

“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***

(CH-S) How do two of the most renowned US intellectuals view their own foreign policy? The following discussion, reproduced in full, 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), 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 future, at a time when a nuclear war is looming on the horizon.

The “Swiss Standpoint” publishes the transcript of this outstanding discussion here. Below, you can find the link to the video from the event. Subtitles from “Swiss Standpoint”.

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Moderator David Sacks: I'm excited about this panel. We are going to talk about foreign policy. I think we have two of the most interesting imminent renowned thinkers about foreign policy: Professor John Mearsheimer from the University of Chicago from and Professor Jeffrey Sachs from Columbia, so great to have you guys here today.

It's a big world and there's a lot of things happening, so let's just jump into it. The big news over the past week was that Dick Cheney endorsed Kamala Harris for president. I think, for people to see the world in partisan political terms, this might have been surprising, but I don't think that you guys were that surprised by that. Do you see an underlying logic to this? Jeff, why don't I start with you.

The “Deep State” and its goals

Jeffrey Sachs: I think it's obvious. 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 Junior 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.

Sacks: John, what's your thought on that? Do you see any difference between Republicans and Democrats?

John Mearsheimer: No. 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 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.

Sacks: Can you actually define this for us, for me. I don't understand when people say 'Deep State', what it is. I almost viewed the term comically— we have one of our friends in our group chat we call Deep State. He's really the Deep State, but we say it as a joke. But maybe for the uninitiated what does it actually mean? What are their incentives? Who are they?

Mearsheimer: Let me say a few words about it. 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 and that's why we talk about Tweedle dee and Tweedle dum with regards to the two parties. You could throw the Deep State as being on the same pages as those other two institutions.

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 entrained 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.

I got to watch some of it early on because I was an advisor to Gorbachev, and I was an advisor to Jelzin, and so I saw early makings of this though I didn't fully understand it, except in retrospect. But that policy has been mostly in place pretty consistently for 30 years. And it didn't really matter whether it was Bush senior, whether it was Clinton, whether it was Bush Jr, whether it was Obama, whether it was Trump. After all, who did Trump hire? He hired *John Bolton*. Well, pretty Deep State. He explained this is the way it is and by the way, Bolton explained also in his memoirs: when Trump didn't agree we figured out ways to trick him, basically.

Sacks: What are they're incentives? Is it war, is it self-enrichment, is it power, is it all three?

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: You know, if I were lucky to sit next to the world's greatest political philosopher – which I am – he'd give you a good answer which is that the right answer, which is if you want to interpret American foreign policy, it is to maximise power. And John gives an explanation of that. We have some differences, but 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 – not his interpretation of their idea but the fact that they hold that idea is a little weird to me. But in any event, that's the idea and every time a decision comes inside that I've seen – I'm an economist, so I don't see the security decisions the same way – 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. So, Clinton faced an internal cabinet really debate should NATO be enlarged.

Sacks: Is this a post-Cold War phenomenon?

Sachs: Well, let John take that.

Mearsheimer: Two very quick points. 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.

Sacks: That's a values point of view, right? There are values that many do hold dear – that liberalism and democracy does ultimately reduce conflict worldwide and that there is an importance to that. We've never seen two democratic nations since WWII go to war, and there's a reason why we want to see liberalism kind of spread throughout the world. And it's our responsibility for global peace to make that a mandate.

Mearsheimer: I want to be very clear. 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).

I give you just one example. I'm friends with one of the only PhD Afghani economists, a senior person in the U.S. academia over the last 30 years. You would think that the State Department, if they were interested in state building, would ask him one day one moment something about Afghanistan. Never happened.

Sachs: It never happened. He asked me, "Can you get me a meeting with the State Department?" They were completely uninterested. This is about power. You're too idealistic, John. They don't care about the other places. They may feel we should be free and so forth, but freedom – I've seen it with my own eyes, the coups, the overthrows, the democratic presidents led away. They don't care at all! This is Washington. Be a realist!

Should America use its power against dictators?

Sacks: Professor Mearsheimer, when we talk about power, there are other people in the world who are trying to accumulate power. We live in a multi-polar world right now, and they have, in some cases, very nefarious or bad intent, and they do not have democracy. So, it's one thing to tell people in Afghanistan, "You need to evolve to be a perfect democracy like the one we have here." I think we all agree that's unrealistic and insane and not practical. But what about the free countries of the world uniting to stop dictators from invading other free countries? Is that noble? Is that a good use of power and a good framework for America to evolve to?

Mearsheimer: No, I don't think so. I think that what the United States should do, is to worry about its own national interests. In some cases, that's going to involve aligning ourselves with a dictator. If we're fighting WWII all over again – it's December 8, 1941, you surely would be in favor of allying with Joseph Staling and the Soviet Union against Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany. Sometimes you have to make those kinds of compromises. As I said before, I love liberal democracy, I have no problem aligning with liberal democracies. But when we begin to think in the terms that you're thinking, you end up with an impulse to do social engineering around the world. And that gets you into all sorts of problems.

Sacks: What I'm proposing is that when dictatorships invade other countries then we take action. Maybe defend them.

Mearsheimer: It depends of course. I mean when Russia invades Ukraine, basically what you're saying you want to go to war on behalf of Ukraine against Russia. Are you in favour of that?

Sacks: No, I would say diplomacy would obviously be what we'd want to exhaust. But if they do roll into other free countries, I think there's an argument for the free countries of the world to get together and say to dictators, "We're not going to allow this."

Sachs: Could I clarify a few things. 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. We used the cynical bullshit that we're "defending the people of Benghazi" to bomb the hell out of Libya, to kill Mohamar Gaddafi. Why did we do that? Well, I'm kind of an expert on that region, and I can tell you, maybe because Sarkozy didn't like Gaddafi. There is no much deeper reason except Hillary liked every bombing she could get her hands on, and Obama was kind of convinced: "My Secretary of State says go with it. So, why don't we go with the NATO expedition?"

It had nothing to do with Libya. It unleashed 15 years of chaos. We cheated the US Security Council because, like everything else we've done, it was on false pretenses. We did the same with trying to overthrow Syria. We did the same with conspiring to overthrow *Victor Janukovic* in Ukraine in February 2014.

So, the problem with this argument is that we're not nice guys. We're not trying to save the world. We're not trying to make democracies. We had a committee – by the way, full of all the luminaries you could mention, but they're the neocon crazies, but they're luminaries. The Committee for the People of Chechnia. Are you kidding?! Do you think they even knew where Chechnia is or cared about Chechnia?

But it was an opportunity to get at Russia, to weaken Russia, to support a jihadist movement inside Russia. This is a game. But it's the game that John has described better than anyone in the world. It's a game of power.

It's not that we're defending real things. 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. Iraq was obviously a game before we went in. *Colin Powell* could not move his lips without lying that day– obviously. 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.

Sacks: Professor Mearsheimer, if we were to take Jeffrey's position here – that we are exerting power for the sake of our reputation and in fact to weaken dictatorships – is that not a good strategy to weaken dictators around the world who might like to invade other countries? Is there a framework in which you could see that being justified? Is that not noble? Is weakening dictators and despots a good strategy?

Mearsheimer: It depends.

Sacks: Well, let's talk about the two that we have – you know, Xi Jinping, I think you wanted to get to eventually, and then Ukraine and Putin. Are these people worth trying to contain or even weaken?

Mearsheimer: In terms of China, I'm fully in favour of containing China. I'm not interested in regime change. I'm not interested in trying to turn China into a democracy. It's not gonna happen. We tried it actually and I thought it was foolish to even pursue a policy of engagement toward 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 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: Could I just say: two-thirds right? Perfect

Sacks: So, you give him a B or B-plus...?

Mearsheimer: A-minus

The China threat: avoiding the escalatory path to nuclear war

Sachs: I always give him A-minus. 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.

Sacks: As an economist, can you talk about the impact of a cold or hot conflict with China from an economic perspective, given the trade relationship?

Sachs: Yeah, it 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. Maybe if you're worried about whether a worker in Ohio has a particular job on a particular assembly line, then you could be anti-China. If you're worried about the tech industry, about California, about peace and the future, you should be pro-China. That's all.

Sacks: So, why has it become so universal to assume that we are already in a state of conflict with China? On not just party lines but on almost any spectrum you could consider?

Sachs: John said it exactly right, and he predicted it better than anyone in the whole world in 2001. He said, "When China becomes large, we're going to have conflicts." That's John's theory, and it's right as a description of American foreign policy that we are for power. They are big; therefore, they're an enemy. They're an enemy of our aspiration to global supremacy.

Sacks: I think what's interesting – Jeff and I arrive at similar conclusions about Ukraine, but different ones on China, right? Because Jeff is an economist and sees the world in fundamentally positive-sum ways based on the potential for trade, economics, and so on, whereas you [John] see the world more as a zero-sum game based on the balance of power. Why don't you just explain that difference?

Mearsheimer: It is very important to emphasise – as David was saying, that 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. And let me explain to you why I think that's the case, and then Jeff can tell you why he thinks I'm wrong.

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 authority, 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.

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.

And I don't blame the Chinese one bit. If I were the National Security Advisor in Beijing, that's what I'd be telling Xi Jinping we should be trying to do. But, of course, from an American point of view, this is unacceptable. We do not tolerate peer competitors. We do not want another regional hegemon on the planet.

In the 20th century there were four countries that threatened to become regional hegemons like us: *Imperial Germany*, *Imperial Japan*, *Nazi Germany* and the *Soviet Union*. The United States played a key role in putting all four of those countries on the scrap heap of history. We want to remain the only regional hegemon in the world. We are a ruthless great power – never want to lose sight of that fact. And the end result of this is, you get an intense security competition between China and the United States, and it revolves around the concept of security, not prosperity.

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]

Sacks: Let me set it up for Jeff here. So, Jeff, you and John agree that the game on the board is power seeking. I think what John is saying is there are smart ways and dumb ways to pursue power – containing China is a smart way. What we're doing in Ukraine is a dumb way. Whereas it seems, like you're saying that all power-seeking behaviour is bad and that's not the game we should be playing. We should somehow opt out of that. Is that kind of where you're going?

Sachs: It's not a bad way to say it, but I would put it in another way. I read a very good book – John's book – and John described – I'm going to quote him, and he can quote himself afterwards. He said 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.

Why I don't like Ukraine is that I don't see any reason in the world that NATO has to be on Russia's border with Ukraine. I was, as I said, *Gorbachev's* advisor and *Yeltsin's* advisor. They wanted peace, and they wanted cooperation. But whatever they wanted, they did not want the US military on their border. If we continued to push, as we did, we would get to war. John explained that better than anybody. We're now at war and even this morning, there is further escalation. Blinken has said, "Well if the Iranians give these missiles, then we will give missiles to hit deep into Russia." This is a recipe for disaster.

And then we had Bill Burns, the CIA director, say last week an absurdity that he knows, but CIA directors never tell the truth – if they do, they lose their job. But he said, "Don't worry about nuclear war, don't worry about saber rattling."

My advice to you is: worry a lot about nuclear war.

So, be prudent. You don't have to put the US military on Russia's border. And my advice to Russia and to Mexico – when I'm going to Mexico tomorrow – I'll give them a piece of advice; don't let China or Russia build a military base on the Rio Grande. Not a good idea for Mexico, not a good idea for Ukraine, not a good idea for Russia, not a good idea for China, not a good idea for the United States. We need to stay a little bit away from each other, so that we don't have a nuclear war.

By the way I do recommend another good book and that is *Annie Jacobson's* "Nuclear War: A scenario". It takes two hours to read. The world ends in two hours in the book. And it's a very persuasive guide that one nuke can ruin your whole day, as they say.

My strong advice on this, therefore, is *recognize China, first of all, is not a threat to United States' security*. Big oceans, big nuclear deterrent, 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. That's a long, complicated issue, but this would be the stupidest thing for my grandchildren to die for – unimaginable. And I resent it every day when we play that game. 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: Can't we do better?

Mearsheimer: My point to you, Jeff, is let's prevent that from happening by preventing them from becoming a regional hegemon. We don't want them to have freedom to roam. You were talking about them putting military bases in Mexico. That's our great fear.

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

Sacks: *They do seem to have a big interest, Jeff, in Africa, India, Russia.*

Sachs: Are they building military bases there?

Sacks: *Oh well, they're building nuclear power plants, trade investments...*

Sachs: Let's go compete in that way, I'm all in favour of that.

Mearsheimer: But Jeff, that's because they're not a regional hegemon yet.

Sachs: 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.

Sacks: *So, John, can we contain China, prevent them from becoming a regional hegemon, without directly defending Taiwan? Isn't that where the rubber meets the road?*

Mearsheimer: No, it's not just Taiwan. One could argue there are sort of three flashpoints in East Asia that you folks should keep an eye on. One is obviously Taiwan, two is the South China Sea, and three is the East China Sea. And I think, David, that the place where a conflict is most likely today is not over Taiwan. I could explain why I think Taiwan is not a serious problem at the moment or for the foreseeable future. The south China Sea is a very dangerous place. We could end up in a war for sure, even if we did not defend Taiwan. So, Taiwan – you don't want to overemphasize.

I agree with Jeff that we definitely don't want a war, and we certainly don't want a nuclear war. And he is absolutely correct that there's a risk of a nuclear war if a war breaks out of any sort between China and the United States. Many of us in the audience remember the Cold War, and this was an ever-present danger in the Cold War. But my argument is that this is inevitable because in a world where you don't have a higher authority, and you care about your survival, you have a deep-seated interest – as any state in the system does – to be as powerful as possible. That means dominating your region.

India's growing role; are Chin's wounds self-inflicted?

Sacks: *There is one player on this chessboard that hasn't come up yet and explain where the puck is going when you talk about the South China Sea. Okay sure, South Korea, Japan, Australia, all those major players are there, just a couple hundred million people but then China is in population decline. Xi apparently is self-destructing in terms of trade it seems like containment is working pretty well there because of all the self-inflicted wounds.*

But the fastest growing country, fastest growing economy, the quickest to develop is India and they seem to have a very pragmatic approach. They buy cheap oil from Putin, and they are their own sovereign country with their own point of view. Would we not be really well advised over the next 10 to 20 years to make that our priority and India's role in all this. How do you look at them?

Mearsheimer: We definitely view India as an ally. India is part of the Quad, which is this Rub Goldberg type alliance structure that we put together in East Asia that includes Australia, Japan, the United States and India. And India is smartly maintaining its good relations with Russia. The Indians understand, like Jeff and I do, that the Russians are no great threat, but from India's point of view the real threat is China.

There are two places where India cares about China. One is on the India-China border up in the Himalayas, where they've actually had conflicts and there is a real danger of war breaking out. The second place – which is maybe even more dangerous, not at the moment, but will over time – is the Indian Ocean. The Chinese are imitating the United States. They not only want to be a regional hegemon, but they also want to develop power projection capability. So, they're building a blue-water navy that can come out of East Asia, through the Straits of Malacca, through the Indian Ocean, to the Persian Gulf. Once you start talking about going through the Indian Ocean, the Indians get spooked. That's when the Americans and the Indians come together.

Sachs: Let's think of this from an engineering point of view. Why are the Chinese developing a Navy? Because for 40 years I've read essays on all of the choke points in the South China Sea, the East China Sea, and the Indian Ocean against China. That's poor policy – choke points. Look at the Malacca Straits. Look at what we can do here, the first island chain, the second island chain. This is American strategy. Can we keep the Chinese submarines out of the Pacific Ocean? First island chain, and so forth. So, of course, they react. They're rich – they're going to build a navy so they can get their oil, on which their economy runs. Can we be a little bit sensible with them and decide how we're not going to have choke points and then we won't have to have a nuclear war that's going to ruin our day?

That's the point – we can think a little bit. We can understand it from their perspective, and we can understand it from our perspective. Deconfliction.

By the way, I don't believe India is an ally. India is a superpower. India is going to have its own very distinctive interests. It's not going to be an ally of the United States. I happen to like India enormously and admire their policies, but the idea that India is going to ally with the United States against China is a dream in Washington, yet another delusion.

They should get a passport and go see the world. [applause] These are my failed students in Washington right now, because they didn't listen to their professor.

Sacks: *Jeffrey, we're making our iPhones in India now. Is that not significantly important? We're moving iPhone production. Cooper, you're in economics here and that impact. You've got Apple moving out of China. You've got Japan funding people leaving China to Vietnam and to India. Is that not the solution here? As we decouple from China, it seems like they come back to the table. We had Xi Jinping kick all the venture capitalists, all investment out of China. He got rid of all the education startups. And then whatever, two or three years later, he's in San Francisco asking all of us to invest more money and say, where'd you go?*

Sachs: Okay. First of all, I invite you back in 10 years, and we'll see how smart all these decisions are because we've moved to India. I think you said that Xi Jinping's trade policy is self-imploding or something.

Sacks: *It seems there's a lot of self-inflicted wounds...*

Sachs: Let me explain what the wounds are. The wounds are the U.S.'s deliberate policy to stop you from selling things to China and to stop China from buying things from you. That's not self-inflicted – Let me say – because it's very important for the economy of the people in this room – this is a decision that was taken around 2014 to contain China, and it has been systematically applied since then. It's not a surprise that Biden kept all the policies that Trump put in place and added more. Now Trump says, "I'm going to do all the things that Biden has kept in place, and I'm going to do more."

This is not a self-inflicted wound. 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: My argument is that this is the way the world works, and it is. But if I'm describing how the world really works, how do you beat me?

Sachs: The reason is, you've described a world – described better than anyone I've read or know – how American foreign policy works. I think it's likely to get us all blown up – not because of you, John, but because it's a profoundly misguided approach, one rooted in power seeking.

Even if you're safe as a regional hegemon, you're never safe if another regional hegemon does what you do. No, you can't allow that to happen. So, you end up meddling in every single place in the world. But, in the nuclear age, this approach is fraught with enormous risks. You don't get a second chance.

This is the most definitive fact of our lives: we are now in a war with Russia. Not a proxy war – a direct war. Russia has 6,000 nuclear warheads. I can't think of anything more imbecilic than that, aside from the fact that I've seen, step by step, how we got into this mess. We thought we had to meddle up to the point of including NATO into Georgia, the Caucasus, of all places, and Ukraine. We couldn't let things be – If we do the same with China, there will be a war. But it's not going to be like reading about the *Crimean War*, *WWI*, or *WWII* – this is a different age.

This is a fine theory that explains a lot of things, 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].

Sacks: So, we only have a minute left. So, I want to give it to John.

Your book is called "The Tragedy of Great Power Politics". You clearly understand the tragic aspect of how great power rivalry and great competition can lead to disaster. What Jeff is saying is that we're now in the nuclear age, and that this is going to lead to nuclear war. Do we have to be on this path, or is there a way off of it?

Mearsheimer: Two points. In my heart, I'm with Jeff. In my head, I'm not. I wish he were right, but I don't believe he is. To answer your question head-on, I believe there is no way out. We are in an "iron cage". This is just the way international politics works, and it's because you're in an anarchic system where you can never be sure that a really powerful state won't come after you and inflict a century of national humiliation on you. So, you go to great lengths to avoid that by trying to gain power at the expense of another power. That leads to all sorts of trouble.

Can war be avoided? I like to distinguish between security competition – which I think is inevitable – and war, where security competition evolves into war. I think war can be avoided, and we were thankfully successful in that regard during the Cold War. Hopefully, that will be the case in the US-China competition moving forward. Can I guarantee that? No. Does this disturb me greatly? Yes. But again, this is just a tragic aspect of the world.

Conflict in the Middle East and the path to peace

Sacks: Let me just ask – because we were going to try and talk about the Middle East for a good chunk of this. So, I just want to propose kind of a scenario and get your reaction. What feels to be the most imminent theater of conflict: the West bank. The Israelis are buttressing the settlements, there's a lot of checkpoints, things are getting very tense. They're running raids, and it's becoming a very difficult place to live for Palestinians, and there's a real concern that the West Bank collapses...

Mearsheimer: ...and the Israelis.

Sacks: There's a real risk that the West Bank collapses and turns into a real conflict zone. If that happens, the Jordanians are sitting right there, and they're not going to let Palestinians get slaughtered. They're going to have to do something, and they're such a strong ally of the United States. Does that trigger a theater of response? What is Saudi Arabia going to do? Are others going to be drawn to the region? Does the collapse of the West Bank or the conflict that seems to be brewing in the West Bank become this kind of tinder box for everyone showing up and getting involved and create some sort of regional issue that we get drawn into in a bigger way?

Sachs: Can I start and have John have the last word?

You know, I work each day at the UN and discuss this issue with ambassadors from all over the world. Over the last 50 years, there has been an agreement on what would make for peace. The agreement is two states, maybe with a big wall between them, on the June 4, 1967 borders – with a state of Palestine being the 194th UN member state, and its capital in East Jerusalem, and control over the Islamic holy sites. That is international law.

The *International Court of Justice* or *ICJ*, just reaffirmed that the Israeli settlements in the West Bank are illegal. The *International Criminal Court*, or *ICC*, is likely to find that Israel is in violation of the 1948 *Genocide Convention*, which I very much believe it to be in violation of.

So, my own solution to this is: implement international law – two states. Build the wall as high as you need to, but you give Palestinians their rights, you establish a state of Palestine, you stop the Israeli slaughter of Palestinians, you stop the Israeli apartheid state, and you have two states living side by side. Israel is dead set against that. The entire Israeli political governance now is dead set against that. Hundreds of thousands of illegal settlers in the West Bank are dead set against that. *Smotrich, Ben-Gvir, Galant, Netanyahu* are dead set against that. So, my view is: it has nothing to do with what Israel wants. It has to do with the enforcement of international law.

So, I want to see this imposed – not because Israel agrees to it, but because it is imposed. And there is one country that stands in the way of imposing this – not Iran, not the Saudis, not Egypt, not Russia, not China, not any country in the *European Union*. One country and one country alone, and that is because of the *United States of America* and the *Israel lobby*. Somebody wrote a very good book about that too, that I know. – the best book ever written about it – by John. And that's what stops the solution that could bring peace. And I believe we should bring peace because not only would that bring peace to the Palestinians and peace to the Israelis, but it would avoid potentially another flashpoint that could easily end up in WWII.

*Mearsheimer: Let me answer your question about escalation potential – of the Jordanians coming in. Israel faces three big problems, aside from centrifugal forces inside its society. One is the Palestinian problem, which exists in both Gaza and the West Bank. Two is *Hezbollah*. And three is *Iran*. I think there is virtually no chance of what you described happening – if the Israelis were to go on a rampage in the West Bank, similar to what they've*

done in Gaza, that the Jordanians would come in, or the Egyptians, or the Saudis. They simply don't have the military capability. This is a scenario where the Israelis completely dominate.

So, in terms of escalation with regard to the Israel-Palestine problem, I don't think there's much potential for outside forces to get involved. *Hezbollah* is a different issue, but mainly because it's linked with *Iran*. And Iran is the really dangerous flashpoint. As you know, the Russians are now closely allied with the Iranians and the Chinese are moving in that direction as well. If Israel gets involved in a war with Iran, we're going to come in, in all likelihood. Remember when the Israelis attacked the Iranian embassy in Damascus on April 1st and on April 14th the Iranians retaliated in a reciprocal response?

Sacks: But we were involved, weren't we? We were forewarned.

Mearsheimer: Yes, we were forewarned. But the point is that we were involved in the fighting. We were involved with the Israelis, with the French, the British, the Jordanians, and the Saudis. We were all involved in the fighting. This gets at the escalation problem. Now, to counter the Iranian escalation scenario, the fact is: Iran does not want a war with the United States, and the United States does not want a war with Iran. It's the Israelis – especially Benjamin Netanyahu – who has been trying to sort of suck us into a war because he wants us, the United States, to really whack Iran, weaken it militarily, and especially go after its nuclear capabilities because, as you well know, they're close to the point where they can develop nuclear weapons.

So, the Israelis are the ones who want us to get involved in a big war with Iran. That's the escalation flashpoint. And the \$64,000 question is whether you think the United States and Iran can work together to prevent the Israelis from dragging us into that war.

Sacks: That question will be based on who leads the next administration.

Mearsheimer: Well, if you believe that it matters who leads the next administration, that's true.

Sacks: Thank you. Let me just say, Jeffrey and John, now I know why everyone won't stop talking about you two. This was the most amazing panel of the event so far. Give it up for Jeffrey Sachs and John Mearsheimer!

Source: John Mearsheimer and Jeffrey Sachs | All-In Summit 2024

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uvFtyDy_Bt0

(Transcript full text Ursula Cross)

**John Joseph Mearsheimer (born 1947) is an American political scientist at the University of Chicago. His focus is the analysis of international relations from the perspective of offensive neorealism which he first presented in his 2001 monograph *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. Mearsheimer is the co-author, with Stephen Walt, of the "New York Times" bestseller *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*.*

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