

Against Mearsheimer

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Leftists with a preference for grand narratives and easy answers love the realist geopolitical explanations of Mearsheimer. So does much of the far right. It's all about great nations, spheres of influence and chains of causal factors that seem to oredetemrine everything.

Have a quick look at this recent geopolitics debate.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=hH3s7MRJkAI>

Marlene Laruelle is the only one making a meaningful point in this panel. Mearsheimer and the rest remain in an obsolete logic of sphere of influences that endorses the legitimacy of pre-emptive strikes when existential threats are encountered. I find it problematic how some Leftists are advancing Mearsheimer arguments right now. This is the counter-factual that needs to be taken in consideration. If, let's say, Germany were to have a democratic transition to a socialist system and pull-out of NATO and out of the capitalist embedded EU, Mearsheimer would be the first to show that this has constituted a severe economic danger to the entire Western Europe and also a military existential threat, given Germany position in the heart of NATO lands. 'Spheres of influences' would be invoked and therefore a total war against socialist Germany would be considered a normal and an expected reaction, given the 'need' of the capitalist region to protect its 'sphere of influence'. This is the essence of his position.

Mearsheimer's IR theory is deeply behavioristic (there was this stimulus and it triggered that natural reaction) and it's also deeply conservative because it preserves the status quo and the right of great powers to control what they perceive as their feudal fiefs. His argument fails to make a distinction between the historical-factual reconstruction of how a conflict happened on one side and the moral-political space that allows us to evaluate and judge the rights and wrongs of history on the other side. 'The war in Afghanistan started because the 9/11 attacks and the support the Taliban were giving to global terrorists' - this, for example, could be an attempt to explain why the US political elite thought that Afghanistan was an existential threat and deemed absolutely necessary to invade it. But we know that this decision was not a 'natural' outcome and a 'necessary' reaction the US had to have after 9/11. From a moral-political space we could understand, as the events were unfolding, that other courses of action were possible and that what the US was doing was a horrific imperialistic military action, in spite the horrible events of 9/11. Similarly, with Russia in Ukraine.

Marlene Laruelle is right, there is shared responsibility for the crisis, NATO played an important role, but the war is Putin's choice. Other possible courses of action were possible, the way the narrative regarding Ukraine shifts in Russia right now (from portraying a potentially neutral country to a country that should not exist at all) shows that Russia is not behavioristically conditioned to invade Ukraine. It is a choice.

The socialist and pacifist moral-political space from which this situation needs to be judged is that wars and the invasion of sovereign countries are not legitimate under any circumstances. The main problem for the Left in this moment should be that an imperialist army is butchering thousands of

people in Ukraine and is wrecking an entire country. And the regional Left should invoke a moral-political space which states that actions like this are unacceptable. Against the dominant narrative that Putin is psychologically disturbed, we need to critically reconstruct how this conflict happened geo-politically, this is true. But at the end of the day we need to inscribe these events into a progressist ethical space. This is emancipatory politics.

I think that Ukraine has to stay neutral and if possible, later and down the road, the entire 1999 and 2004 NATO enlargement should be reversed, if we want to have regional stability. The reason for this is that NATO is an imperialist military hegemon. Alternative defensive security strategies need to be employed. But the feeling I have is that some Leftists are turning a blind eye to the atrocities of Putin's criminal regime because this enables us to voice our anti-NATO arguments. This is a strategy born out of weakness. It is weak because we have not been able to substantiate a criticism against NATO that can rally people behind us and this is the opportunity to do so. This is why I think some Leftists endorse this behavioristic explanation of the war advanced by Mearsheimer: this way it can be shown that 'natural' and cause-and effect' disasters can happen if people support NATO. War is so the logical consequence of NATO expansion. The naturalization of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and the portrayal of the brutal Russian invasion as something that leaves no room for a moral-political filter is deeply problematic. This Leftists rhetoric strategy is born out of frustration with how limited the impact of our political activism actually has on the general population: 'we said for years that militarization and NATO is wrong, this is what 'naturally' happens if you do not support our political agenda'.

This type of language will definitely not mobilize people towards the Left. If anything will just make them think that the Left is minimizing the Russian responsibility for the war and will make people want more NATO, not less. I don't know of any Leftists that support Putin (this is right-wing propaganda). What some of them are trying to do is generate a more contextual understanding of the conflict which is desperately needed now, when mass-media itself portrays everything in very shallow terms. But after this analysis is done there should be clear Leftist voice saying that the Russian aggression is not justifiable in any circumstance. Along with the general public opinion we should stand against this war, hoping that this experience will enable them to see that future wars in Afghanistan and Iraq or any other country that NATO invades is equally unjustifiable. Calling the general public opinion hypocrite is not a way forward to consolidate support for socialism. It is just Leftists moralism. Similarly, we should side with the general opinion that the huge flows of Ukrainian migrants are an absolute tragedy and that all countries should do everything in their power to accommodate them, in the hope that future Syrian refugees or any other refugees displaced by NATO wars deserve a similar treatment. Calling the entire general public racist and duplicitous is a very facile generalization. For even if racist and classist attitudes exist, they are not a destiny, but something that can be unlearned. This is our socialist hope. Antagonizing the general public is a youthful and avant-garde Leftists option. It has its merits sometimes. But the real goal should be building political support for socialist alternatives by helping them to see differently.

This antagonizing way of reasoning will not do us any good. Our stance is against militarization and imperialism not only NATO. The real existential threat right now for the region, but most of all for Ukrainian workers, is Russian imperialism. Arguments like 'they had it coming', because there are Ukrainian fascist groups and there is nationalistic disrespect for ethnic minorities are deeply problematic. Romania did not just manifest the intention to join NATO, it is part of NATO. It has fascist groups and has fascist politicians. It is close territorially to Russia. It has ballistic missiles which the Russian government criticized several times. But this does not legitimize a Russian invasion of this country. Or any other country from Eastern Europe that is in the same situation. But according to Mearsheimer thinking this could be a legitimate threat as well.

If Russia is given the slightest geopolitical legitimacy in attacking Ukraine (as Mearsheimer does)

then this means that the US attempts to topple down various governments in Latin America can claim legitimacy as well. US has its own 'spheres of influence', it can easily invoke an 'existential threat', it can make claims that horrible 'Stalinists' are socializing the means of production and steal the goods of honest and decent citizens in Latin American countries, and so on. There would be dozens of Mearsheimers arguing that US is legitimately threatened by this. Listen in his first lecture what he says about Canada.

Also listen to how terrible wrong his prediction that Russia will not invading Ukraine was. The same naïve understanding is displayed in this lecture as well: Russia has no intention to annex parts of Ukraine as it did with Crimea. As if you would need territorial statist integration in order to have territorial control over the economic and political system of occupied Ukraine. Do you remember when Sergei Naryshkin, chief of the foreign intelligence service, intimidated by Putin's questions says: "I support the proposal about the entry of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics into the Russian Federation." It was as if a scolded pupil gives to his teacher the correct answer he desperately wants to hear. It was on 21 February, three days before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. For weeks Russian diplomacy claimed that the reports of an 'imminent invasion' were Western propaganda. Mearsheimer's blind spot to the territorial annexation of parts of Ukraine is a hyper-simplistic and naïve understanding of the existing conflict and to the Russian imperialist control of the Donbass region. It amounts to saying that US did not 'annex' Iraq, it only wanted to bring democracy there and enable the formation of a legitimate and democratically elected government. This argument would be at the level of Mearsheimer not seeing Russian colonial interests in Ukraine.

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