

You Can't Get There from Here:

Offensive Realism and Its Foreign Policy

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Abstract

Offensive realist foreign policy analysts have criticized NATO enlargement and argued that the West is to blame for Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014 and 2022. I analyze these issues in the context of a game theoretic model in which the West has an opportunity to enlarge NATO and then Russia has an opportunity to attack Ukraine. I argue that offensive realism predicts NATO enlargement and does not support blaming the West for subsequent Russian behavior. For Russian aggression to be the West's fault, one must believe that a) Russia would not have attacked Ukraine if NATO had not enlarged, b) that the West was confident of this fact and c) that NATO enlargement was driven by non-security motivations, such as liberal ideology. Offensive realist theory maintains that we cannot know state motivations, which contradicts all three points. Offensive realist foreign policy is therefore not derived from offensive realist theory, which, given the prominence of both, raises concerns about the influence of theory on policy more generally.

When Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, thirty years of Ukrainian independence were brutally interrupted and Ukraine faced a struggle for its existence as a sovereign state. Russian attacks on civilians caused widespread loss of life and Ukrainians fled their homes to become refugees, within Ukraine and abroad. As political scientists interested in the causes of war, we strive to understand the causes of this particular war and to refine our understanding of these causes in general. And, in the age of social media, scholars of war also contribute directly to national and international debates on these topics, in ways that can go viral and have widespread impact.

One of the most prominent examples of this is the case of John J. Mearsheimer. Mearsheimer is well known to scholars for his theoretical writings on international relations, in particular his magnum opus, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (Mearsheimer 2001). In it, he outlines his theory of “offensive realism” which depicts a world of states that ruthlessly compete for power in conditions of anarchy. The competition for power can lead to war, which leaves all states worse off, but is nonetheless rational, because to refrain from competition is to put oneself in great jeopardy. The international system is therefore a tragic realm, in which the struggle to survive leads to war and destruction.

However, Mearsheimer is even more famous for his critiques of US foreign policy.¹ In these writings, one of his most consistent themes is criticism of the use of force by the US, and justifications of the use of force by others. He, and other realists like his frequent coauthor Stephen M. Walt, have savaged the US intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq as a product of what he calls “liberal delusions” (Mearsheimer 2018; Walt 2018). More controversially,

1. Before the 2022 Russian attack on Ukraine, the most prominent example was his critique of the influence of the “Israel lobby” on US foreign policy (Mearsheimer and Walt 2007).

he argued that Russian leader Vladimir Putin's aggression against Ukraine in 2014 and 2022 were the West's fault because it enlarged NATO and hinted that Ukraine and Georgia could aspire to membership in the future as well.² The analysis became so controversial after the war began that Mearsheimer was widely interviewed and his statements were picked up by Russian television. As a result, his analysis was the target of further criticism for essentially justifying Russian aggression and being in harmony with Russian propaganda.

Lost in the furor over how closely Mearsheimer's views resembled Putin's was the more subtle question of how distant they were from his own theory. A problem with Mearsheimer's understanding of NATO enlargement and the Russo-Ukrainian war is the chasm between what Mearsheimer's theory implies about them and what Mearsheimer the policy analyst says about them. Offensive realist theory argues that states seek security but do not know the motivations of other states. They therefore assume the worst and compete for power with anyone who could threaten them. The theory therefore recommends taking advantage of temporary Russian weakness after the Cold War and expanding NATO as far as possible, so that when Russia, inevitably, returns to foreign aggression, the West is in the best possible position to stop it (Sushentsov and Wohlforth 2020; Gunitsky 2024). Realist foreign policy commentary, however, argues that Russia was not a threat after the Cold War, and that NATO enlargement turned it into one by arousing suspicions of Western motivations. This is a fundamentally defensive realist or spiral model argument, stressing the possibility of benign motivations and mutual trust that could be disrupted by competition for power. Offensive realist theory specifically rejects such arguments, while offensive realist foreign policy is founded on them. (Actually need to delete this. OR may not make such arguments

2. Mearsheimer's 2018 book won the 2019 Valdai Club Award from Putin's foreign policy discussion forum.

and the model does not rely on them.)³

The gap between offensive realist theory and foreign policy might itself seem like an academic subject of little real importance. Who cares whether offensive realists are consistent, why not simply focus on whether particular arguments are right or wrong? The reason the gap matters is that scholars hoping to contribute to public debates make claims to expertise to gain a hearing. In many cases, that expertise consists of careful and systematic empirical study which provides lessons from history. In the case of realist international relations scholars, however, their status as theorists is a big part of their claim to expertise. While scholars like Mearsheimer discuss historical cases, they are not historians. The most important source of authority they claim in offering an understanding of how the world works is their ostensibly logical interpretation of a validated body of realist theory. If, in fact, their foreign policy positions are at variance with their own theory, their abilities as theorists are called into question. To enter the political arena with false claims of logical coherence or theoretical rigor undermines the basis for public confidence in academia in the field of international relations, a problem with broad ramifications in an era in which expertise of all kinds is under assault (Nichols 2018).

3. I am by no means the first to point out a divergence between realist theory and realist foreign policy. Rodger Payne argued that there was a fundamental tension between the realist claim to present a positive theory of how international relations “really” works, and the tendency of realists to loudly decry U.S. foreign policy (Payne 2007). If their theory worked, they would presumably have nothing to complain about. Ido Oren developed this point further but argued that classical realists who recognized political thought as a form of political action avoided the dilemma (Oren 2009). Paul Poast argued that one should not let objections to realist takes on the Russo-Ukrainian war lead one to reject realist theory, which retains much of value (Poast 2022).

In this essay I will first outline the key tenets of offensive realism. To do this requires briefly revisiting the intra-realist debates of the 1990s, in particular the schism within structural realism between offensive and defensive variants. I will then show why offensive realism predicts NATO enlargement and is incompatible with arguments blaming the West for Russian aggression. I develop these arguments in the context of a game theoretic model linking NATO enlargement and the war in Ukraine, which allows the relevant theoretical positions to be clearly specified and compared with each other. I then consider alternative interpretations of the theory by which offensive realism could be considered to logically critique NATO enlargement and show why they are unpersuasive.

1 Realist Theory and Foreign Policy

Modern international relations realism emerged in the 1990s out of a set of disputes about the implications of Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* (Waltz 1979). The core of Waltz's thought can be summarized in four propositions. First, the international system is anarchic, so force may be used at any time. Second, states seek to survive in anarchy, and may have more ambitious goals as well. Third, competition and war often maximize a state's security. Fourth, states will form balances of power, rather than imbalances. In the 1980s, liberals and what would later be called constructivists criticized Waltz from outside of realism, assuming that Waltz's statement of realism was a correct summation, and indeed advancement of the school of thought (Keohane 1986). In the 1990s, it began to be clear that Waltz's statement of realism was itself incoherent and required further development.⁴

4. Waltz, somewhat oddly, always maintained that realist theory could not explain states' foreign policy choices, and only a theory at the domestic level could do so. This position was effectively demolished by

The key problem in Waltz’s reframing of realism has to do with state motivations and perceptions thereof. Security is in fact a benign, positive sum goal that all can enjoy simply by not attacking each other (Schweller 1996; Kydd 1997). A world of security seeking states, therefore, who knew each other to be security seekers, could easily be peaceful, since if they all refrained from attacking each other, they would all maximize their security. Therefore there is a fundamental gap in the logical chain from anarchy, to security seeking, to conflict. Two strands of realism arose that differ in the way they address that problem.

Offensive realism posits that the motivations of other states are so opaque and variable as to be unknowable (Mearsheimer 2001; Rosato 2014). Other states could be benign security seekers or they could be aggressive power maximizers. Given the uncertainty, states have no choice but to assume the worst and strive to maximize their own power without regard for the motivations of other states, or their beliefs about one’s own motivations (Brooks 1997). Strictly speaking, worst case thinking is a violation of another of Mearsheimer’s assumptions, state rationality, since rationality implies expected utility maximization rather than worst case thinking.⁵ However, a simple theory in which states maximize power subject to costs is a reasonable first cut on many problems, and maps on to low trust equilibria in more complex games. In addition, the large rationalist literature in which states are just assumed

Colin Elman, and Waltz’s response contained the astonishing admission, “An international-political theory can explain states’ behavior only when external pressures dominate the internal disposition of states, which seldom happens.” This statement is both unlikely and a radical indictment of his own theoretical work (Elman 1996; Waltz 1996).

5. Mearsheimer and Rosato claim to have an alternative understanding of the meaning of rationality in international relations, but in the end it is just a restatement of expected utility maximization (Mearsheimer and Rosato 2023; Kydd 2025).

to have conflicting preferences, as in the bargaining and war framework, is congruent with offensive realism in a broad sense (Fearon 1995).

Defensive realism avoids the irrationality of worst case thinking by embracing Bayesian updating over motivations (Kydd 2005; Glaser 2010).⁶ States are often divided into two “types” the security seeking, who just want to survive, and the “greedy” who have additional, non-security related goals (Glaser 1995; Fearon 2011). The probability that the other side is a security seeker is conceived of as the level of trust one has for them. When mutual trust is high, cooperation is feasible, when mutual trust is low, competition ensues. States can sometimes reassure each other and build trust, but even defensive steps to build power can increase distrust, leading to “spirals” of mistrust and competition (Jervis 1976). Note, offensive realists specifically deny the possibility of reassurance as a way out of the security dilemma, judging signaling to be inadequate to convey information about motivations (Montgomery 2006). For offensive realists, we are always already at the end of the spiral, the level of trust is never high enough to sustain cooperation between great powers.⁷

Realism is also quite prominent as a school of thought in the foreign policy world. Realist heavyweights like Mearsheimer 2018, Walt 2018, and Posen 2015 have written widely read books critical of US foreign policy, and a younger generation of realists frequent the pages of

6. Note, defensive realism can also be distinguished from offensive realism along other dimensions, such as beliefs about whether conquest pays in the modern era, the relative ease of conquest, and the relative frequency of balancing vs. bandwagoning. See Van Evera 1999.

7. A third strand of realist thought to emerge in the 1990s is “neo-classical” realism. Neo-classical realism purports to be more inclusive and incorporate insights related to domestic politics and individual leaders into the realist framework. Some argue this flexibility robs it of analytical coherence. See Rose 1998, Legro and Moravcsik 1999 and Kirshner 2022.

the most prestigious foreign policy journals offering realist takes on the issues of the day and foreign policies of successive administrations (Ashford 2021; Shiffrinson and Wertheim 2021). Interestingly, most of these authors make no reference to the offensive-defensive split within realism, which is troubling, given that the implications of each school are quite distinct. Instead they proceed from the broadest of assumptions (power matters, war recurs, etc.) to discussions of grand strategy and specific foreign policy questions.

The near consensus view within realist foreign policy circles is that the United States has been too aggressive in the post-Cold War era (Bacevich 2020), and indeed from the end of World War II. Since the end of Soviet Union we have been seduced by our preeminent power and so have squandered our wealth and power on ill-conceived military ventures. Both Republicans and Democrats are blamed for this over-reaction, indeed no meaningful difference is drawn between the two parties. Their foreign policy experts co-constitute “the blob” which runs US foreign policy from the shadows and drags us into ill advised wars in order to maintain their prestigious jobs (Walt 2018). Realists, in contrast, advocate “restraint” and “offshore balancing” (Posen 2015). They oppose the use of force abroad, and call for scaling back the US presence in the Middle East and Europe, although they debate the extent to which we should support Taiwan and confront China.

Restraint, and realism along with it, have become the defacto foreign policy philosophy of the populist wing of the Republican party. Their stance dovetails nicely with Trump’s “America First” slogan and his general skepticism towards US allies, international trade and the wars of the Bush years. Even Trump’s mysterious pro-Putin stance is enthusiastically echoed by Mearsheimer’s outspoken defense of Russia’s aggression towards Ukraine and De-

sch's critique of Zelensky.⁸ Leaders hoping to succeed Trump, like Vivek Ramaswamy, have embraced realism as well (Ramaswamy 2023), though some realists have not hugged him back (Walt 2023). Realist views, once confined to academia and the libertarian fringe (Carpenter 2019), are increasingly central to political debates and supported by a groundswell of neo-isolationist public opinion.⁹

2 Offensive Realism, NATO Enlargement and Ukraine

But is restraint realist? More specifically, is restraint *offensive* realist? Let us consider the case of NATO enlargement and Russian attacks on Ukraine, culminating in the 2022 invasion. I will focus on the analysis of John Mearsheimer since he has been so prominent in that debate. His offensive realist theory explains these events very simply and powerfully, with core components of the theory, indeed it could be a paradigmatic case for the theory. However, his foreign policy analysis views these events as aberrations from realism that are explained by liberal delusions.

The offensive realist explanation for NATO enlargement is simple and compelling. The United States and the Soviet Union were locked in a struggle for power, as the two most powerful states in the system must be of necessity. The Soviet Union experienced a sudden negative shock to its power, rendering it much weaker than it was. As a result, the Soviets lost control of their sphere of influence and even the outer provinces of their empire. This weakness was bound to be temporary, however, some degree of recovery could be fore-

8. Michael C. Desch, The Tragedy of Volodymyr Zelensky, Harpers Magazine, October 2023.

9. This newfound popularity may embarrass realists who like to think of themselves as a beleaguered and ignored minority (Gilpin 1996; Walt 2022; Ashford 2022).

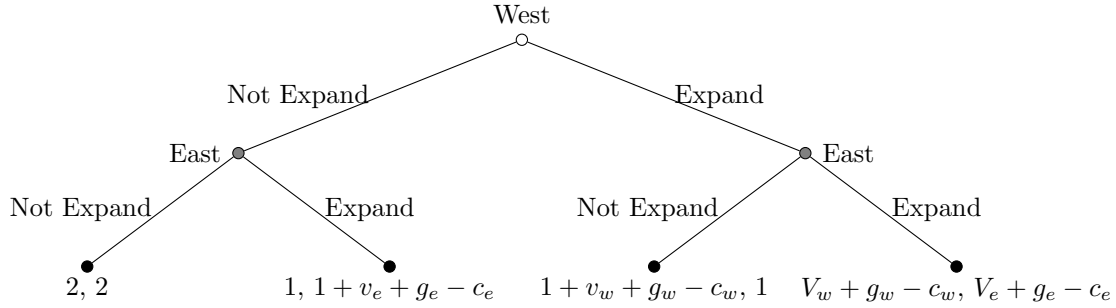
seen. When the Russians began to recover their lost strength, they would naturally start to regather the lost provinces of their empire, and if their recovery permitted, the sphere of influence as well (Poast 2024). Any state that wishes to maximize its relative power must try to regain its position to the extent that its power allows. So Russian revanchism, from the offensive realist perspective, can be treated as a certainty.

The question facing the U.S., therefore, is what to do to prepare for future Russian efforts to retake its lost provinces. One possibility is to simply stand aside and let it happen. But this would be to allow a geopolitical rival to increase its power position at your expense, and therefore would be contrary to realism. In what he calls the “want of a nail” argument, Mearsheimer is clear on this point:

States often worry that if they fail to address minor security problems, their adversary will continue to take advantage and the balance of power will eventually shift profoundly against them. It is better to nip the problem in the bud than wait until survival really is at stake. The power of this view point is magnified by the degree to which survival matters for states (Mearsheimer 2018, 208).

The other possibility is to incorporate as much of the adversary’s sphere of influence into your own as possible while the adversary is too weak to forcibly oppose it (Labs 1997). When Russia regains some of its strength, therefore, it faces not individual countries that can easily be cowed or conquered, but a united alliance that deters it from attacking. The result is that a temporary negative shock to Soviet power is translated into a permanent weakening in Russian power, to the advantage of the United States. Note, this story makes no mention of democracy, psychology, or other non-realist factors. Here there is no “zone of

Figure 1: The Alliance Enlargement Game



peace” or liberal utopia. Nor is there humiliation, resentment, or revenge. Here we have only rational decision makers seeking to build their own power and weaken that of competitors. The offensive realist world in a nutshell.¹⁰

3 The Alliance Enlargement Game

The realist approach to the topic can be represented in a formal model. Why bother with formalism? The main advantage is that one can capture in one framework both the offensive and defensive realist logics, and trace the relationship between the assumptions and the ultimate conclusions in a rigorous fashion. (Kydd 2001).

The Alliance Enlargement Game is illustrated in Figure 1. There are two players, West and East. The setting is the end of the Cold War. East has had a sudden collapse in its level of power and its allies have abandoned it. However, it is widely understood that East will recover at least a portion of its strength eventually. West contemplates expanding its alliance to include a former member of East’s alliance, such as Poland. After West’s choice, East

10. See the last point in William C. Wohlforth’s critique of Mearsheimer’s *The Great Delusion*, in H-Diplo—ISSF, September 23, 2019. See also Shiffrinson 2020.

may expand by retaking control of another former ally or province, such as Ukraine. I use the same terms for the strategies of West and East, expand and not expand, to simplify the exposition of the game. However, these terms may have different significance in each case. For West, expansion means accepting an ally who wishes to join NATO, whereas for East expanding may mean using military force to partition or annex a country to prevent it from doing so. At a minimum, expansion will therefore be more costly for East than for West, to say nothing of the moral distinction between a free alliance and an imperial conquest.

Having a potential ally or province remain neutral is worth 1 to each side, and having it absorbed by the opposing side is worth 0. If West and East both refrain from expanding, therefore, each side gets a payoff of 2, because both small states remain independent. Expanding when the other side has not expanded produces a strategic value of v_w and v_e for West and East, respectively, at a cost of c_w and c_e . I assume that if the other side refrains from expanding, the strategic value of taking an ally is not worth the cost, that is, $v_w - c_w < 1$ and $v_e - c_e < 1$. This assumption stacks the deck in favor of non-expansion, if this were not the case then each side would have a dominant strategy to expand and mutual restraint would be impossible from the outset.

If the other side has expanded, however, the strategic value of the remaining ally is denoted V_w and V_e and I assume that in this case the strategic value of an ally makes it worthwhile to expand, that is $V_w - c_w > 1$ and $V_e - c_e > 1$. The value of strategic territory is therefore contingent on whether the other side has expanded. The closer they move to your frontiers, the more valuable it is to push those frontiers outwards. If the strategic value of the allies were all that mattered, therefore, each side would prefer to reciprocate what the other side does, expand if the other side is expected to expand, but refrain if the other side

is expected to not expand. I further assume that each side would prefer that the other side not expand, so $V_w < 1 + v_w$ and $V_e < 1 + v_e$.

Finally, each side may be one of two types: security seeking and greedy. Security seekers respond to the strategic incentives and attempt to maximize their security. Greedy types have additional, non-security related motivations for expansion. These could include a desire to spread democracy and protect human rights, for West, or a desire to rebuild the Russian empire, for East. Security seekers have the payoffs just described. Greedy types have an additional payoff g_w and g_e for expanding. Security seekers prefer to reciprocate what the other side does. Greedy states prefer to expand even if the other side does not, so $v_w + g_w - c_w > 1$ and $v_e + g_e - c_e > 1$. I further assume that greedy states prefer mutual expansion to mutual restraint, so $V_w + g_w - c_w > 2$ and $V_e + g_e - c_e > 2$. Greedy states have a dominant strategy to expand their alliance and would rather both sides expand than neither.

Finally, we need to consider the level of trust between West and East. A world in which states know each other to be security seekers would be peaceful. Indeed, in the model, if both sides were known to be security seekers, the equilibrium outcome would be mutual non-expansion. The problem is the possibility that other states have greedy motivations for expansion. The level of trust is therefore identified with the probability that the other side is a security seeker. Mistrust, conversely, is the probability that the other side is greedy. The probability that West is a security seeker is denoted t_w and the corresponding probability for East is t_e . The likelihoods that they are greedy is $1 - t_w$ and $1 - t_e$ respectively.

How should West and East play the game? If West does not expand, a security seeking East will not expand either, but a greedy East will. If West does expand, then both types of East will expand. The security seeking West therefore faces a dilemma. If West expands,

the outcome will be expansion by both sides, for a payoff of $V_w - c_w$ for the security seeking West. If West does not expand, there is a t_e chance that East does not expand, for a payoff of 2, and a $1 - t_e$ chance that East is greedy and expands anyway, for a payoff of 1. The security seeking West will expand if the level of trust is below the following threshold.

$$t_e < V_w - c_w - 1$$

There are two equilibria in the game, the low trust equilibrium and the high trust equilibrium, as shown in Table 1. In both equilibria, the greedy type of East expands no matter what the West does, while the security seeking East only expands if the West expands first. The greedy West also expands in both equilibria. The security seeking West's strategy depends on its beliefs about East's type. In the low trust equilibrium, the security seeking West expands the alliance. This is because the likelihood that East is willing to not expand is too low to make it worth the gamble. In the high trust equilibrium, the security seeking West is optimistic enough about East to not expand, hoping that the East will reciprocate by not expanding as well.

The Alliance Enlargement Game captures a very simple realist analysis of NATO expansion. Territory is strategically valuable. If the other side expands, you have a strategic incentive to do the same. If both sides could be assured that the other side were solely motivated by security, both would be willing to refrain from expansion, and get their best possible payoff. However, some states are greedy and would seek to dominate their periphery even without a security threat. When trust is low, even security seekers are reluctant to take a chance on cooperating with their opponent, and the result can be mutual expansion rather

Table 1: Equilibrium Strategies in the Alliance Enlargement Game

	Low Trust Equilibrium	High Trust Equilibrium
Level of Trust	$t_e < V_w - c_w - 1$	$V_w - c_w - 1 < t_e$
Security Seeking West	Expand	Not Expand
Greedy West	Expand	
Security Seeking East	Expand if West Expands, Not Expand Otherwise	
Greedy East	Expand no matter what West does	

than cooperation. When West is greedy, it will expand regardless of its level of trust for East, and both types of East will expand in turn.

Offensive realist theory is represented by the low trust equilibrium. As Mearsheimer says, “states can never be sure that other states do not have offensive intentions.” The level of trust is low, therefore states do not take chances on the good intentions of other states. Instead, they compete for power and the result is sometimes a tragic competition between security seeking states. Defensive realists argue that either equilibrium may occur, depending on the level of trust. Sometimes states do trust each other enough to let down their guard, so state motivations, and beliefs about them, are important determinants of state behavior. Of course, defensive realists also acknowledge that sometimes trust is low and then the low trust equilibrium will hold.

With this framework in mind we can ask, what does it mean to say that the West is to blame for East’s expansion? I argue that for the West to be at fault for East’s expansion, three points must hold. First, without Western expansion, East would not have expanded. If East would have expanded no matter what the West did, blame can hardly be attributed to

the West. This means that we must believe that East was the security seeking type, because a greedy East would have expanded no matter what. Second, Western trust for East must be high. If Western trust for East is low, then a security seeking West would expand along with the greedy type. The West's expansion would therefore be justified by fear of East, and not contingent on Western greed. If trust is low, blame cannot be fairly laid on the actors who are forced to compete. Instead, the structure of the system is to blame, because security seekers and greedy types behave the same. Trust must be high to make blame of West a reasonable position. Third, West must be the greedy type. With trust high, only the greedy West expands. Blame may then fairly be laid at the feet of west's greedy motivations for the ensuing conflict. All three conditions must hold for West to be fairly blamed for East's expansion.

In what version of realism do such statements make sense? According to offensive realism, intentions are opaque, inscrutable, unknowable. All that we know about them is that the level of trust is never high enough to justify cooperation between great powers. Offensive realism, therefore, contradicts all three points. According to offensive realism, we cannot know East's intentions, and we certainly do not know that they are the security seeking type. Similarly, since East's motivations are unknowable, we must infer that West does not know what they are, and in particular, West must be assumed to distrust East, because trust is never high between great powers. Finally, we as observers cannot know West's type either, since intentions are inscrutable. West might be security seeking, or it might be greedy, there is no way to form beliefs on this question, according to the theory. Belief in offensive realism, therefore, is logically incompatible with blaming West for East's expansion.

Defensive realism, by contrast, is entirely consistent with this position. Defensive realists

are free to make all three claims. Analysts who view the 1990's as a golden era when Russian intentions were benign, mutual trust was high, but the West expanded anyway, naturally blame the West for NATO enlargement, and trace it to non-security motivations. It then becomes an empirical question as to whether these claims are accurate, rather than a theoretical question about what assumptions one should make in developing a theory of international relations (Driedger 2023).

4 Offensive Realist Foreign Policy and NATO/Ukraine

Despite the inconsistency between offensive realist theory and blaming the West for Russian aggression, Mearsheimer does just that. His theory does imply that Russia's response to NATO enlargement should be to expand, "great powers are always sensitive to potential threats near their home territory" (Mearsheimer 2014). He then argues that Putin would not have attacked Ukraine but for western meddling, essentially arguing that Putin is the security seeking type in the Alliance Expansion Game, so that if NATO had refrained from expanding, Putin would have followed suit. He is clear that Russia was no longer a threat and "did not need to be contained." In an interview with Isaac Chotiner, he argued essentially that we know Putin had limited aims because he did not articulate more ambitious ones, directly contradicting his theory (Chotiner 2022). He approvingly quotes George Kennan to the effect that "No one was threatening anyone else." He returns to this theme in his 2018 book, where he argues, "most realists opposed expansion because they thought a declining power with an aging population and a one dimensional economy did not need to be contained" (Mearsheimer 2018, 177). And in a footnote, he writes, "Russia was in no position to take the offensive

in the 1990s, and although its economy and military improved somewhat after 2000, hardly anyone in the West saw it as a serious threat to invade its neighbors—especially Ukraine—before the February 22 coup” (Mearsheimer 2018, 277–278).

As it happens, one person who did see Russia as a “serious threat” to Ukraine was John Mearsheimer himself. In 1993 he published an article arguing that Ukraine should keep its nuclear weapons (Mearsheimer 1993), and in a section entitled, “Why Russian-Ukrainian Conflict is Likely,” he made four points. First, the two countries shared a long border and so would compete for security. Second, there was a danger of hypernationalism emerging. Third, there were several disputes between the two countries, including the fact that, “Senior Russian officials, for example, have recently been describing Ukraine’s independence as a ‘transitional’ phenomenon and have been warning other European governments not to open embassies in Kiev because they would soon be downgraded to consular sections subordinate to their embassies in Moscow.” Finally, mixed populations could provide a flashpoint. Throw in the fact that Russia still had as many nuclear weapons as the United States and conventional forces larger than any country in Europe, and it seems hard to avoid the conclusion that Mearsheimer’s foreign policy analysis was closer to his theory in 1993 than it has been in the post 2014 era.

While Mearsheimer may be the most prominent realist critic of NATO enlargement, he is not alone in claiming that realism implies that NATO enlargement was a mistake and caused Putin to invade Ukraine.¹¹ Monica Toft argues that the US “needs to own” its role

11. For an extensive collection see the special issue of *International Politics*, Legacies of NATO Enlargement: International Relations, Domestic Politics, and Alliance Management, Vol 57, No 3 (2020). See also, William J. Perry, How the US Lost Russia. And How We Can Restore Relations. September 5, 2022. Outrider.

in causing Russia to invade Ukraine.¹² Realists also consistently warned of the dangers of a wider NATO-Russian war and advocated for reducing support for Ukraine and pressuring Ukraine to make territorial concessions to Russia that would enable Putin to “save face” and increase his chances of retaining power.¹³ The implication being that if Putin could not plausibly claim victory, he would be more likely to escalate, possibly to the nuclear level. This last argument is quintessentially “liberal” in that it focuses on the domestic regime, the leader, his level of domestic support, and how that might be affected by performance in war (Goemans 2000).

The result is that much of realist foreign policy analysis agrees with Vladimir Putin and the western far left in blaming the U.S. for the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Mearsheimer gave a prominent interview alongside Stephen Cohen, a scholar long sympathetic to Russia, in which they agreed that the U.S. was to blame for the Ukraine crisis.¹⁴ When the 2022 war broke out, Noam Chomsky, lion of the new left in the 1960s, criticized the west and embraced the Russian line. In that, he was in agreement with his one time antagonist, Henry Kissinger, high priest of realism, disciple of Metternich, bomber of North Vietnam

<https://outrider.org/nuclear-weapons/articles/how-us-lost-russia-and-how-we-can-restore-relations>.

12. Monica Toft, “What the United States Needs to Own in Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine.” Responsible Statecraft, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2022/05/16/what-the-united-states-owns-in-russias-war-on-ukraine/>.

13. Emma Ashford and Joshua Shiffrin, “How the War in Ukraine Could Get Much Worse,” Foreign Affairs, March 8, 2022. Realists were not alone in making such arguments, see Charles Kupchan, “Ukraine’s Way Out” The Atlantic, May 18, 2022. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/05/ukraine-war-russia-putin-end/629890/>.

14. Cohen mentions that he has been accused of being a Putin apologist: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SJBQikfYyKs>.

and Cambodia, when he told the Davos crowd that the West should pressure Ukraine to make concessions to Russia.¹⁵ To be sure, the realists traveled further from their theories to get to this position, the far left always took criticism of U.S. foreign policy to the point of support for foreign aggression. But the realist/leftist synthesis was remarkable.¹⁶

5 Counterarguments: Regional Hegemony and Balance of Power

My argument that offensive realist theory, properly understood, both predicts NATO enlargement and is inconsistent with blaming the West for Russian aggression could be challenged on two grounds. First Mearsheimer discusses the concept of “regional hegemony” as the goal of great powers, rather than power maximization, which implies a degree of satiability. Second, he has also argued that balance of power logic implies that the US should be sacrificing Ukraine and the rest of eastern Europe to Russia in order to enlist Russian aid against the growing threat from China.

First, Mearsheimer argues that to achieve security, states seek to achieve regional hegemony, or dominance in their own region, and to prevent regional hegemons from arising in other regions (Mearsheimer 2001, 40–42, 114–126). Regions are isolated by bodies of water which are said to have “stopping power” that impedes attack. States, like the US, that achieve regional hegemony do not need to get deeply involved in other regions, unless a po-

15. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/05/24/henry-kissinger-ukraine-russia-territory-davos/>

16. Van Jackson has been a prominent observer of this trend. See <https://inkstickmedia.com/do-realists-and-leftists-want-the-same-thing/>

tential hegemon arises there. At that point, unless the local regional powers can handle the problem, the extra-regional power may need to step in to contain the aspirant. As we have seen, since 2014 Mearsheimer has argued that Russia after 1991 no longer posed a threat of becoming a regional hegemon in Europe, so the US could safely ignore potential increases in Russian power.¹⁷

This argument is ad hoc and almost pollyannaish in its distance from Mearsheimer's core perspective and arguments, as expressed in the "want of a nail" passage. The logic of preventive war suggests that rising powers should be nipped in the bud, rather than allowed to expand until they become major threats. If Prussia had been stopped in 1866, and Germany remained divided, the world wars of the 20th century might have been prevented. The whole point of the Munich analogy is that Germany should have been stopped in the mid 1930's before it became strong enough to challenge the other great powers of Europe. If Putin were to have conquered Ukraine quickly, as it hoped to do, offensive realism implies that he would have then turned his sights further westward, in pursuit of regional hegemony. Would it have been wiser to leave Poland out of NATO so he would have a free hand there as well? Should we have waited until Russia had amassed as much power and territory as the Soviet Union did before attempting to contain it? Surely, in line with the "want of a nail" logic, it is more consistent with offensive realist assumptions to argue that rising threats

17. The best argument along these lines is Stephen Van Evera, "To Prevent War and Secure Ukraine, Make Ukraine Neutral," *Defense Priorities*, February 19, 2022. Van Evera marshalls economic data to show that even if Russia swallowed Ukraine, Russian power would be a small fraction of the previous threats that spurred the US to action in the World Wars and the Cold War. He also makes the important point that if Russia cares about dominating Ukraine more than we care about Ukrainian independence, nuclear deterrence theory suggests that Russia will prevail in any contest of risk taking.

should be checked at the outset, rather than allowed to grow stronger. Indeed, Mearsheimer dismisses appeasement as a “fanciful and dangerous strategy” (Mearsheimer 2001, 164)

But what about balance of power logic? Mearsheimer has argued that since China is the main threat, Russia should be appeased to bring it on board an anti-China coalition. There are three problems with this idea. First, the US is still so dominant in military power, that even according to simple balance of power logic, Russia and China should ally against the US for quite some time. Second, the conflicts of interest between the US and Russia and between China and the US are much greater than those between China and Russia (Kydd 2020, 2022). Russia and the west have serious conflicts of interest in Eastern Europe, we want the countries there to be free democracies allied to the US, Russia wants them to be ruled by pliable authoritarians or directly incorporated into Russia. The US and China also have serious conflicts of interest with respect to east Asia, primarily concerning the fate of Taiwan and the security of Japan and South Korea. Russia and China, however, have little in the way of conflicts of interest. Despite their long, shared border, they have few remaining territorial or other disputes. This is in part because Russia focuses mainly on Europe and China on Asia (Haynes 2020). This means that the US would have to sacrifice much to appease Russia, and even then Russia would have little incentive to assist the US against China. Finally, it is not clear what Russia could do for the US even if it wanted to. Russian power against China is weak, and it certainly would not help in maritime contingencies, which are the key issue (Ross 2020). Thus permitting Russia to aggrandize itself at the expense of our European friends in the hopes that it would then turn on China is to pay dearly now for a very uncertain prospect in the future, hardly a realist proposition.

6 Conclusion

Realist international relations theory provides an indispensable building block for the study of international relations. It is the foundation of much of international relations theory and the ancestor of the modern game theoretic approach to international security, bargaining, conflict, competition, alliances and much more. It grapples with the vital questions: the implications of anarchy, trust and mistrust, military technology and power, alliances, the causes of war, the list goes on and on. As such it deserves a central place in the intellectual history of the discipline of international relations and helps shape how we understand the world today.

Offensive realism is a very specific strand of realist theory, one that makes strong assumptions about the inscrutability of state motivations, and concludes that great powers cannot cooperate because trust is always everywhere too low. Its adherents also claim that the West is to blame for Russian aggression against Ukraine. I have argued that these positions are incompatible so that offensive realist foreign policy cannot be deduced from offensive realist theory. Defensive realists are free to make such arguments, although not all of them do. More broadly, the realist foreign policy of “restraint” is much more compatible with defensive realism than offensive.

This raises a final question. Why, despite their logical flaws, are offensive realists so prominent in both academic and policy debates? This is a question for the sociology of knowledge, but it seems plausible that the marketplace of ideas, both in the academy and outside it, rewards provocation over logical consistency. Offensive realist theories seem to strongly over predict conflict, and were criticized on those grounds in the academy. Offensive

realist foreign policy is provocative because it appears sympathetic to US adversaries and recommends appeasement. Indeed, part of the interest in offensive realist foreign policy may be precisely because of the fact that it claims to deduce a dovish foreign policy stance from a hawkish theory. This kind of “signaling against type” can be persuasive in some contexts (Calvert 1985). If the logical connection between the theory and the policy is missing, however, the signal becomes meaningless, and all we are left with is the provocation.

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