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# Realism after Ukraine: A Critique of Geopolitical Reason from Monroe to Mearsheimer

<https://doi.org/10.1515/auk-2022-2033>

**Abstract:** This article seeks to historicize both the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the debate on realism occasioned by Russian aggression in Ukraine since 2014. Using the research of Gerard Toal on Russia's construction of its security interests in the post-Soviet spaces that include Ukraine, the article argues that neorealist geopolitical explanations fail to do justice to the roles of contingency and culture in setting Russia's so-called 'red lines.' It also identifies an agency problem in realism: realists not only fail to do justice to the agency of small states like Ukraine in this conflict but elide the moral and practical agency of decisionmakers like Russian President Vladimir Putin. The article also suggests that the current realism debate is the tip of an iceberg: realism has long had a problem specifying the relation of its theory to its practice. The article concludes by discussing the long shadow of 19th century imperial history over contemporary discussions of spheres of influence and great power status.

**Keywords:** Putin, Ukraine, NATO enlargement, Mearsheimer, neorealism, classical realism, neoclassical realism, Monroe Doctrine, Atlantic realists

For at least a decade, a new master-narrative for our times has steadily gained in popularity: the return of 'great power competition.'<sup>1</sup> Where the 1990s was frequently emplotted as a triumph for 'globalization' and universal human rights, the financial crisis of 2008, Brexit, and Trump are said to mark a new chapter of global history in which illiberalism and nationalism are in the ascendant. Instead of integrating into the U.S.-led international order, leaders in China and Russia

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<sup>1</sup> N-gram results for 'great power competition,' for example have doubled since 2008 and quadrupled since 1998. N-gram results for book titles in English are an imperfect index, but results for 'great power competition,' 'return of power politics,' and 'return of geopolitics' all trace the same steep climb from 2008.

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have increasingly sought to chart their own path. U.S. foreign policy experts have become preoccupied with the international implications of Xi Jinping's nationalism and worry that Chinese self-assertion in the South China Sea may culminate in an invasion of Taiwan. When Russia launched its full-scale war on Ukraine on Feb. 24, 2022, many were tempted to describe Russia's behavior as marking an end to what Francis Fukuyama had labelled the 'end of history.' *Time* magazine distilled the mood with a picture of a tank on the cover and the flat-footed caption: 'The Return of History. How Putin Shattered Europe's Dreams' (March 14/21, 2022). At the time of writing, the foreign policy journals brim over with dire predictions of 'inevitable' rivalries that make war between the 'great powers' more likely than it has been for decades (Kroenig 2022; Layne 2020; Mearsheimer 2021). But what justifies the elevation of 'great power competition' to a symbol of the return of 'history' itself? The notion of great-power competition is a way of emplotting the rise of new powers—China, Russia, and India in particular, and the potential for a major transition away from a Western-dominated global order. What follows U.S. unipolarity may be a multipolar world order conceived in terms of spheres of influence—or it may—hopefully—be something very different. Amitav Acharya, for example, has described 'a multiplex world' in which the power to set rules is regionalized and pluralized (Acharya 2014). The master-narrative of great power competition flattens the unpredictability of the future into old and familiar historical categories. We conflate one possible future with the necessary course of history. A tradition as diverse and complex as political realism is not responsible for these confluences (Wolhforth 2008). But many advocates of this cyclical notion of history and a spatialization of historical causation borrow from the accumulated intellectual capital of realist tradition to trade on the aura of the real. When we think predominantly in large continental spaces, and naturalize spheres of influence, we claim history as our guide while avoiding realism's own history as a foreign policy and theoretical tradition.

As I will argue below, the Russo-Ukraine war does not represent the return of the 'real' dynamics of international relations. Nor does the current Russian invasion of Ukraine vindicate the predictions of neorealist IR theorist John Mearsheimer that such an event would happen. Mearsheimer's monocausal argument is rooted in an essentialist theory of geopolitics and does not adequately explain the regime's highly contingent choice for war. There is a broader context for Putin's decision, but a realism based exclusively on the truths allegedly disclosed by geopolitics cannot decipher it. Putin's decision was informed by Russian discourses on how to secure their 'near abroad', what it means to be Russian, and how to maintain status in the mirror of world society. These considerations require a sensitivity to questions of international hierarchy and status, as well as to the political infighting between what leading political geographer and regional

expert on post-Soviet worlds Gerard Toal calls rival ‘geopolitical entrepreneurs’ (Toal 2017).

At best, versions of neoclassical realism describe the systemic constraints that condition and inform decisionmakers, but they are never a fully sufficient guide. At worst, neorealists portray a deterministic world in which a figure like Putin had nearly no choice but to implement the dictates of the national interest geopolitically naturalized and understood. Neoclassical realists afford more agency to decisionmakers, but no branch of the realist tradition has good answers for small states who fall outside the privileged circle of great powers. Realists do not claim that might makes right, but too many suggest that might makes questions of right quaintly irrelevant. Realists, therefore, have an agency problem. They have trouble explaining why the agency of small states is discounted and underestimated, as the currently effective counteroffensive of the Ukrainians in the northeast of Ukraine shows. But scientific neorealism also skips lightly over the agency of foreign policy decisionmakers, treating highly contingent moral and political decisions as products of a fully predictable universe. Contrary to the conventional wisdom about the ‘success’ of Mearsheimer’s predictions on Ukraine, I argue that his geopolitical explanation for the Ukraine war is also deeply unsatisfying as historical explanation. Realism is normatively unsatisfying on multiple levels but it has also not performed well on its own terms: as an explanatory theory of international politics (Miller 2019).

The conventional story goes like this: The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 illustrates the foresight of one of their most famous representatives in the academy, John Mearsheimer, a professor of political science at the University of Chicago. In a series of writings and interviews from 2014 to the middle of this year, Mearsheimer has consistently argued that the West ‘provoked’ Putin to go to war by its ‘reckless’ advocacy of NATO expansion. The rubicon was crossed, according to Mearsheimer, when in 2008 George Bush stated the U.S. intention to admit Ukraine and Georgia to NATO. He famously argued in *Foreign Affairs* that Putin’s shocking invasion of the Crimea in February 2014 was not only predictable, but the ‘West’s fault.’ The broader war Putin began on February 24, 2022 has not changed Mearsheimer’s basic analysis. As he wrote this year:

I think all the trouble in this case really started in April 2008, at the NATO Summit in Bucharest. The Russians made it unequivocally clear at the time that they viewed this as an existential threat and they drew a line in the sand. Nevertheless, what has happened

with the passage of time is that we have moved forward to include Ukraine in the West to make Ukraine a Western bulwark on Russia's border. (Mearsheimer 2022)

But by arguing that the West is ultimately the prime mover of these events, and practically to blame for the war, Mearsheimer vastly oversimplifies the causes of the war. While suggesting that America's global imperium is both ultimate and proximate cause, Mearsheimer reinforces the reputation of realists for a critical stance towards U.S. hegemony (Layne 2006). But his own 'offensive realist' theory dictates that the only way for 'great powers' to attain real security is to prevent any other hegemon from dominating its region. Thus Mearsheimer insists on an aggressive policy of containing China and resisting its attaining uncontested dominance of the Asian-Pacific. Why the theory does not have the same implications for U.S. policy vis Russia is not entirely clear.

But his analysis of the post-Feb. 24 conjuncture reveals the problems realists have in divesting themselves from imperialism, in this case, by offering a de facto justification for Russian aggression. As I have argued in *Dissent* this year, this is not surprising given realism's historical origins and development in the Atlantic world at the fin de siècle context of inter-imperial competition and the rise of a science of 'geopolitics' (Specter 2022b). Advocates of a less militarized, more restrained U.S. posture in global affairs should avoid realist historical pessimism about Ukraine's fate. We need not be entrapped by the deterministic geopolitical logic of great powers and their spheres of influence that we have inherited from the late 19th century. The U.S. should be prudent and careful in Ukraine but this 'thin' prudential form of realism' hardly requires a 'thick' realist ontology of international relations. Untangling the differences between them is the subject of the next section.

## 1 Realism's Equivocations: Art or Science, and the Underdetermination/Overdetermination of Practice by Theory

Realism has never seen itself as an ivory tower academic exercise, but rather an intellectual tradition that prides itself on the ability to narrow the gap between abstractions and 'the concrete.' When realism became influential in the U.S. in the early Cold War, it was, because, as Stanley Hoffmann observed, of its practical relevance. It offered

some intellectual compass which would . . . exorcise isolationism and justify a permanent and global involvement in world affairs; rationalize the . . . techniques of intervention, and

the methods of containment apparently required by the cold war; explain to a public why international politics does not leave much leeway for pure good will (Hoffmann 1977).

The dual orientation of realism to both theoretical explanation and to practical policy orientation is one of its enduring features. Realists of all stripes—classical, neo- and neoclassical alike—offer an ideal-typical description of international relations that is not only supposed to explain what will happen in the future (in part on the basis of what has occurred in the past), but to orient policymakers, and help statesmen (and women) to make wise and prudent decisions about foreign policy. As Stephen Walt argued, “there is an inescapable link between the abstract world of theory and the real world of policy” (Walt 2005, 29 in Acharya and Buzan 2019, 36).

Mearsheimer’s contributions to the Ukraine debate translates theory into practice in a problematically direct fashion. If Russia were ‘pushed’ beyond its oft-proclaimed ‘red lines,’ it would have to react (Mearsheimer 2014b). The policy relevance of his analysis could not be clearer: the U.S. should never have exploited the unipolar moment to ‘push’ and now it must do its best to undo the damage. Most recently, Mearsheimer has cautioned that the West’s support for Ukraine’s defense could escalate in unpredictable ways including nuclear exchange (Mearsheimer 2022). Kissinger’s argument that Ukraine must ultimately be partitioned in order to avoid broader war between Russia and the U.S. and its allies follows this pattern too (Bilefsky 2022). While Mearsheimer and Kissinger suggest that some kind of negotiated settlement with Russia is inevitable, and will probably require territorial concessions, other realist analysts have argued that Putin only understands the language of counterforce and will never come to the negotiating table until his losses have mounted even higher or the pressure from sanctions bite deeper. Realists agree that China poses some sort of threat to Western interests but disagree about how to ‘contain’ or ‘manage’ China’s ‘rise’ (Glaser 2021; Kirshner 2012; Mastro 2021). The divergence of realist policy responses shows that the relationship of the theory to practice is indeterminate. But is that indeterminacy a strength or a weakness?

One good answer comes from realist Paul Poast. As he volunteers, neither realism nor “any one theory offers the best explanation for the war in Ukraine. Alternative explanations abound.” Indeed, he offers a modest view of the theory’s role: “Rather than being a strictly coherent theory realism has always been defined not by what it prescribes but by what it deems impossible.” That is, its strength as a theory is that it “[highlights] the mechanisms that constrain human agency,” such as human nature or the current distribution of global power. In contrast to Mearsheimer, who claims the authority of an objective social science for his policy recommendations, Poast articulates a more attractively modest role for theory:

“The theory is just a baseline. An attitude, not a determinate guide to policy” (Poast 2022). How strongly should realist theory ‘guide’ the practice of foreign policy? The realists have a problem: either realist foreign policy recommendations are either highly underdetermined (Poast) by the theory, or highly overdetermined (Mearsheimer). This instability in realism’s epistemology is the tip of a historical iceberg—a century long debate about the status of realism as ‘art’ or ‘science.’

Mearsheimer clearly falls on the science side of the line. His rhetoric and method are positivist and reflect the overall positivism of the discipline, an artifact of its confinement to what Justin Rosenberg has artfully named the ‘prison of political science’ (Rosenberg 2016; Rosenberg and Tallis 2022). As Acharya and Buzan explain, the dominant American definition of ‘theory’ in international relations is positivist because “it defines terms in operational form, and then sets out and explains the relations between causes and effects. This type of theory should contain—or be able to generate—testable hypotheses of a causal nature” (Acharya and Buzan 2019, 35). When Mearsheimer treats Putin’s decisions as causally, even mechanistically overdetermined by a single variable—NATO expansion—this is the face of realism as law-disclosing science. Putin didn’t choose war freely; he acted as he did because he was ‘pushed’ into a corner. When Poast presents realism as a mere heuristic—a modest ‘baseline,’ that only sketches the contours of possible policy while reserving to the statesman a great deal of interpretive and decision-making latitude. This is the vision of realism as art more common to an earlier generation of mid-20th century classical realists—of Morgenthau, Aron, and Carr—a prudential, ultimately unsystematizable and nondeterministic way of educating the statesman to the ‘art’ of judgment (Guilhot 2014, 2018; Specter 2022a; Troy 2021; Williams 2018).

Realists try to avoid this deep problem—realism’s simultaneous overdetermination or underdetermination of practice—by claiming that realism is both art and science. Realism derives part of its intellectual prestige from within a discipline that prides itself on its scientificity, its testability and status as a positive science. But realists also speak in the more humble register of art—statesmanship as *statecraft*. In the strongly scientific variants that dominated the fin de siècle era of high geopolitics informed by Darwinism, practice is overdetermined by the theory: wisdom consists in aligning oneself with nature and internalizing nature’s laws as common sense. The statesman’s task is to cultivate this in himself until it becomes ‘second nature’ (Specter 2022b). But if realism sheds its claims to scientificity and is no more than an ‘attitude,’ then the relationship of theory to practice is highly underdetermined. The one is too ‘thick’ a vision of theory-informing-practice, the other too ‘thin.’ If in the end, all it comes down to is the injunction, credited to Obama: ‘Don’t do stupid shit,’ what need do we have of a metanarrative or grand theoretical foundation for realism (Rothkopf 2014)

Prudence, sometimes described by realists as the ability to cautiously weigh the feasibility of your ends in light of the means at hand is good advice but hardly a monopoly of the Western thinkers canonized by realism. When realists oscillate between these two modes of self-presentation—art and science—they try to have their cake and eat it too.

Hans Morgenthau was one canonical realist whose oscillations between the two modes of self-presentation reflected a pattern in the Atlantic realisms I discuss in my book (Specter 2022a). On the one hand, Morgenthau defined his project in strict opposition to the behaviorist political science then regnant among his contemporaries (Charles Merriam, Harold Lasswell) at the University of Chicago. Ironically, the figure most responsible for realism's elaboration as an academic paradigm in a highly quantitative political science himself identified more with the humanistic side of the university represented by figures like Leo Strauss, Mortimer Adler, and Robert Hutchins (Jütersonke 2010; Specter 2022b, 137–167). In texts ranging from his 1946 *Scientific Man versus Power Politics* to a 1952 essay on Churchill, Morgenthau insisted on the ultimately artistic qualities of statesmanship and the irreducible moment of decision. As Michael Williams explains, when Hans Morgenthau said in a lecture of 1946 that statesmen have “a kind of artistic feeling for the political possibilities which a particular problem offers,” and that “an element of art enters into the solution of particular problems,” these were not just figures of speech (Williams 2018, 70, 73). At the same time as the realists sought to carve out a distinct space for international relations by making this anti-behaviorist ‘gambit’ (Guilhot 2011), Morgenthau still tried to capitalize on the authority of positivist science when it suited him. Morgenthau could insist that an uneducated demos was a threat to a ‘rational course’ of foreign policy at the same time that he could attempt to flatter the American people for their ‘instinctive’ knowledge of the national interest, so often covered over by moralistic clutter: “Underneath [‘the intoxication with moral abstractions’ which prevails in our time] there has remained alive an almost instinctive awareness of the perennial interests of the United States” (Specter 2022a, 161).

The neorealists sought to erect positivist foundations for realism that would be sturdier than those of Carr and Morgenthau's generation. The landmark text was Kenneth Waltz's 1979 *Theory of International Politics*. According to Richard Ashley's classic critique of what he calls ‘neorealist lore,’ “The Poverty of Neorealism,” the neorealists believed they had successfully “dispens[ed] with the normatively laden metaphysics of fallen man” and “root[ed] realist power politics . . . securely in the scientifically defensible terrain of objective necessity” (Ashley 1984a, 233; Waltz 1990). Waltz faulted Morgenthau's and Kissinger's understandings of the international system with placing too much weight on

the “subjective” level of the decision-maker. By according “actors’ subjective perceptions an important role in constituting and reproducing the ‘system’ . . . [they] thereby deny the system a life of its own as an objective social fact to be grasped by theory” (Ashley 1984b, 231). But Waltz too wanted to have it both ways.

In his 1996 essay entitled, ‘International Politics is not Foreign Policy,’ Waltz acknowledged that the theory can neither fully *explain* specific acts of decision, nor is it a self-sufficient *guide* to foreign policy decision. This modest role for theory is much more defensible than the one implicit in Mearsheimer’s pronouncements of a predictably hydraulic universe of push and pull. There Waltz acknowledged that for a theory to be ‘beautiful’ it must simplify: The theory he made famous in *Theory of International Politics* (1979) “explains why states similarly placed behave *similarly* despite their internal differences” (emphasis added). A theory of foreign policy by contrast would have to “explain why states similarly placed in a system behave in *different* ways” (54, emphasis added). It is no defect of the theory, he argues, that it does not encompass the ‘unit-level’ analysis, domestic pressures on, or debates over foreign policy: “Neither realists nor anyone else believe that unit-level factors can be excluded from foreign policy analysis. Much is included in an analysis; little is included in a theory. Theories are sparse in formulation and beautifully simple. Reality is complex and often ugly” (56; Waltz 1996, 10). Theory, he concludes, is best conceived of as an instrument of prediction, not an all-encompassing explanatory framework: “In using the instrument, all sorts of information, along with a lot of good judgment is needed” (Waltz 1996, 56). By the 1990s, neorealism’s heroic phase was over, and these dissatisfactions with the scientific program would lead to the rediscovery of classical realism and the Morgenthau vogue of the early 2000s (Williams 2007).

With Mearsheimer now becoming a virtual synecdoche for realism, it is hard not to feel sympathy for realists who allow more room in their models for the *domestic* causes of foreign policy, pay more attention to discourses that actors employ to give *reasons* for their actions, and who try to make a place for explicitly normative considerations in foreign policy decision. In his thoughtful plaidoyer for a “normative neoclassical realism,” Alexander Reichwein, for example, laments that “in its current state, neoclassical realism remains first and foremost an analytic framework to explain a state’s foreign policy. It lacks any *normative* strand.” Reichwein argues that neoclassical realism has lost sight of an older “self-understanding of realism as foreign policy theory and foreign policy guide” (Reichwein 2021, 285). The classical realism of Morgenthau still offers a resource for resurrecting realism’s dual orientation to theory and practice. Neoclassical realists, he concludes, “must not make the same mistake as their neorealist colleagues” by focusing exclusively on explanation (287). Classical realism, by contrast, “does not assume deterministic objective forces pushing

states into predefined directions. It focuses on the historical political contests and challenges faced by the reflective decision makers of a state who have to make strategic choices . . . ” (286) Reichwein helps us see what happens when a scholar embraces the dual orientation of realism—as foreign policy theory and guide to practice, but neglects to make the kind of normatively informed political judgments that Reichwein urges realists to make. And this underscores the problematic nature of Mearsheimer’s direct translation from theory to practice which skips over the normatively laden moments of decision (Tooze 2022).

## 2 Realism’s Elision of Decision-Making Agency: Geopolitics versus Geopolitical Cultures and Contingency

By offering a single-variable geopolitical explanation for the war in Ukraine—NATO expanded, Putin was forced to react—Mearsheimer beguiles readers with conceptual parsimony. Such parsimony also has an aesthetic rationale—recall Waltz’s account of the ‘beautiful’ in theory. But it also has an emotional appeal. His hydraulic account—of forces and counterforces vying for a finite geographical space—offers the emotional satisfactions of a complete explanation. It also has the ‘ring of truth,’ resonating as it does with the common sense we have internalized over the last century in a half living in a world hierarchically structured by empires, and that therefore seem as natural and immovable as the planet’s orbit around the sun. While realists claim to be particularly well-attuned to the shortcomings of rationalism, Mearsheimer offers the fantasy of total intellectual mastery of what was in fact a highly contingent and fundamentally unpredictable situation. Few experts expected Putin to choose war. *The Washington Post* story about the efforts of the Biden Administration to warn Zelensky of what was coming show how unimaginable a full-scale invasion seemed to leading players in the arena (Harris et al., 2022; ‘Road to War,’ Aug. 16, 2022).

While classical realists like Morgenthau weighed moral ends in terms of a consequentialist ethics of responsibility indebted to Max Weber, Mearsheimer’s statesman’s vocation appears only to require subordinating himself to the logic of the system. Mearsheimer has described Putin as a ‘first class strategist’ (Mearsheimer 2014a, 87). While ‘strategist’ conjures an ability to handle multidimensional challenges in a rational and sequenced manner, Putin is now widely acknowledged to have ‘miscalculated’— as if the likely success of an invasion of a country of forty-two million was little more than a rounding error in math. But Putin, it seems clear, has vastly overrated his military’s preparedness and motivation, underestimating both the will of Ukrainians to resist and their level

of military preparedness and skill. By what criterion does he fit the measure of a ‘first class strategist’ then? The logic is circular: Putin counts as a rational strategist because he behaves as the theory would predict a rational leader of a ‘great power’ would. But as the continental European critical theory tradition reminds us what is instrumentally rational is not necessarily substantively rational. Our ostensibly hyper-rational actor’s failings exceed a ‘miscalculation’ of the relationship of ends to means. The ends matter for an assessment of ‘rationality.’

A major weakness of Mearsheimer’s hydraulic model of state behavior—push and pull, action and reaction—is that it treats human decisions as overdetermined. But it is not only neorealists who fail to do justice to the agency of decisionmakers: the geopolitical tradition of realism also has an agency problem. As I show elsewhere, two leading realists of the 1940s, Princeton’s Harold Sprout and Margaret Sprout, became apostates from realist orthodoxy when they argued that geopolitical theories offered overly deterministic explanations, reified geographical facts into deterministic forces, and neglected the cognitive world of the ‘decisionmaker’ (Specter 2023). As Patrick Houghton has shown, rectifying this relative lack of attention to agency vis a vis structures motivated several generations of critics of positivism in IR theory (Jackson and Nexon 2013). Cognitive foreign policy analysis prefigured much of what has become accepted in constructivist IR. “In early cognitive foreign policy analysis (CFPA),” Houghton writes, “we see at least the beginning of the idea that states—and the policymakers within states—‘construct’ their own realities . . .” (Houghton 2007, 33).

Like many other realists before him, Mearsheimer has a tendency to treat the state as a unitary actor responding automatically to the promptings of the ‘national interest.’ In an important treatise written in 1956, the Sprouts rebelled against this tendency among their scholar-peers.<sup>2</sup> They argued that not enough attention was paid to the intersection of decisionmaker and his international environment, what they named the nexus of ‘man’ and ‘milieu.’ In important work funded by the Rockefeller Foundation, they critiqued the notion of an unmediated cause-effect relationship between ‘geographic influences’ and contingent policy decisions. To the realists’ description of states causally responding to their environment—in ways thought predictable according to general laws of ‘power politics’—the Sprouts offered the humbler and more convincing description and explanation of foreign policy centered on the cognitive world of the decision-maker. They argued that “foreign policy, military strategy, and other phenomena

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<sup>2</sup> The Sprouts co-authored eight books between 1940 and 1980; their intellectual partnership and its significance for the history of international relations theory in the U.S. and beyond is one of my current research projects.

of international politics” were often described in terms that personify the state and its subdivisions:

Decisions are explained in terms of vague generalities such as ‘national honor’, ‘national prestige’, ‘national interest’, ‘raison d’état’ etc. But built into such expressions are implicit hypotheses that the state is a quasi-organism that divorces the idea of the state from . . . [those] who take and execute decisions in the name of the state. (Sprout and Sprout 1956, 84)

The Sprouts believed their ‘cognitive behavioral’ model of foreign policy explanation and prediction could provide:

. . . a fruitful alternative to vague but dogmatic generalizations regarding the ‘effect’ of ‘continentality’ or ‘isolation’ or ‘the wide oceans’ or ‘insularity’ or ‘new weapons’ or ‘international communism’ or the effect of some other environmental factor on the foreign policy of this state or that one. (Sprout and Sprout 1956, 69)

The Sprouts’ apostasy from a certain tendency in the realism of their day resonates in the current context of the Russian war on Ukraine. Morgenthau would probably not accept the Sprouts’ characterization of the national interest as a ‘vague generality,’ and to his credit, he recognized that the national interest was an ideal type—a way of mapping the world and the nation’s priorities in it, not holding up an objective mirror to it. By contrast, Mearsheimer’s account of Putin the decisionmaker treats him as relatively epiphenomenal to the real drivers of foreign policy. Such a move deprives us of a satisfactory account of Putin’s moral responsibility for the war. But it also reveals a logical weakness in the paradigm, not just a moral deficiency. As Toni Erskine writes,

There is a fascinating proclivity in IR for accepting states as purposive, yet amoral, actors. Nevertheless while *inter alia*, realist, neorealist, neoliberal and some constructivist approaches rely on the agency of the state, the idea that the state might be a bearer of moral burdens is either precluded or (perhaps most notably in the case of classical realist positions) allowed but unexamined. (Erskine 2009, 702)

By taking refuge in the claim that they are in the business of value-free prediction and explanation, the Mearsheimerian realist brackets all normative questions concerning the stakes, moral and practical, of different outcomes (including genocide).

The parsimony of Mearsheimer’s account of the war’s origins is a reflection of how little ambition his structural analysis has for accounting for the specific conjuncture of Putin as a free agent within a concrete historical context. This not only makes it hard to evaluate Putin as a moral agent with choices—but

also makes it hard to understand how and why he has assigned specific strategic meaning to Ukraine. For Mearsheimer the strategic meaning of Ukraine is a self-evident fact of geography. In what follows, I use the insights in Gerard Toal's deeply informed book, *Near Abroad: Putin, the West, and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus* (Toal 2017) to argue that Putin's decision to invade was pre-structured by forces that are more historically contingent and culturally constructed than natural or necessary. In particular, Toal helps us see the constructed, non-natural, non-objective nature of 'geopolitics.' In the place of a geopolitical *deus ex machina*, Toal offers the analytically useful notion of 'geopolitical entrepreneurs' and 'geopolitical cultures'. These are the source of the mental maps, affective investments, and narratives of redemption, honor and rescue that have driven Putin's decision-making about Russia's 'near abroad' in the last two decades. Geopolitical cultures, not geographic facts, are key. Geopolitical cultures channel popular fears about national decline and anxieties about a loss of international status into specific visions of national security. Russian security elites on Toal's account appear to be as animated by potent emotions of honor, pride, and humiliation as any merely rational calculation of interest. And the difficulty if not impossibility of separating 'rationality' from 'emotion' at the philosophical level helps explain why this should be so, no less in the United States than in Russia. There is no overarching strategic rationality to Putin's thought that is not mediated by conceptions of Russian national interest. And these in turn are an always evolving product of ideologies and discursive contest between visions of Russia's place in Eurasia (Suslov 2018, 2020; Tsygankov 2022; Tsygankov and Tsyganov 2010).

At the time he wrote the book in 2017, Toal outlined two "predominant interpretive traditions" for analyzing the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014. The dominant Western liberal view that Russia had behaved as "an unreformed and reinvigorated imperial power," was one. The other, which corresponds to Mearsheimer's view, was "understand[ing] Russia as a great power pursuing its interests like all great powers" (286). But Toal argues that neither framework gets the regional dynamic right. While Toal agrees with the liberals that "Russian geopolitical culture under Putin became concertedly revanchist in conception and goal," he insists that this "revanchism did not have a teleological territorial end: it was not about re-creating the territory of the Soviet Union or about expanding the territorial expanse of the Russian Federation" (280). The deficiency of Mearsheimer's view is that his general observation about great power 'sensitivity' is incomplete without a more precise account of threat perception: ". . . There is nothing predetermined or objective about great powers being sensitive to potential threats near their home territory. The process is thoroughly contingent and constructed by prevailing geopolitical discourses and entrepreneurs" (288).

Indeed, Toal notes, “A consistent interventionist policy toward the near abroad, however, never developed . . . [under Putin]. Geopolitical entrepreneurs competed with each other to push the state towards more muscular policies and revisionist schemes, but their interests and power waxed and waned” (287). NATO expansion did not render Putin’s war inevitable.

A key weakness of what Toal calls “political realist storylines” is the way they reduce complexity and eliminate contingency. One way they do this is by privileging “the dispositional essence of states, and the state system . . . over the contextual practice of world politics” (31). Toal’s critique of this essentialism of dispositions echoes the Sprouts’ lament about the tendency of the realists of the mid-1950s to anthropomorphize states and reify geographic ‘influences.’ As Toal writes, in neorealism,

States are conceptualized as fearing, thinking, observing and calculating entities in a struggle for survival with other states. From these foundational assumptions, Mearsheimer identifies three general patterns of behavior in international affairs: fear, self-help and power maximization. (29)

By describing Russia’s national interest “as overdetermined by primordial fear of land invasion” (32), Toal argues convincingly that Mearsheimer makes fear an “explanatory *deus ex machina*.” Mearsheimer has never explained why “fear of NATO encroachment in 2008 or EU encroachment in 2014 triggered wars but did not result in wars in 2004—when NATO expansion incorporated the former Soviet Baltic Republics” (32). A realist might counter that Putin simply hadn’t sufficient economic and military power yet to risk war for the underlying objective. Underscoring the role of contingency, Toal argues that the road to the invasion of Crimea was paved by developments a continent away. The U.S.-led overthrow of Libyan President Muammar Qaddafi was a turning point since it “strengthened the position of hardliners who argued Russia was in a zero-sum struggle for power and influence with the West” (210). This argument resembles Mearsheimer’s in emphasizing an aggressive West. But it is clear that the ‘red lines’ of Russian security do not run through Ukraine in particular.

In short, Russia’s relation to its near abroad cannot be captured through a one-dimensional model oriented to invasion and security. South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabankh, Donbas, and Crimea together constitute a ‘geopolitical archipelago’ whose meaning is as much symbolic and affective as strategic. Fear alone is not a convincing master-variable because there is a much “richer range of affective motivations . . . connected to the places themselves” (32) By “disregarding the power of emotional ties,” Toal argues that Mearsheimer “marginalizes” Russian motivations that cannot be reduced to “strategic moves in a game of power politics.” Toal suggests that “righteous indignation mixed

with feelings of protection, pride and glory,” were more important than any security threat embodied in land-based NATO expansion (32-3). Mearsheimer empties geopolitical spaces of populations and their “varying aspirations” (286) turning them into abstract containers. “Mearsheimer’s great power centrism tends to marginalize the geopolitical field and the various actors that define post-Soviet space,” flattening them analytically into “superpowers,” “clients,” and “proxies” and concluding that superpowers “are the only ones with real agency” (31-2). By contrast, “an analysis of the structure of the conjunctures in August 2008 and February 2014 . . . reveals a much more complex picture concerning agency and ‘playbooks’” (32).

Mearsheimer’s rationalist model, Toal continues, black boxes the “sensitivity” of “the state” to territorial infringement, instead of inquiring into understandings of security that shift with shifts in the state’s “ontological security”—its sense of a stable identity and secure status in the world system. Neither “primordial state security motivations,” nor a desire to rebuild Russia within the boundaries of the former USSR capture Putin’s goals since he ascended to power in late 1999: “It was always Putin’s goal to restore Russia to the status of a great power in northern Eurasia . . . But the end goal was not to create the Soviet Union but to make Russia great again” (58). But what is this elusive thing, “greatness”? Toal argues that for Putin, making Russia great again means, “Russia must ‘rise from its knees” (89). Neorealism’s emphasis on the objective necessities of geopolitics cannot get at the heart of “greatness.” Greatness is not superstructural, but culturally constructed, subject to change, and demands normative scrutiny. One can imagine that a neoclassical realism informed by constructivism could be able to help explain Putin’s sensitivity to stigma, to humiliation, the whole emotional complex of the Russian national ego and its discontents. But this is Russia on the couch—Russia in need of interpretation. This is very different from the neorealists’ explanation of Russia as exemplar of geopolitical rationality.

The collapse of the USSR raised existential questions about Russian identity, writes Toal: “The new Russian state had to determine what made someone Russian” and the scope of its responsibilities to all Russian-speaking peoples (70). In the Russian Federation’s first decade an “intense debate” yielded three “distinctive visions”: “a liberal European Russia, a revived imperial Russia, and an independent great power Russia” (71-2). The success of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy’s Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) in the December 1993 Duma elections marked a shift in public sentiment. Though Zhirinovskiy

was one only one of a series of geopolitical entrepreneurs at the time . . . territorially revisionist geopolitical fantasy became a distinctive genre within Russian intellectual life

... Two others who would go on to forms of influence ... were Alexander Dugin and Dmitry Rogozin. (76)

When the referendum on Ukrainian independence took place in December 1991, Putin's political mentor, then mayor of St. Petersburg, Anatoly Sobchak denied it any significance: Ukraine is mostly provinces handed over from Russia: "a whole series of Russian provinces, the so-called *Novorussiya*, whose population is for the most part Russian" (80). Fighting in Transnistria (from August to July 1992) and Abkhazia (from August 1992 to September 1993) generated media attention to endangered Russian-speaking civilian populations. Note that Toal asserts that this, not NATO expansion, was the key inflection point of the last thirty years:

Strong statist actions (*derzhavniks*, from the Russian word for great power) within the Supreme Soviet, the Kremlin, the Russian military, and groups representing military industrial interests ... all pushed for more forceful articulation of Russia's national security interests within these conditions of crisis. (81)

Toal's sketch of competing geopolitical entrepreneurs and cultures illustrates how contested, polyvalent and open the idea of Russian national security was in the three decades between the fall of the USSR and the 2022 war.

When contemporary neorealists and neoclassical realists identify great power competition as the defining horizon of 21st century world politics, they pour old wine into new bottles. But then as now, great power status is misunderstood if it is described as an achieved state to be defended and conserved. Great power status is as much a description of future-oriented aspirations as a reflection of proven and measurable capacities. Between March 1992 and December 1993, the *derzhavniks* crafted a "series of policy documents, findings and public declarations" explicitly modelled on the US's Monroe Doctrine of 1823. On August 4, 1992, for example, Andranik Migranyan, adviser to the Duma's Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs, stated in an interview that "Russia should declare the entire geopolitical space of the former USSR a sphere of its vital interests (like [the] US's Monroe Doctrine). Only Russia should be the factor determining the geopolitical space of the former USSR" (83). A National Security Directive circulated in April 1993 stressed certain priorities for Russia's near abroad, but excluding NATO or securing the border against invasion were not among them. The list included only "the need to deepen ties, protect the rights of the members of the Russian Federation's ethnic groups in the near abroad, and protect the rights and interests of citizens and orgs of the Russian Federation abroad" (82).

While most historians date the appearance of realism as a coherent body of thought from the 1930s, 40s or 50s, with E.H. Carr or Hans J. Morgenthau the central figure, I have traced some of its most salient concepts and arguments to

discussions of the 1880s and 90s, amongst intellectuals I name the first generation of ‘Atlantic realists.’ Two characteristics of this discussion at the fin-de-siecle are particularly illuminating of the current conjuncture. The first concerns the Monroe Doctrine, for me an *Ur*-text of Atlantic realism. The Monroe Doctrine haunts all of our contemporary global discussions of ‘great power politics’ and spheres of influence, not just the Russian. The Monroe Doctrine’s global ramifications and reformulations awaits its historian. In *The Atlantic Realists*, I tell two pieces of this story. The first is the late 19th century U.S. reformulation of the doctrine by the generation of Theodore Roosevelt and Alfred Mahan. The second is Carl Schmitt’s explicit adaptation of the Monroe doctrine as a model for Nazi hegemony in Europe. As I show in the book, Schmitt claimed that the theory of *Grossraum* was validated by a practice of imperial comparison. Other scholars have sought to draw connections between Schmitt’s *Grossraum* theory and Alexander Dugin’s Eurasianism but they fall beyond the scope of this article. Here I will emphasize how the late 19th century U.S. discussion of the Monroe Doctrine sheds light on how an earlier generation of realists handled the nature of global hierarchies, great-power status, and what it meant to be a power of the ‘first rank.’

### 3 Great-Power Competition, The Monroe Doctrine, and the Long Shadow of the 19th Century in IR Theory

Realists today are not often willing to recognize the deep continuities in their thinking with their late 19th century forbears (Ashford 2022; Porter 2022). When contemporary neorealists and neoclassical realists identify great power competition as the defining horizon of 21st century world politics, they pour new wine into old bottles. Then as now, great power status is misunderstood if it is described as an achieved state to be defended and conserved. For Russia today, great power status is something to be recovered from the debris of the Soviet Union and Imperial Russian history: recoiling from the stigma of being perceived as a second tier or merely ‘regional’ power, it looks to the past. Great power status is not an objectively determinate status reflecting measurable capacities. The perception of ‘greatness’ depends on what one perceives when one looks in the mirror of international society. At the turn of the century U.S. and German thinkers held up that mirror to each other’s empire and through a practice of comparing the image they found there, ascertained the nature of realistic imperial behavior. Three key figures on the American side illustrate how a realism of empire took shape through a practice of comparison. What is striking from the perspective

of the Mearsheimer debate is how sympathetically and respectfully the first generation of American realists treated their German rival's imperial aspirations. In this respect the debate over Russian great power aspirations and behavior echoes the conversation of the founders about the prerogatives of American and German imperial power. A brief discussion of the writings of three Americans of this first generation will illustrate the point. These were Archibald Coolidge, a professor of Russian history at Harvard, Paul S. Reinsch, a professor of political science at the University of Wisconsin, and Admiral Alfred T. Mahan.

In his writings of the 1890s, Mahan exhorted the U.S. to confront the imminent closure of the global frontier for imperial expansion by embracing a more assertive foreign policy. "The outlook—the signs of the times, what are they? . . ." One sign he observed was "the general outward impulse of all the civilized nations of the first order of greatness—except our own" (Specter 2022a, 40). Mahan wanted to teach his readers how to see the world, not only as it was, but also as it should be. And that world was one in which the U.S. ranked among the 'great.' Description and prescription, theory and practice, were closely linked. Great power status was about aligning national behavior with the recognized role of a 'world power' in international society. When U.S. victory in the Spanish-American War of 1898 turned the U.S. into an overseas colonial power for the first time, Mahan, Coolidge and Reinsch felt the need to reflect on the changing prerequisites of national 'greatness.' Lodge, Roosevelt, Mahan, and Wilson all described the Spanish-American War of 1898 as a watershed in American development: a new stage of 'maturity' reflected in an outer-directedness. Great power status now required a presence on the 'world stage,' a status measured in colonies and the naval power necessary to police them and deter rivals. As Coolidge wrote in 1909,

it is a truth, now generally accepted, that the war of 1898 was a turning-point in the history of the American republic. The reason therefor (sic) is usually summed up in the phrase that since that date the United States has been a world power. (Specter 2022b, 31)

Before that, "in the great game of international politics they took little part. European statesmen could usually leave them out of their reckonings." The U.S. was widely known to be "a power of great resources . . . [but] if one . . . kept clear of the Monroe Doctrine, in which most of Europe had small interest, then in practice the U.S. need not often be taken into consideration. It belonged, so to speak, to a different world" (Specter 2022a, 31).

Numerous books appeared in the years immediately before and after 1898 with the words 'world politics' in the title. Figures like Henry Cabot Lodge and Theodore Roosevelt frequently used these terms in speeches and letters from 1895 to 1900. Advocating for the annexation of Hawaii, Cabot and Lodge, said: "The great nations are rapidly absorbing for their future expansion and their

present defense all the waste places of the earth . . . As one of the great nations of the world, the U.S. must not fall out of the line of march.” Lodge didn’t have a specific territorial goal in mind — as he repeatedly said, the U.S. should take “rank where we belong, as one of the greatest of the great world powers.” Because the territorial perquisites of ‘greatness’ were only vaguely formulated, the category was an empty signifier. Referring to an imagined Atlantic community of peer nations helped establish the rank of the ‘great.’ National ‘greatness’ was established through the practice of comparison (Specter 2022b, 32).

But for Mahan, the Monroe Doctrine had inaugurated a more expansive definition of U.S. national interests as hemispheric rather than continental. Between 1895 and 1903, Mahan kept returning to the Monroe Doctrine in his writing, finding it a useful lens on the United States’ new status. When in 1901, the Roosevelt Corollary to the Doctrine was signed into law, it “explicitly transformed the negatively framed and noninterventionist message of 1823 into a proactive call for intervention.” Mahan interpreted this massive change in meaning as an expression of its strength:

The virtue of the Monroe Doctrine, without which it would die deservedly, is that, through its correspondence with the national necessities of the U.S., it possesses an inherent principle of life, which adapts itself with the flexibility of a growing plant to the successive conditions it encounters. One of these conditions of course is the growing strength of the nation itself. (Specter 2022a, 43)

Like other first-generation Atlantic realists, Mahan eschewed American exceptionalism. Significantly for the present discussion of Ukraine, Mahan even allowed that the Monroe Doctrine could one day serve as a model for the Germans since Germany has parallel interests, equally unsusceptible of arbitration by tribunal or codification in international law:

. . . In questions of policy, like the Monroe Doctrine, or the position of the British in Egypt, or of Japan in Manchuria, determination does not concern lawyers as such, but men of affairs, because therefore being no law applicable, what is needed is a workable arrangement based on recognized conditions. (Specter 2022b, 45)

For the German-educated U.S. political scientist, Paul S. Reinsch (1869–1923) too, 1898 signified a new vocation for the country:

That the U.S. is to play a leading part in international affairs—that she is to be one of the five leading world powers—has been irrevocably decided by the events of the recent past. A nation of our power and resources would be untrue to its vocation if it did not sooner or later realize its duty in this important position to which it has attained. (Specter 2022a, 33)

Like Mahan, Reinsch also recognized Germany as a peer empire with comparable ambitions and prerogatives. Writing against those contemporaries who asserted that German settler colonization in South America violated the Monroe Doctrine, Reinsch defended Germany's desire to protect "the rights of her colonists" abroad. Like Reinsch and Mahan, Coolidge argued that beneath the surface confrontations, lay a deeper German-U.S. kinship:

England and France appear to us like two rich, long-established and somewhat old-fashioned commercial houses . . . Compared with them, Germany and the U.S. are like two young pushing firms who have yet their way to make. Already their achievements have excited the alarm of their staid rivals, and they might look forward joyously to more brilliant triumphs in the future, if each were not worried by the presence of the other. (Specter 2022b, 38)

Since the dynamics of German-American competition were a subset of the larger systemic logic of world empire, Germany's rise should be accommodated not resisted: "Wherever on the globe there is a good opening for trade, there we may expect to find the Germans and the Americans striving in ardent rivalry. . ." By emphasizing the comparability of the American and German empires at the turn of the century, the Atlantic realists together ascertained a measure for what constituted 'reasonable' behavior for an imperial nation-state (Specter 2022a, 38).

The world of Mahan and the Monroe Doctrine may seem remote from the neorealist political science of Mearsheimer, and of little relevance to assessing global international relations after Ukraine. But the Monroe Doctrine is not just a lodestar of American foreign policy (and unchallenged by Morgenthau, who also described it as non-imperialistic: Guilhot 2014). In 1950, Morgenthau wrote, "The Monroe Doctrine and the policies implementing it express the permanent national interest of the US in the Western Hemisphere" (Specter 2022b, 157). It also figures in Mearsheimer's thinking about Ukraine, as a recent interview in *The New Yorker* clearly showed. The notion that the Monroe Doctrine doesn't amount to 'imperialism' for Mearsheimer is a too perfect synecdochic example of realism's broader amnesia about and denial of its imperial origins.

When the interviewer, Isaac Chotiner suggested that granting Russia a veto over Ukrainian aspirations "to be considered part of Europe" sounds "like almost some sort of imperialism." Mearsheimer's response was illuminating:

It's not imperialism: this is great-power politics. When you're a country like Ukraine and you live next door to a great power like Russia, you have to pay careful attention to what the Russians think, because if you take a stick and poke them in the eye they're going to retaliate. States in the Western Hemisphere understand this full well with regard to the United States. (Chotiner 2022)

When Chotiner responds that this amounts to an endorsement of American imperialism in our hemisphere—that “we have some sort of say over how democratic countries run their business,” Mearsheimer replies:

We do have that say and in fact we overthrew democratically elected leaders in the Western Hemisphere during the Cold War because we were unhappy with their policies. This is how great powers behave. (Chotiner 2022)

Mearsheimer’s substitution of ‘great power’ behavior for imperialism is what poker players call a ‘tell.’ In describing U.S. hemispheric dominance *as just how great powers behave* is an astonishing truncation of the duty to think historically. To be fair, Mearsheimer does not sugarcoat American imperialism. In *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, he calls the U.S.’ pursuit of regional hegemony in the 19th century “relentless” and “aggressive.” However, when the positivist gaze turns what Mearsheimer clearsightedly names “conquest, colonization and territorial expansion” into “great power behavior,” critical reason abdicates its normative function. It also fails as history, substituting a law-governed world of quasi-natural behavior for the contingent choices of imperial statesmen (Mearsheimer 2014b, 238–9)

Long before *l’affaire Mearsheimer*, historians have been looking at the myths that shape IR and trying to write a more adequate disciplinary history of IR and the history of international thought more broadly. But the heat generated by the charges and countercharges around the person and work of Mearsheimer are a distraction that obscure deeper problems with realism that long predate the Ukraine war. While realists claim the authority of history for their science, by turning history into a series of ‘examples’ of general patterns and law-like regularities, the current defenders of realism seem unaware of neither the revolution that has taken place in our historical understanding of the disciplinary field of international relations, nor of the historiography that has revealed realism’s deep and significant links to 19th century imperialism and racism.

The problems with IR realism as a theory are not new. Defenders of realism thus go astray when they claim that the sole alternative to realism is ‘moralism,’ or insist that critiques of realism are fundamentally irrational—either an expression of ‘rage’ at the moralist’s failure to predict the Ukraine war, or an insistence that any effort to explain Putin’s actions is morally reprehensible (Porter 2022). Critiques of realism long predate the war and it trivializes these critiques to reduce their taproot to moralism. Constructivists have long insisted that concepts like the national interest cannot be reified and treated as quasi-objective. Harold and Margaret Sprout, as I showed, identified a determinism in geopolitical theory that prefigured the development of critical geopolitics (Dodds, Kuus, and Sharp 2013). All realisms have naturalized the concept of international ‘anarchy’ and muted

the role that racial and civilizational hierarchies play in pre-structuring political conflicts (Acharya and Buzan 2019; Anievas, Machanda, and Shilliam 2015; Buzan and Lawson 2015; Donnelly 2015; Hobson 2012; Mateos and Laiz 2018; Matern and Zarakol 2016; Zvogobo and Loken 2020). Ironically, given all realisms' focus on the high politics of the state, it has no theory of the state in relation to economy. Whether you treat realism as a degenerating research paradigm (Elman and Jensen 2014; Vasquez and Elman 2003) or a robustly healthy one (Wolforth 2008), realism has been the hegemonic paradigm in the American political science subfield of political science for over a half century (Donnelly 2015; Dunne, Hansen and Wight 2013). American IR has dominated the global discipline in the same period that the U.S. itself has been politically and economically hegemonic. Acharya and Buzan assert that "American IR's ideational position [has become] much less hegemonic, with many inside and outside the West rejecting its link to Political Science and positivist epistemology" (Acharya and Buzan 2019, 291). If this is the case, then the notion that a post-American world necessarily entails a world structured by great-power competition is far from a foregone conclusion.

International relations' preoccupation with great-power competition dates back to the 19th century. As Buzan and Lawson and Vitalis have shown, international relations has repressed its origins in the late 19th century (Buzan and Lawson 2015; Vitalis 2015). As Acharya and Buzan have written: "To see the massive continuities between the concerns of 19th cent IR and the contemporary discipline, it is necessary to both break through the 1919 boundary, and to confront the fact that racism and the 'standard of civilization' were foundational to IR, and although largely forgotten or repressed, influential still. . ." (Acharya and Buzan 2019, 38).

In the 1920s, a myth took hold that the discipline had been born in the ashes of WWI, not in the discourses of geopolitics, imperial and colonial administration of the late 19th century (De Carvalho, Leira and Hobson 2011). As Buzan and Lawson put it:

From the 1920s onwards, IR was almost obsessively focused on the present and near future, which were, in turn, largely defined in terms of great power relations. This genesis of the discipline launched IR as a presentist discipline whose primary concerns were the (dis)order of the great power system and how to understand the conditions that might lead to war or promote peace. . . (Buzan and Lawson 2015, 62)

Buzan and Acharya add that neorealism reinforced this focus on great powers since Waltz's

notion of system structure refers to the distribution of capabilities among the units, only those units that occupied the upper rungs of the power matrix could affect system structure by virtue of their conflictual or cooperative behavior. The extreme materialist simplification

of polarity put the two superpowers at the center of IR theory and marginalized all others. (Acharya and Buzan 2019, 153)

The results were consequential: “In effect by ignoring the relationship between the North and South as a factor in systemic order, Neorealism maintained the exclusion of the periphery from the concerns of mainstream IR that had been a feature of IR since the 19th century” (154).

Realism has long oscillated between two modes of self-presentation: as art or as science (Milne 2015; Specter 2022a). By explicitly forswearing normative questions, realism as science naturalizes great power prerogatives, reifies geopolitics, and elides the real agency of decisionmakers. As a consequence, the contingency of historical events and the cultural construction of notions of national security tends to disappear from view. The classical or neoclassical realists who wish us to narrow the gap that opened up with Waltz between international politics as theory and foreign policy as practice suggest that we return to a post-positivist view of realism as an art of judgment. A neoclassical realism attuned to normative questions of agency is preferable to its positivist cousin, but still begs the question of how important the theory is if ultimately it has only prudence to offer. Prudential realism appeals to many critics of U.S. foreign policy because of the distorting influence of American exceptionalism and messianic hubris in American foreign policy. Reading Reinhold Niebuhr or Hans Morgenthau is a salutary exercise for cultivating skepticism about American exceptionalism. Where realism fails badly however is in allowing the comparative imagination to content itself with the practice of imperial comparison. If we treat great power status and its prerogatives as the unmoveable horizon of international politics, we remain the contemporaries of our 19th century imperial forbears. Realists cannot contribute fully to an emancipatory global politics until they acknowledge the persistence of imperial modes of seeing from Monroe, Mahan, Coolidge and Reinsch to Morgenthau, Waltz and Mearsheimer.

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