrogating America's role as an empire and complicity in a settler colonial project, even in times of 'peace'.
 101. Hans Morgenthau, *Scientific Man Versus Power Politics* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1946), chapter 6. There are variations among the classical realists. On this see, Seán Molloy, 'Hans J. Morgenthau Versus E. H. Carr: Conflicting Conceptions of Ethics in Realism', in Duncan Bell (ed.), *Political Thought and International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 83–104.
 102. On the classical realists' rejection of cyclical and progressive conceptions of time see Andy Hom and Brent Steele, 'Open Horizons: The Temporal Visions of Reflexive Realism', *International Studies Review*, 12(2), 2010, pp. 271–300; On Morgenthau's reflexivity, see Seán Molloy, 'Realism and Reflexivity: Morgenthau, Academic Freedom and Dissent', *European Journal of International Relations*, 26(2), 2020, pp. 321–43.

103. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, p. 550.
104. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, p. 553.

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