

“Deep State”, China and the big war

John Mearsheimer and Jeffrey Sachs on American foreign policy

Discussion at the “All-in Summit 2024” at the Columbia University
between John Mearsheimer* and Jeffrey Sachs**



John Mearsheimer and Jeffrey Sachs
at the Columbia University discussion. (Screenshot)

(CH-S) How do two of the most renowned US intellectuals view their own foreign policy? The following abridged discussion provides a deep insight into this, which should be taken note of urgently in Europe.

At the “All-In Summit 2024” at Columbia University (8–10 September 2024), a discussion was held with two of the most provocative voices in US foreign policy, John Mearsheimer of the University of Chicago and Jeffrey Sachs of Columbia University, which revealed various layers of the global power dynamic.

The role of the so-called “Deep State” was scrutinised and it was revealed how both major political parties are involved in the US’s global projection of power, despite their outward appearance.

From US involvement in Ukraine to the long-term effects of China’s rise and the situation in the Middle East, these intellectual titans not only explained the mechanisms of American hegemony, but also questioned its viability in the fu-

ture, at a time when a nuclear war is looming on the horizon.

At the end of the text, you will find the transcript of the entire interview and a link to the video.

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“Deep State” and the difference between Republicans and Democrats

Jeffrey Sachs: There is basically one Deep State party and that is the party of *Cheney, Harris, Biden, Victoria Nuland* – my colleague at Columbia University now. And Nuland is kind of the face of all this because she has been in every administration for the last 30 years. She was in the Clinton administration, wrecking our policies towards Russia in the 1990s, she was in the Bush Jr. administration with Cheney, wrecking our policies towards NATO enlargement, then in the *Obama* administration as Hillary’s spokesperson first and then making a coup in Ukraine in February 2014 – not a great move, started a war – then she was Biden’s Undersecretary of State. Now that’s both parties, it’s a colossal mess and she has been Cheney’s adviser, she has been Biden’s advisor, it makes perfect sense. This is the reality. We are trying to find out if there’s another party. That’s the big question.

John Mearsheimer: I like to refer to the Republicans and the Democrats as Tweedle dee and Tweedle dum. There is hardly any difference. I actually think the one exception is that former president *Trump*, when he became president in 2017 was bent on beating back the deep state

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** **Jeffrey David Sachs** (born 1954) is a US-American economist and former professor at the Columbia University where he was the director of the Earth Institute

from 2002 to 2016. From 2002 to 2006 he was special advisor for the *Millennium Development Goals*. He is director of the *UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network* at the Columbia-University. From 2001 to 2018 special advisor to UN-General Secretary *Kofi Annan, Ban Ki-moon* and *Antonio Guterres*. He is Co-author of the World Happiness Report. Sachs has published several books, among them three “New York Times” Best-seller: *The End of Poverty* (2005), *Common Wealth: Economics for a Crowded Planet* (2008) and *The Price of Civilization* (2011).

and becoming a different kind of leader on the foreign policy front, but he basically failed. And he is vowed that if he gets elected this time it will be different, and he will beat back the Deep State. He will pursue foreign policy that's fundamentally different than Republicans and Democrats have pursued up to now. And the big question on the table is whether or not you think Trump can beat the Deep State and these two established parties and I bet against Trump.

When we talk about the Deep State, we're talking really about the administrative state. It's very important to understand it starting in the late 19th, early 20th century, given developments in the American economy. It was imperative that we develop.

And this was true of all Western countries. A very powerful central state that could run the country. And over time that state has grown in power. And since WWII the United States, as you all know, has been involved in every nook and cranny of the world, fighting wars, here, there and everywhere. And to do that, you need a very powerful administrative state that can help manage that foreign policy.

But in the process, what happens as you get all these high-level bureaucrats, middle level and low-level bureaucrats? Who become established in positions in the Pentagon, the State Department, the Intelligence Community, you name it, and they end up having a vested interest in pursuing a particular foreign policy. And the particular foreign policy that they like to pursue is the one that the Democrats and the Republicans are pushing. [...]

Sachs: There has been a very interesting interview of Putin in Figaro in 2017. And he says: I've dealt with three presidents now. They come into office with some ideas even. But then the men in the dark suits and the blue ties – then he says I wear red ties, but they wear blue ties – they come in and explain the way the world really is, and there go the ideas. And I think that's Putin's experience, that's our experience, that's my experience, which is that there's a deeply entrenched foreign policy. It has been in place in my interpretation for many decades but arguably a variant of it has been in place since 1992.

Can you change a policy once it is running?

Question: Is it philosophical entrenchment or is it just this inertial issue that once a policy begins

it's hard to change and the system's just working with 10,000 people working towards it?

Sachs: I think it's a very good description of American foreign policy which is that it's trying to maximise global power, essentially to be global hegemon. I think it could get us all killed because it is a little bit delusional in my mind [...] but every decision that I've seen, always leans in the same direction for the last 30 years, which is power as the central objective.

Mearsheimer: First of all, I do believe that the people who are in favour of this foreign policy do believe in it. It's not cynical. They really believe we're doing the right thing.

The second point I would make is that power has a lot to do with this. As a good realist, I of course believe that. But it's also very important to understand that the United States is a fundamentally liberal country, and we believe that we have a right, we have a responsibility, and we have the power to run around the world and remake the world in America's image.

Most people in the foreign policy establishment – the Republican Party, the Democratic Party – they believe that, and that is what has motivated our foreign policy in large parts since the Cold War ended. Remember, when the Cold War ended, we had no rival great power left. So, what are we going to do with all this power that we have? What we decided to do was go out and remake the world in our own image.

I am forever thankful that I was born in a liberal democracy, and I love liberalism. But the question here is, do you think that we can run around the world imposing liberal democracy on other countries? In some cases, shoving it down their throat, doing it at the end of a rifle barrel? My argument is that's almost impossible to do – it almost always backfires. Think of Iraq, Afghanistan, so forth and so on. Secondly, you begin to erode liberalism in the United States because you build a Deep State. And you want to understand that a lot of the complaints here about cracking down on freedom of speech and so forth are related to the fact, that we have this ambitious foreign policy. Those two things go together in very important ways.

Sachs: Let me disagree, just a bit. Because we agree on the behaviour, and I've learnt most of that from you. But in my work, 40 years overseas,

I don't think the US government gives a damn about these other places. I don't think they really care if it's a liberal democracy or a dictatorship. They want the right of ways, they want the military bases, they want the state to be in support of the United States, they want NATO enlargement. I don't know if you've written it – and there are some who believe in state building. God, if they do, they are so incompetent, it's unbelievable (applause).

First of all, almost all the time that we intervene, it's because we view this as a power situation for the US. So, whether it's Ukraine or Syria or Libya or other places. Even if we define it as defending something, believe me, it's not about defending something. It's about a perception of US power and US interests and objectives of US global hegemony.

If we analyse the Ukraine conflict, just a little bit below the surface, this is not a conflict about Putin invading Ukraine. This is something a lot different. That has to do with American power projection into the former Soviet Union and so it's completely different.

Second: if we decide we're the police, which we do, you can't imagine how cynical bullshit we use to justify our actions.

If you want to defend real things, go to the UN Security Council and convince others, because the other countries are not crazy. And they don't want mayhem in the world. But we play games. [...] But if we're real about our interests, then you go to the UN Security Council, and then it's not just on us, it's actually then a collective security issue.

Is China a threat?

Question: Is China a threat?

Mearsheimer: In terms of China, I'm fully in favour of containing China. [...]

With regard to Russia, I don't think Russia is a serious threat to the United States and indeed, I think the United States should have good relations with Putin. It's a remarkably foolish policy to push him into the arms of the Chinese.

There are three great powers in the system: the United States, China and Russia. China is a peer competitor to the United States. It's the most serious threat to the United States. Russia is the weakest of those three great powers, and it's not a serious threat to us. If you are playing balance power politics and you're interested, as



Discussion at the 'All-In Summit 2024'. (Screenshot)

the United States, in containing China, you want Russia on your side of the ledger. But what we have done, in effect, is push Russia into the arms of the Chinese. This is a remarkably foolish policy. Furthermore, by getting bogged down in Ukraine and now bogged down in the Middle East, it's become very difficult for us to pivot to Asia to deal with China, which is the principal threat that we face. [applause]

[...]

Sachs: I just wanted to add a footnote, which is that China is also not a threat. It's just not a threat. China is a market. It's got great food, great culture, wonderful people, a civilization 10 times older than ours, it's not a threat. [...]

A conflict with China would wreck California, for one thing. It would destroy the economy that you guys are making completely. This economy has been the biggest beneficiary of China's rise, probably in the whole world. So, it's crazy. If you're worried about the tech industry, about California, about peace and the future, you should be pro-China. That's all.

John said, "When China becomes large, we're going to have conflicts." They are big; therefore, they're an enemy. They're an enemy of our aspiration to global supremacy.

Mearsheimer: Jeff and I agree on all sorts of issues, including Ukraine and Israel/Palestine. But we disagree fundamentally, as he just made clear, on China. [...]

It has to do with security – whether you privilege security or survival, or whether you privilege prosperity. Economists, and I would imagine most of you in the audience, really care greatly about maximizing prosperity. For someone like me, who's a realist, what I care about is maximizing the state's prospects of survival. When you live in an anarchic system – and in IR speak that means there's no higher author-

ity, there's no night watchman that can come down and rescue you if you get into trouble – and this is the international system. There's no higher authority.

In that anarchic world, the best way to survive is to be really powerful. As we used to say when I was a kid on New York City playgrounds, "You want to be the biggest and baddest dude on the block." And that's simply because it's the best way to survive. If you're really powerful, nobody fools around with you. The United States is a regional hegemon – it's the only regional hegemon on the planet. We dominate the Western Hemisphere.

But from an American perspective this is of course not acceptable. We tolerate no equal hegemon. We don't want another hegemon on the planet. [...]

And what China has begun to do, as it's gotten increasingly powerful economically, is translate that economic might into military might. It's trying to dominate Asia. It wants to push us out beyond the first island chain, beyond the second island chain. It wants to be like we are in the Western Hemisphere. [...]

What you see beginning to happen is that it's in all domains where the competition takes place, especially high-tech. We do not want them defeating us in the high-tech war. We are competing with them economically, we're competing with them militarily and this is because the best way to survive is for us, the United States of America, to remain the only regional hegemon on the planet. [applause]

China is not a threat to the US

Sachs: John said in his book, that regional hegemons don't threaten each other. Why? Because we have a big ocean in between. [...]

I deeply believe that China is not a threat to the United States. I deeply believe the only threat to the United States, period, in the world, given the oceans, given our size, and given the military, is nuclear war. I deeply believe we're close to nuclear war because we have a mindset that leads us in that direction. We have a mindset that everything is a challenge for survival, and that escalation is therefore always the right approach. My view is: a little bit of prudence could save the whole planet. [...]

My strong advice on this, therefore, is *recognize China, first of all, is not a threat to United States' security*. Big oceans, big nuclear de-

terrent, and so forth. Second, we don't have to be in China's face. What do I mean by that? We don't have to provoke WWII over Taiwan. We have three agreements with China that say we're going to stay out of that. And we should. And then China would have no reason for war either.

And then on the economic side, let me just reiterate, because I was asked yesterday, and there was some surprise: was it good to let China into the WTO? I said, of course. It enriched all of you, by the way. It enriched me, it enriched this country, it enriched the world, including enriching China. That's normal. Economics is not a zero-sum game. We all agree on that. I believe that security doesn't have to be a zero-sum game either. We can stay a little bit away from each other, and China does not spend its time bemoaning America being a Western Hemisphere hegemon. They don't – that's not their greatest interest, to bring down American power in the Western Hemisphere.

Mearsheimer: Most of you have probably never asked yourself the question, "Why is the United States roaming all over the planet, interfering in every country's business?" It's in part because it's so powerful but it's also because it's a regional hegemon, which means we have no threats in the Western Hemisphere. So, we are free to roam. The great danger, Jeff, is that if China becomes a regional hegemon and doesn't have to worry about security concerns, then they behave like us.

Sachs: It's not my great fear. They have no interest in doing so because they don't want to get blown-up either.

If you try to prevent them from becoming a regional hegemon, we're going to end up in WWII. As you said yourself, this can absolutely spill over into war. I don't want it to spill over into war on the theory that maybe someday they'll behave differently. That's not a good theory for me. [...]

The United States has closed the market to China. Is that smart? No, it's not smart. Is it leading to the re-shoring of American manufacturing jobs? Zero. It may shift them a bit, it may make things less efficient, it may make all of you lose a bit more money or not make as much money, but is it going to solve any single economic problem in the United States? No way.

Mearsheimer: we are now in a war with Russia. Not a proxy war – a direct war. Russia has 6,000 nuclear warheads. [...] but the stakes are too high in the nuclear age. We've created technologies like Chat GPT and Optimus, and with all this innovation, we can avoid nuclear war. Just do a little bit better than saying, "It's inevitable".
[applause]

The conversation then turns to the conflict in the Middle East and the path to peace.

The transcript of the whole interview can be found here.

Source: John Mearsheimer and Jeffrey Sachs, All-In Summit 2024 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uvFtyDy_Bt0

*(Transcript and compiled shortened text:
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