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QI Panel:

Book Talk: How States Think: The Rationality of Foreign Policy

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Anatol Lieven 0:45

Good morning everyone. I hope you can hear me okay. I am Anatol Lieven, director of the Eurasia program at the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft. My guest today is Professor John Mearsheimer, before I introduce him and his his book, just a couple of announcements on Wednesday, but at 1pm, not 12pm, we are having another panel to discuss the new report by QI's William Hartung on Chinese military spending in context, trying to address some of the rather overblown characterizations of the Chinese military that have occurred recently. For today, John and I will talk for about half an hour. And then I will pass on questions from you, the audience, please put your questions in the q&a down below. And I will then pass them on to John. And I apologize if I don't get around to everybody. Unfortunately, we only have an hour. So with that, it is a tremendous honor today to introduce Professor John Mearsheimer of the University of Chicago, where he has taught since 1982. John served in the military past from West Point. He is generally regarded as one of the greatest thinkers on international relations of the past half century, as well as one of the very greatest thinkers from the realist tradition over well, since it began. And today, he is author of the classic work, the Tragedy of Great Power Politics. And today we will be discussing his latest book, co authored with Sebastian Rosato, How States Think: The Rationality of Foreign Policy, an interesting title since I think both of us have often felt that many recent foreign policy decisions have been profoundly irrational. Anyway, John, to begin now, I wil just asked you to describe briefly the main thesis of this book.

John Mearsheimer 2:59

Well, what happened here, Anatol is that a number of years ago, Sebastian and I were talking, and we were quite perplexed by the fact that there was this growing consensus in the academic world, and even in the policy world, that states are more likely to be irrational or non rational than they are to be rational. And we thought this was a rather disturbing finding, not only because we thought it was intuitively wrong, but also because almost all of the key theories in international relations are based on the rational actor assumption, and that would relegate them to the dustbin of history if states were not rational. And furthermore, how can policy makers make policy if all the states in the system are most of the states in the system are irrational most of the time?

So we decided to investigate the matter. And what we had to do was we had to come up with a definition of rationality. In other words, what's the baseline? Or what are the criteria for determining whether or not a state is rational. And then what we had to do is we had to take that definition. And we had to apply it to a handful of cases, important cases and see whether states

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were indeed rational or non rational. And the definition that we came up with about rationality is a two part definition. The first part focuses on the individual and the second part focuses on the collectivity because inside a state there are a handful of individuals who are involved in making decisions, so you have to aggregate the decisions or the views of individual policymakers. Anyway, focusing on the individual. Our basic argument is that we are all theoretical human beings. We call this *homo theoreticus*. And our basic argument is that to comprehend the world around us, and to be able to make decisions, which is what rationality is all about, you need theories and everybody has theories in their head. And the question is whether or not the theories that those policymakers employ are credible theories or non credible theories. That's the key criterion at the individual level. So, we argue that if you see an individual or a group of individuals making a policy that's based on a credible theory, that is rational, but that's only part one of our argument. The second part of our argument is that the different individuals involved in the policymaking process have to work together in a collective way, so as to produce a rational decision. And that involves, you know, uninhibited and freewheeling debate among the relevant policymakers. So if you have this sort of open ended freewheeling debate at the collective level, and you come up with a policy that's based on a credible theory about how the world works, then you are rational in our story. And just to finish up here, what we then did is we looked at the 10 cases that are most often cited as examples of irrationality. And we argue that in all 10 of those cases, the policymakers acted in a rational way. Nevertheless, we point to four cases of irrationality. So we have a total of 14 cases, the 10 sort of flagship cases, that proponents of the irrationality school of thought point to those 10 cases we looked at, which we think are examples of rationality, and then for cases that we pointed to, which are cases of irrationality. So that in a nutshell, is basically what the book is all about.

Anatol Lieven 7:10

Thank you. Now, the book talks about a rational policymaking process based on credible theories. But I suppose the question about that is twofold. I mean, the first is the theories may well be credible to the great majority of the people or even all the people making the decisions within a particular state or policy framework, while being incredible to the rest of the world, and possibly not actually corresponding to reality. The other question would be, if indeed the basic premises or goals of the policy, at one stage, you actually if I remember rightly say that, you know, the, the policymaking process is not the question the rationality of the process, does not address the question of ultimate goals. But if there is something profoundly flawed about the basic goal, can the policymaking process be described as wholly rational? And that I'm thinking of one very extreme case here, which is the Nazi vision for a racial empire in Europe? A softer but nonetheless, I mean, not, shall we say, what did Hirohito say in 1945, "not unconditionally successful one" was the Wolfowitz Doctrine of 1992, setting out the aim of universal us universal and permanent, US hegemony in every region of the world, something which many people even at the time said, was bound to awaken resistance and ultimately irresistible resistance in, you know, among other great powers, and yet, so much of US policy and strategy since then has been based on that base that that that assumption or goal. So how does one can one reconcile or how does one reconcile the rationality of the process with the ends or goals and their rationality or lack of it?

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John Mearsheimer 9:38

Well, there's a couple points to be made. First of all, you started off by saying it may be the case that policymakers have views that are based on theories that they think are credible, but the rest of the world doesn't think those policies and the theories they're based on are credible. I think that's exciting. Remotely unlikely to be the case. And I think that we have a body of theories in international politics that both policymakers and academics and I would add the public as well draw upon. And so I would not expect any great disjuncture between what policymakers think and what people in the broader public think. So I don't see a problem there. With regard to your point about goals, the literature on rationality is almost exclusively about the decision making process, and has hardly anything to say about goals. And as you know, we have a whole chapter on goals. And a number of people told us that we should take that chapter out that rationality has nothing to do with goals. But we left it in, in our basic argument, is this our argument? Is that a theory that, well, let me put it differently, from the point of view of policies, right, and goals, the only thing that matters is that survival be the number one goal and any other goal that you have not be more important than survival. And the basic logic here is if you don't survive, you cannot pursue those other goals. But that, in a nutshell, is our argument about goals. Again, survival should be the number one goal, states can have all sorts of goals that are deeply immoral or unethical. But that doesn't mean they're irrational. And a lot of goals that states have or not realized this was one of the points that was implicit in your commentary. There's no question about it, that states sometimes pursue goals and they fail to achieve those goals. But you cannot measure rationality, you cannot determine whether a state is rational or not, by looking at outcomes, there's almost universal agreement on this point in the literature as well. You look at the process. And the question is, does the policymaking elite have a rational policy based on our credible theory? Right? And did they operate collectively, in a way that fostered uninhibited debate to produce this policy? And if the answer is yes, it's a rational policymaking process. So it's the process, not the outcomes that matter. And it's really the process and not so much the goals except for survival.

Anatol Lieven 12:59

Survival, of course, there's an interesting tension here, between the survival of a state, which I entirely agree with you must be the fundamental and goal of, of any, any state and is basically, and the survival of an empire. Because there can be an argument that the pursuit of empire by many states has led them into dangers, or even existential dangers, which they would not have run. If in fact, they had contented themselves with their simply with their survival as a as a state. America is perhaps an extreme version of this because of course, in the case of Russia or many continental states, the argument can be made that the security of one's own borders, one's own survival depends on the expansion of power. But that isn't really true of the United States. As long as Mexico is weak, and Canada is a friend, there is no existential threat to the United States from other powers. There is, of course, an existential threat to American global hegemony. But can that be defined as an interest of the American state?

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John Mearsheimer 14:09

The question of whether or not the United States or any other great power should expand should pursue regional hegemony or pursue global hegemony is all a matter of whether or not that state has a plausible theory that underpins that policy. I believe you can easily come up with a plausible theory that explains why states pursue regional hegemony. I think you can come up with a plausible theory as to why states pursue global hegemony. Do I agree with it? No. But you can come up with theories that underpin all sorts of behavior that you Anatol Lieven don't like it. You got to understand that there are a good number of plausible theories in the land, and those plausible theories lead to different policy outcomes. A good example of this is NATO expansion. I'm a realist. And I thought from the get go that NATO expansion was going to lead to one heck of a lot of trouble. And it eventually did. Am I then going to say that NATO expansion was irrational or non rational? And I'm not and why am I not going to say that, because NATO expansion was based on a handful of plausible theories. NATO expansion was based on the Big Three liberal theories, Democratic Peace Theory, Economic Interdependence Theory and Liberal Institutionalism, those three liberal theories, and the policymakers who advocated and won the day for NATO expansion based their story about why NATO expansion would be good on these three liberal theories. These three liberal theories are widely regarded in the academic world, they're not considered to be non credible or foolish theories. So I think that the policy of NATO expansion was rational in the sense it was based on credible theories. But I also thought at the time that it was flawed, and I believe that I was right. But all of this just highlights that there are different theories, which lead to different policy prescriptions. And if you look at 14 cases that we examined in the book, what you see in almost every case is that different policymakers bring different theories to the table. And those different theories have different policy implications. And in a lot of cases, it takes time to reconcile the differences among the policymakers. And in some cases, the Cuban Missile Crisis a really is a really good example. There is no reconciliation. Different policymakers have different theories in their head, which leads them to different conclusions about what is the right policy. And I don't think you want to get in the business of saying that someone who advocates policy that you think is wrongheaded, is irrational, because that person may be making an argument based on a different theory than the one you have.

Anatol Lieven 17:37

And but so when it comes to NATO expansion, you would I think, also agree that by the same token, the Russian establishment's decision to push back very hard against NATO expansion to Ukraine, and Georgia was also rational, given the premises on which they were basing their policy.

John Mearsheimer 17:58

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Oh no question. I mean, we start the book, as you know, by talking about Putin, and it was commonplace, certainly after February 24 2020, to make the argument that Putin was irrational, and it was completely crazy for him to invade Ukraine. I think this is not the case at all. I mean, Putin went to great lengths to tell us that NATO expansion was unacceptable, he tried to solve the problem diplomatically, we refused. And what he effectively did in February 2022, is he launched a preventive war, it was a preventive war to prevent an outcome that he considered to be an existential threat. And, you know, a lot of people think that he was, to some extent, really taking a leap in the dark that this was not a guaranteed victory. I think that that's true, I think he surely knew that he was pursuing a risky strategy. I think that's in large part why he went to such lengths to try to solve the problem diplomatically. But he launched a limited offensive into Ukraine. And his basic goal clearly was to reach some sort of negotiated settlement with the Ukrainians that would produce a neutral Ukraine. And as you will remember, there were negotiations in Istanbul, in the month or so after that invasion, that looked like he might be proved correct, that you might in the end, have a negotiated settlement, where there would be no NATO expansion into Ukraine, but that didn't work out. And we're still in the midst of this horrible war, but I believe he was clearly rational in terms of his own thinking about invading Ukraine, and I think there's a bit of evidence, we don't have a lot of evidence at this point, but there's a bit of evidence that shows that he consulted others in the decision making process. So I think this is a rational policy. But as you well know, the United States, whenever it's dealing with an adversary has a powerful tendency to argue that that person is irrational, or crazy, whether it's Saddam Hussein or Vladimir Putin. But the fact is, when you're dealing with someone like Vladimir Putin, I think you're dealing with a first grade strategic thinker. You don't have to like what he's doing, but he's not a fool, and I believe that the policy that he pursued in February 2022, can easily be explained on rational actor grounds.

Anatol Lieven 20:44

Does rationality in the in the decision making process, in your view, relate to stupidity, against which, as we've heard, the Gods themselves war in vain. And its cousin or brother? Ignorance, because you remember the famous statement by Daniel Ellsberg that none of the mid ranking US officials who made the decision to intervene in Vietnam could have passed a freshman exam in Vietnamese history, culture, politics. And that was my experience, by the way of the US policymakers I met who were making the decision to go into Iraq when it came to actually understanding Iraqi society and history and its dynamics. And it would appear that Putin made some and the Russian establishment made some very flawed assumptions based on very poor intelligence, about Ukrainian society, Ukrainian nationalism, perhaps based on poor intelligence, perhaps based on their own prejudices, perhaps based well, that of that, I'll come to that in a second, the whole group thing, but how? How does in your view, the issue of of ignorance and intelligence failure relate to the rationality of the decision making process?

John Mearsheimer 22:08

Okay, a couple of points. One is Iraq 2003 is one of our four cases of irrationality. So we can talk about that, but I'm not going to defend that for one second as a case of rationality and action.

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With regard to your point about stupidity versus ignorance, I would argue, and I know Sebastian would argue that those are two very different things. We live in a world of uncertainty, great uncertainty, whether you're Vladimir Putin, George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Joe Biden, you name it, we live in a world of uncertainty. And anytime you make a major move in international politics, it is difficult to be certain what the end result will be. Stupidity is a different matter. That's a case of just dealing with dumb coughs, people who really don't think things through. If you look at our cases, I think what's most impressive, at least what was most impressive to me, and to Sebastian, was the seriousness with which almost every policymaker in all of these 10 decision making processes, considered the options and thought about what to do. These people were not stupid, they were not foolish. They were dealing with tremendous uncertainty. If you're France, and it's 1938 and it's early 1938, before Munich, and you're trying to make sense of Adolf Hitler, it is not easy to do. From the perspective of 2024, of course, it's very easy to say it should have been perfectly obvious to them at the time, how to think about what kind of threat Adolf Hitler represented. But it was not clear at the time, and people were making a great effort to figure out how to solve that problem, how to figure out how ambitious his goals were. If you look at the case of the Soviet Union invading Czechoslovakia in 1968, the policymakers, the relevant policymakers go to enormous lengths to figure out exactly how to solve this problem. They are fully aware that this is a thorny issue of the first order, and almost any way they go, they're going to get themselves into serious problems. Anyway, case after case I think what you see is not evidence of stupidity, but evidence of great uncertainty. Now to go to Putin, which is the example that you use, do I think Putin was uncertain about certain aspects of the invasion and he was wasn't sure how things were going to play out with regard to A or B or C, of course, that happens in almost every case. This is why you can't equate rationality without outcomes. Because we live in an uncertain world. And sometimes things just don't work out the way you anticipated, not because you are stupid, but because it is a very complicated world. So I'm not arguing that Putin got everything right.

Anatol Lieven 25:34

A question that relates to a wider critique of realist IR, which is the alleged tendency to treat states as monads, rather than policies with different forces within them. And also to, you know, as a student of the origins of the First World War, the old German debate over, the inland politics, the primacy of internal as opposed to external policy in one can see, well, you in your book with Stephen Walt about the Israel lobby, have very convincingly demonstrated that I think that not just a policy, but a particular policy, but an entire, you know, generations long, universal strategy, that, I think by any has to be regarded as irrational from the point of view of the United States as a, as a state, or a US Empire even is extremely rational, as regards powerful groups within the United States. And also, of course, the individual interests and goals of individual politicians, policymakers, advisors, academics. So perhaps another example, you refer to this in the book would be Germany before the First World War. It well, Bismarck had warned against it, challenging both Russia and France on the one hand, and Britain on the other, challenging Britain's global empire at the same time as you challenge the continent, the other continental great powers. Germany did it anyway. But it has been argued that a key reason for this was the interests of German heavy industrialists and the fact that the conservative monarchist regime in

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Germany depended basically, in its struggle with social democracy on a coalition between the great industrialists and the great landowners, which helped to cement this profoundly irrational combined strategy. So how does that work? The clash between the rational interests of the state and the particular interests equally rational of groups within the state?

John Mearsheimer 28:09

Yeah, let me make a couple points. First of all, I want to make it clear, this is not a book that is a defense of realism, it's not a realist track. In fact, as should be clear from my comments about NATO expansion, and the fact that it was underpinned by rational, liberal theories or credible, excuse me, credible liberal theories, we're not arguing that the only theories out there that are credible are realist theories. We argue that liberal theories are every much as credible as realist theories. So it's not a brief for realism. Second point I want to make is that with regard to the lobby book, there's no question that is at odds with the rational actor assumption. If you were to look at US-Middle East policy, or US policy towards the Israeli Palestinian conflict over time, you could not make the argument it was rational, right? It was not rational. And by the way, as you well know, Anatol, virtually every administration going back to the Carter administration wanted to push for a two state solution, because they understood that that was the strategically wise thing for the United States to do. But we could not do it because of the lobby, the lobby thwarted every president at every turn. Right, so I think the book, the lobby book, right is at odds with the rational actor assumption.

And by the way, you also raise the issue of Britain, challenging Britain before World War One. This is one of our four cases of non rationality. This was Admiral Tirpitz who came up with this whole motion of risk flee, which was a really cockamamie idea to put it in crude terms, who was certainly not rational. Right. So this is another example of irrationality. And I want to be clear here in talking about the Lobby case, and also talking about Tirpitz doctrine, and also talking about Iraq in 2003. There are cases of non rationality or irrationality. Sebastian and I are not arguing that states are rational all the time, our argument is that they're rational most of the time, and we have many more cases where states are irrational than we do cases where they're not rational. Finally, just going to realism. Realism, as you will know, is a theory that assumes that states are basically black boxes, and it does not pay attention to domestic politics. And the reason for this is that any theory is a simplification of reality, and you have to leave some factors on the cutting room floor. And realism leaves domestic politics on the cutting room floor. But you and I both know very well that there are going to be occasions where domestic politics matters a lot. And in those cases, when domestic politics matters a lot, i.e. with regard to the lobby, then realism is not going to tell you very much in the same way that the rational actor assumption is not going to apply. So just with regard to realism, I'm not someone who argues that realism can explain state behavior 100% of the time, because it can't I think it does better than other theories, explaining reality. But my intuition and I want to underline the word intuition is that it gets it right about 75% of the time. But that means that realism is wrong 25% of the time, a lot of people say oh my god, this is horrible. It's wrong. 25% of the time, I would remind those people that we live in a remarkably complicated and uncertain world, and in a remarkably complicated and uncertain world. When you're making simplifications, which is what theory is all about,

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there's no way you can avoid getting it wrong, you know, some reasonably large number of times.

Anatol Lieven 32:16

That's just what I was told my own students, I always push back ferociously against the use in academia of parsimonious as a compliment. Or, you know, the idea that the the argument that is the most narrowly and exactly based in every case on the universal theory, is somehow an advantageous one always seem to me, including as a former journalist who had some opportunity, actually to see how events really played out, always seemed to me an abomination in addressing how the world really works. But anyway, I agree with you on that. To go to questions, we have a question about groupthink in decision making something which is very evident in Washington, DC, but it seems to me this in a way, you know, Ben Rhodes coined this, this term, the blob, in terms of a certain degree of universal groupthink in Washington, DC. It seems to me that every major power or every power that thinks itself as a major power, has a blob, and that to some degree that every blob operates, according to some somewhere between a theory and a doctrine, a standard operating procedure, and of course, has to to a degree because you can't, you know, make up your mind, you know, completely afresh on a blank slate. But what are the well, I suppose it gets back to the original point, how far you described a process when a rational policy making process involves, you know, a plurality of of voices of advice, the ultimate decision makers, listen to that advice and choose between it. But what if you have a situation in which the entire apparatus is giving one set of advice based upon a doctrine, which is simply wrong?

John Mearsheimer 34:26

We found that there are three general patterns in terms of how the policy makers interact with each other inside the room, Sebastian and I used to talk about what happens inside the room. One of our findings was that basically in every case, it's a rather small number of people who make these key decisions, both in crises and in terms of formulating grand strategy, and what we found out as well. There were three patterns. The first pattern is that there is no agreement among the policymakers. And nevertheless, after debating the issue, they reach agreement. Okay. This second pattern is there's no agreement initially among the policy makers, and they never reach agreement. And the ultimate decider, the sovereign, in effect, has to make a decision. This is Kennedy in the Cuban Missile Crisis, there was never a consensus among the policymakers. Right? In the first instance, where you have no consensus to begin with, but where a consensus emerges, you see this in the Soviet decision to invade Czechoslovakia, where you go from disagreement to consensus, you see this with regard to the French, and how they think about dealing with Adolf Hitler, there's no consensus for most of '38. And then that all begins to change by late '38, early '39, you get a consensus. And then the third case, which is what you're talking about, is where you get consensus from the get go. And you see this, for example, in the German decision, the Nazi Germany decision to invade the Soviet Union on June 22 1941. There's remarkable unity, very little disagreement among the policymakers. And by the way, that contrasts with the situation that existed among policymakers before they

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invaded France on May 10, 1940, there you had huge disagreement, but eventually you got agreement. In the case of Barbarossa, where they invaded the Soviet Union, you had consensus from the beginning. So you see, Anatol, that there are these three different patterns, right, there is no single pattern. But I would argue, as I said to you before, if you look at all those cases, the ones that I mentioned, that the policy makers are really thinking and serious in responsible ways about how to make the policy work, actually, I should say how to choose the right policy and then make it work. It often times doesn't work. The other example just to highlight this, the Japanese decision to attack the United States at Pearl Harbor in December 1941. Most people think that this was a case of irrationality, for sure, how could it be otherwise, look at what happened? Again, you don't want to look at outcomes. I would argue that if you look at that decision closely, it's really quite remarkable. How strategic the Japanese thinkers, excuse me, the Japanese policy makers were, they understood full well the risks that they were taking. This was not a case of irresponsible or stupid decision makers not thinking through what they were doing. They viewed themselves as being in a desperate situation, where they had no choice but in effect, to pursue an extremely risky strategy. They understood full well, from the get go, that attacking the United States at Pearl Harbor was extremely risky. They simply felt that they had no choice. I won't go into the logic that underpins their thinking. But I actually think their thinking is quite impressive, despite the fact that it ended in disaster. So the point that I'm trying to make here is that not in every case, but in almost all the cases or most of the cases that we looked at, what you see is that policymakers are very serious, and whether they agree or disagree depends on the particular case.

Anatol Lieven 39:02

But in the case of Japan, I entirely agree with you as regards the specific decision, you know, to attack in December '41, but I suppose if you go back to the overall strategy, if you go back to the early 30s, if a decision was made that ultimately, Japan would have to challenge the European empires in eastern Southeast Asia, then you probably needed, given the balance of forces, you needed China as an ally. In other words, you need to actually to think seriously, as opposed to in propagandists terms about about a greater co-prosperity sphere, and the concept of power with China. But once they had locked themselves into war with China, then of course they had set themselves on a path, whereby, in the end, they, I would probably agree with you, from their point of view had no choice but what the Germans I think, call an escape forward. In other words to, to adopt a decision that they, you're right knew very well was extremely dangerous and risky. But if you see what I mean, the the path on which they had set themselves pointed them down the road to that lack of choice in the end.

John Mearsheimer 40:38

Yeah, let me make a couple points. First of all, it wasn't the European empires that they cared that much about what they really cared about, it was the Soviet Union. You want to remember they fought a giant battle against the Soviet Union in 1938, and lost, they got clobbered. And then in 1939, the Japanese fought a war because you had over you know, 1000 battle deaths. There was an actual war in 1939, between Japan and the Soviet Union, and the Japanese got

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clobbered again. So the Soviet Union was, was the real problem for them in the area that you say they should have had China's an ally. The problem with China is it was in the middle of a civil war, it was a basket case, it was not a meaningful ally in any way. Right. And what they did is, you know, in 1931, is they cleaved off Manchuria. And then in 1937, they ended up in a war for northern China. You know, this is beyond Manchuria. First of all, the Japanese did not want that war, I believe that the Chinese started the war, I think Chiang Kai Shek is principally responsible for what happened in 1937. But let's assume that I'm wrong there, and the Japanese get into this war on the Chinese, or in China on the Asian mainland in 1937. If you look at their behavior after 1937, they were remarkably cautious. And they were not expansionist at all after that, unless necessity, because of the war in China forced them to be so because they quickly got into a quagmire in China, after the attack in 1937. So they were in no situation, they were not in a situation where they could be highly aggressive. And if you look at their decision to invade northern Vietnam in 1940, and then southern Vietnam in 1941, they did it reluctantly, they got permission from the French, and they were not doing it for any reason, other than trying to shore up their position inside of China. All of this is a way of saying the Japanese contrary to the conventional wisdom, were not wild and crazy, from 1937, up until 1941.

And they did not attack the United States in 1941 thinking that they were going to win a great victory. The problem that the Japanese faced is that starting in 1940, and certainly in 1941, the United States put economic embargoes on them that were basically strangling Japan in 1940. They basically cut off all scrap iron and scrap steel. And the Japanese dependent, the Japanese economy depended heavily heavily on scrap iron and scrap steel. And then in 1941, they put an oil embargo on Japan. And there was no way that Japan was going to survive that because it was so heavily dependent on imports of oil from the United States. And by the way, the reason the Japanese were interested in creating a co prosperity sphere was to ameliorate this problem. The Japanese understood full well that they were extremely vulnerable to pressure from countries like the United States and the Soviet Union. And they wanted to establish a co-prosperity sphere to get out of that problem. And of course, in the end, it did not work.

Anatol Lieven 44:25

We have a question, which I know you addressed in the book. The influence on your work of Daniel Kahneman, his research - Thinking Fast and Slow. Could you describe the relationship with your work to that of Professor Kahneman?

John Mearsheimer 44:41

Yeah, well, Daniel Kahneman is sort of the intellectual father of the political psychology school of thought. And this is one of the principal targets in our book, the two sort of prevailing schools of thought about rationality, in social life are economists and rational choice theorists who use expected utility maximization as a way of thinking about rationality. And then the political psychologists and this is where someone like Daniel Kahneman comes in. And his basic argument, which lots of political scientists, or to put it slightly differently, lots of IR theorists

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employ is the claim that policymakers use heuristics to make decisions, or sometimes the argument is that they use analogies like the Munich analogy. And other words, the argument is that decision makers have the simplifying devices in their head, these heuristics, these rule of thumbs, these simple analogies, and that's what they rely on to make decisions in crises, or for purposes of formulating grand strategy. Our argument is that you can find zero evidence of this in any of the cases that we looked at. Look, international relations is a deadly serious business, we're talking about the security of a state, the survival of a state, when policymakers get into a crisis or when they're trying to formulate a grand strategy. They go to enormous lengths to try and figure out what the right strategy is. They think about it in theoretical terms, they think about all the different ways that this can go right or this can go wrong to argue that they use simple heuristics, they use simple rules of thumb that they use, like the Munich analogy, I think, doesn't make much sense at all. And I think when you look at the evidence, you just don't see any, hardly any evidence that the Munich analogy really matters that much, or this heuristics, or that heuristics matters, what you see, I think, is that people employ theories to make sense of the world so that they can comprehend the world out there, this incredibly complicated world so they can comprehend it, and then make a decision.

Anatol Lieven 47:31

So in other words, the endless endless references to Munich and appeasement that one reads in the media, and in politicians, speeches, and sometimes in President speeches, that this is basically just for public consumption, it's for the masses, it doesn't really affect how they themselves think?

John Mearsheimer 47:51

I think that's true. I mean, I think one could have a theory of international politics, that has some relationship to the Munich analogy, but and that could be a credible theory, I'm not sure exactly what that theory is, and how I'd relate it to but I think it's almost impossible to think of a case where policymakers were motivated by a particular analogy. And here, we're talking about the Munich analogy. I think that, you know, there's no question that some policymakers when they get into a crisis understand that you don't want to appease this particular leader at this point in time for this reason or that reason. But it's not simply because of the Munich analogy, it's because of the context of the situation they're in. And because the theory that they have in their head tells them that appeasement would not work. But again, international politics is a deadly serious business, we all understand that the stakes are enormously high here. Would you expect in that kind of situation that people are going to use or policymakers are going to use simple rules of thumb or simple analogies? I don't think that that makes sense. And I think that when you look at the evidence, my point is born out.

Anatol Lieven 49:20

There's a question about your attitude to the issue of Taiwan, and American commitments to Taiwan and the status of Taiwan. Some people have felt that there is an inconsistency there

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between the positions you've taken with regard to US policy towards Russia and US policy towards China. Can you explain your contrasting views on these issues?

John Mearsheimer 49:42

Yeah, I think that from the American perspective, what really matters is the possibility of a regional hegemon. I think from an American perspective, what you don't want is any other great power in the world to become a regional hegemon, you don't want Imperial Germany or Nazi Germany to dominate Europe, you don't want Imperial Japan to dominate Asia and you don't want the Soviet Union to dominate either Europe or Asia. You don't want another regional hegemon. From my point of view, the principle goal of any state in the world should be to be the only regional hegemonic on the planet. And I think that there is no possibility of Russia being a regional hegemon in Europe. And therefore, I think the United States should have good relations with Russia. I think it makes no strategic sense at all, to pick a fight with Russia. I think China, on the other hand, is at this point in time, a peer competitor, it's much more powerful than Russia is and is a threat to dominate Asia. And I think it's in the American interest not to allow China to dominate Asia. So, I think that we should go to great lengths to contain China and to prevent it from dominating Asia, the same way we prevented the Soviet Union from dominating Europe during the Cold War. But I think Russia is a very different story. So I think, Anatol, if you want to push me, please do, but I think that's the fundamental difference in my thinking about Taiwan/China on one hand, and Ukraine/ Russia on the other.

Anatol Lieven 51:38

Leading on from there, there's a question which follows rather naturally on the impact of nuclear weapons on decision making and calculations of rationality? Because in other words, if one's looking at the fundamental issue of state survival, how great is the risk of annihilation, that it is wrapped in genuine annihilation, total destruction of the state and society? Is it reasonable to run for the sake of a broader security concept of security? The Cuban missile crisis, of course, illustrates this very, very vividly. But it's also well, of course, been explicitly raised when it comes to the whole question of both Taiwan and direct intervention in Ukraine.

John Mearsheimer 52:30

Yeah, I mean, I think that if the United States or NATO more generally were to intervene in Ukraine, and we in the West started pushing back, the Russians were in a situation where they looked like they were going to be defeated in Ukraine, I believe they would use nuclear weapons. Yeah. And so I'm adamantly opposed to NATO getting inside of Ukraine, I think it's prescription for disaster. I think when you think about the consequences of a nuclear war, it really, to put it in crude terms, scares the living bejesus out of you. And as I always emphasize, when I talk about these issues, thankfully, we've never had a nuclear war. And the end result is that we don't know much about nuclear escalation. The fact is, we've never had a large scale conventional war between two nuclear armed states. And we don't know what would happen in terms of nuclear escalation, if two conventionally armed states got into a conventional

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war as to whether that would escalate to the nuclear level or not. So I'm fully aware of the dangers here.

With regard to China, I think, you know, the dangers are there, as well as they are in Ukraine. I think that it is possible that you could have a war of the South China Sea, you could have a war over Taiwan. I think that that war would almost certainly start as a conventional war, I find it hard to imagine the Chinese or the Americans using nuclear weapons, initially in a conflict between the two sides. But if a conventional war broke out, and one side was losing, I mean, if the Chinese were losing, and this war was taking place right off their coast, and the Americans were pounding the Americans, excuse me, the Chinese mainland, do I think that the possibility of nuclear escalation would be real? I certainly do. So I think this is a very dangerous situation in Taiwan, and in the South China Sea and with regard to the US China competition, more broadly. Now I have a number of friends who believe that the risks of nuclear war are sufficient enough that we should just back off, not defend Taiwan not defend the South China Sea, because of the possibility of nuclear war? I think to go back to the book, I think that's a rational argument. I think you can make that case on sound theoretical grounds. And I think the people who make that argument who are friends of mine are very smart. So I'm not saying these are foolish arguments. It's an argument that I disagree with, I think it's important for the United States to contain China. I'm not interested in rolling back the Chinese, I'm not interested in the highly aggressive foreign policy against China, I want to contain China. And I am willing to defend Taiwan and to defend the South China Sea. And I can lay out a theory that explains that. But the fact is, as the questioner points out, there are risks involved in this and I'm willing to live with those risks. Am I going to sleep well at night knowing those risks are out there? Absolutely not. And this just highlights to me what a dangerous business's International Relations is and why it's so important that policymakers behave in a rational manner.

Anatol Lieven 56:21

A question about credibility, a word that comes up again and again, in the case of the British Empire believe, it would be called the Prestige of the British Name. In other words, is it rational to fear that a withdrawal or compromise in one part of the world will lead to the emboldening of rivals or enemies elsewhere and produce a general collapse? Of course, we heard that, we hear that we heard that about the withdrawal from Afghanistan. We heard about Vietnam. Now we're hearing it in Ukraine, what is your view of that?

John Mearsheimer 57:01

I think that you can make a rational argument, I think it's wrong, that pulling out of one particular conflict, potential conflict situation or pulling out of a war will have negative effects in other areas, I think you can argue both sides of that issue. I was recently at a conference, and we talked about the Taiwan issue. And I made the argument that if we were to abandon Taiwan, and to abandon the Chinese, or the South China Sea, this would have usually negative effects on our relationship with Japan, the Japanese would no longer trust us, our reputation would be damaged, our credibility would be damaged. That was the argument that I was making. And

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there were people who were arguing against smart people on the other side of that debate, that the United States could abandon Taiwan and the South China Sea defending Taiwan and the South China Sea, and make it clear to the Chinese that Japan was a different matter, and make it clear to the Japanese that we had their back and that we would put our security umbrella firmly over their head. And they argued, in fact, that after having pulled out from defending Taiwan on the South China Sea, that our commitment to defend Japan would probably look stronger than ever to the Chinese. So we wouldn't really have a problem and you, John are wrong. So this debate went back and forth. I think that the people I was arguing with were wrong, they thought I was wrong. But I think we both had positions that were based on rational theories.

You know, this is one of the problems, Anatol, that you run into, in the policy world, and it's a world that you run into, in IR theory land, and that is that you have this different body of theories. First of all, you have realist theories, and you have liberal theories. And then within the realist world, you have actually quite different realist theories. These people who I was arguing against over Taiwan, were all realists, right? So this realist versus realist, so you have different realist theories, and you have different liberal theories as well. I know quite a few liberals, to my surprise, who really don't put much stock in democratic peace theory, which I always thought was the best of the liberal theories. And the question is, how do you adjudicate among these theories? How do you say John Mearsheimer is right and Ken Waltz is wrong? The answer is, it's very hard to reach any sort of universal consensus on who's right or who's wrong with regard to these different theories, and a lot of that has to do with the fact that the evidence which we use to adjudicate these theories is so messy that you can't tell which theory is right and which theory is wrong. And by the way, this is not peculiar to political science or to be more particular, it's not peculiar to international relations. It's also true in economics. If you look at the great economic thinkers of modern times, they're basically all over the map in terms of their theories on how international economics or domestic economics works. It's just the nature of the enterprise. We live in a remarkably complicated world, it's a tremendous amount of uncertainty out there a lot of messy data, and it's, again, hard to adjudicate among theories. And that is why you come up with different policy prescriptions. Again, one of the core insights in our book is that policies are based on theories, policymakers have theories in their head about how the world works. But again, apropos my previous comments, because we have no single theory, that dominates all the other theories, what we end up in a lot of situations is instances where policymakers have different policy prescriptions, because they have different theories in their head. And you see this on the in the Taiwan case that I was just describing to you.

Anatol Lieven 1:01:25

I have always approached my children on the basis of the theory that their father is always right. The problem is that since the age of about three, they haven't believed it anymore. But I keep trying. John, thank you so much. This was a truly fascinating conversation. I wish we could continue it. Well, no doubt, we we will in person. And my thanks to you, the audience for some excellent questions. I'm so sorry. There were 63 questions of which I could only get to, of

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course, a small handful, but I apologize for that to those whose questions I couldn't pass on. My thanks to John. For once again and most fascinating discussion, and goodbye for today.