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QI Panel:

Book Talk: The Sources of Russian Aggression

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Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 0:31

Good afternoon. My name is Kelley Vlahos and I am a senior advisor at the Quincy Institute and editorial director of our Foreign Policy magazine responsible statecraft. I am honored to join my colleague Mark Episcopel House to discuss a new book by our friend Dr. Sumantra Maitra entitled sources of Russian aggression, which was just released last month. I dare say that this book comes at a time where US NATO policy is at a crossroads. After two and a half years of fighting off the Russian invasion. The Ukrainians are finding themselves on the backfoot militarily, and in the position of having to struggle to keep the world's attention on their plight. The US is draining its own stockpiles of ammo, and missile defense weapons in this war. And in the conflict in the Middle East. European partners have pledged to Ukraine whatever it takes for as long as it takes to win the war. But Europe too, is trying to balance its own economic and political challenges and interests with making this promise to Kyiv. Kyiv still, we are told by message leaders, whether in government or in academia, and in the elite foreign policy commentariat that this is an existential fight that Russia is revanchist and Neo Imperial and then if not stopped, Russia will move on militarily to expand its power throughout Europe. NATO has been mobilized for two and a half years in response to this claim. And President Biden trots it out anytime that there is a threat of additional aid or against additional aid to Ukraine in Washington. But what are Russia's true intentions? Why did it choose to be so aggressive in Ukraine? And does it have motivations to move further? Dr. Mitra has pulled together three case studies to explore the question and to hopefully guide foreign policy practitioners to chart a course that is more practical and does not turn the current dynamics into a spark for future confrontations between Russia and the West.

So a lot to unpack here. But first let me introduce my colleague Mark Episkopos, Mark is a research fellow at the Quincy Institute's Eurasia program. He is also an adjunct professor of history at Marymount University, Episkopos post holds a PhD in history from American University and a master's degree in international affairs from Boston University. He was previously the national security reporter for the national interest, where he wrote widely on military and foreign policy topics. And our guest of honor Dr. Sumantra Maitra, is Director of Research and Outreach at the American Ideas Institute, and senior editor at the American conservative. He is also a senior fellow at the Center for Renewing America, and an elected Associate Fellow at the Royal Historical Society in the UK. He holds a PhD from the University of Nottingham, UK, and his research explores great power of grand strategy. So welcome to both of you.

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I'm gonna, I'm gonna take the prerogative and ask the first question to Sumantra. So Sumantra, in order to gauge the source of Russian aggression, namely, why did it act the way it did in 2022? you zero in on the question. This is in your book. Is Russia a realist Grand Power? You say perhaps so, but that needs more than scholarship focusing on individual events like the annexation of Crimea. Rather, your book explores three distinct cases in which you study Russian foreign policy, use of military force and or balancing behavior in regard to NATO, Ukraine and Georgia. Tell us why you think these three cases will give us insight into Russia's motivations? And more importantly, why should we care if Russia is a quote, realist power at all?

Sumantra Maitra 4:40

Right, so that's a that's a lot to unpack on that question. First of all, this book, essentially is the result of my PhD thesis. I completed the thesis and then obviously, the war started. And one of the questions which I had to ask myself, I don't want The time was like whether I should wait and see if the thesis conclusions were correct, and then get the book published. So the title, as you know, probably most of the people who are attending would know, it's upon on the George Kennan paper on the sources of Soviet conduct, obviously, I'm standing on the shoulder of giants here. question that you asked is, in the methodology chapter of my PhD thesis part of it, which was deleted from the book, because it's a book, you know, they won't publish the methodology in full detail. When you're judging great power, which is nominally a rival of the United States, a couple of things, one needs to keep in mind, one, what might be the cases which would provide you with principally the variables that might help you in understanding the great powers grand strategy. So if you have to choose Russian aggression, material aggression, military aggression, you need to have the case studies where Russia actually went and went to war. So that's one of the things that you have to find out went to war in Georgia, it went to war in Crimea and Ukraine, and Syria, you know, balanced against NATO, in parts of the Baltics. So those are that's the that's the primary variable. The second thing that you have to figure out, is, in a similar situation, why did Russia not pull the trigger, because exceptions are obviously more interesting, interesting than the rules. So if you find a situation where you see Russia is going to war, and your causal theory is it is because of NATO expansion in that region, then to at least negate parts of your theory, you have to find a similar situation where NATO expanded, but Russia didn't go to war and figure out what variables lead to one reaction in one place, and not the reaction in the other place. So I did that.

And so I had to choose three case studies where Russia was balancing. It was balancing in the European continent, it was balancing against NATO, against Ukraine and against Georgia, and figured out the strategic variables that were available in all of those three cases, figured out Russian reactions, it's, it's, again, it's very easy to listen to what Vladimir Putin is saying, but you in foreign policy, it's not that prudent to rely on rhetoric. So you have to, you know, kind of like, take it with a pinch of salt, and then figure out what Russia is actually doing, when they're doing what, and why, and then determine whether that falls within any specific theories of realism. In this case, I was trying to test the balance of threat theory by Stephen Walt, which gives you four different variables of geographic proximity, aggregate power, aggregate intention, and offensive capabilities, and then figure out if Russia is acting within the bounds of the theory in these three

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cases, and then come to the conclusion whether it's a realist power or not. So again, lots of things to you know, unpack, and I'm happy to, for you to ask more questions. But that is basically what my opinion was when I was trying to get the thesis.

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 8:18

Before I move on, I just want to tell folks who are listening in, please, if you have any questions, we'll get to them as we go on, but just put them in the chat. And I'll move through them as I as I can throughout the next hour

Mark Episkopos 8:36

Thanks, Kelley. Great, great to be here. And congratulations Sumantra on the book, which really is a monumental achievement, both as a materialization of Walt's balance of threat theory, I think one of the best materializations that I've seen, but also as a deep and I think very important contribution to our understanding of Russian policy behavior. And so, I like to begin by asking sort of a broad framing question, which is, you know, Russia is often framed as a revenue chest state, intent on revising the post cold war balance of power. This argument comes in many different flavors. There is the view that Putin regards the Soviet collapse as an unacceptable tragedy, the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century as is often repeated, and seeks to restore the Soviet Empire by any means possible. Another line of thought, and this became especially popular after the Russian invasion of Ukraine and in February 2022, suggests that Putin is driven by this higher ideological goal of stamping out all democracies, especially in Ukraine, because in this view, Ukraine was attacked because Russia feels is mortally threatened by the existence of a liberal democracy on its borders. And this was this would, you know to Russians that there is a better way to live. And and this would cause regime collapse in Russia somehow, it's safe to say, you take a very different position on Russian behavior and intentions. So I thought I'd invite you to lay out your basic argument for our viewers. Before we delve deeper into the book. Why is Russia a realist power?

Sumantra Maitra 10:26

Thank you, Mark. And for those of you who don't know, in the introduction, Mark was my colleague NCFE. And I'm so happy that you liked the book. said three different things that you asked me in this. Before I delve into your question whether Russia was a realist power one, whether Russia was revanchist? I think that's at least in foreign policy, that's not let me let me put it in a very polite way. I don't think that that's a prudent way to figure out the strategy for grip power revenge. Is Russia taking revenge? Yes, maybe. But that doesn't give you much to determine on your grand strategy opposed to that. I mean, yes, Russia's might be taking revenge. But does that is that how is that related to American grand strategy in Europe? Right. So just because a country is you know, taking revenge on something doesn't mean that it needs to it could be a rival. So that's, that's one of the things whether Russia is a security or a power maximizer is a very different question, though. In my opinion, and according to my research thus far, and I don't want to be Francis Fukuyama and tomorrow, things might change. But so far, to

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my knowledge, I haven't seen a scenario in the last 15 to 20 years of starting Russian reaction to different balancing maneuvers in Europe, where Russia has been acting as a power Maximizer it has been acting as a security Maximizer Absolutely. whether Russia was reacting in Ukraine as a result of being a security Maximizer. Yes. whether Russia was acting as a security Maximizer in Georgia trying to protect its material interests. Absolutely. Same in Syria, although that is not part of my case study. But the theory holds, you know, Syria had a warm water port, Syria had Russian air bases and Ally defending those things. Material priorities, security maximizing great, same in Ukraine, same in Crimea from 2014 onwards. But whether that means that Russia is a revanchist expansionist power maximizing power? I don't think so, first of all, interests and threat perception from a great powers perspective is a combination, as you obviously know, it's a combination of intention and capability. Russia might have the intention of being an expansionist power in in Europe, Putin might think that the collapse of the Soviet Union was one of the biggest geopolitical catastrophes in Europe. Whether that gives Russia the power to do much about it is a different question altogether. So Russia can intends to be a nuisance in its own backyard, be powered with 6000 nuclear weapons which can, so to speak, determine at least some of the geopolitics in its own backyard in its own immediate neighborhood.

But whether that would mean the Russia tanks, would tomorrow be in Poland, or crossing Germany or threatening the English Channel and Russia would be a hegemonic power in Europe is a different question. And I don't see any evidence so to speak, to come to the conclusion that Russia is a hegemonic threat to the European continent. So yes, Russia might be a revanchist power, but I highly doubt it is an expansionist power or more so it has the expansionist capability to actually conquer Europe. Now, whether Russia is a realist power, it can be a realist power, even if it's a power Maximizer or a security Maximizer. That is, they're both realism. You know, realism doesn't give you realism as a framework gives you very different policy suggestions, depending on your geographical constraints and immaterial capabilities. You know, it was realistic for Japan, for example, to try and go on a binge in 1941 in Asia to secure you know, its immediate vicinities for fuel supply, whether that was prudent to do is a different question. So just because Russia has a release power, could mean the Russia could be a power Maximizer or a security maximize in this case, although the evidence suggests that Russia is a security Maximizer. So yes, broadly, it falls within the scope of realism.

Mark Episkopos 14:42

Well, thanks, and no, I think you're the as you very saliently put out, revanchism is in many ways a point of view, from Russia's point of view, and this is a debate Russians have all the time and have had since since the collapse of the Soviet Union. And the US has acted in revanchist ways by pushing the Alliance closer to Russia's borders, and by fomenting these what Russia considers to be color revolutions. But well, we'll get to that in a second. I wanted to, before we do that delve into sort of one of the fulcrums. One of the key themes of your of your book, which is this, Russia's reaction to NATO expansion. The debate around NATO expansion, I think, unfolds along and I'm talking here on the most basic policy level unfolds along two sort of schools of thought. The first is the kind of realism and restrained approach that successive

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waves of NATO expansion have pushed Russia into an anti Western posture. And then you have another approach, arguing that Moscow's complaints about Western encirclement are insincere, and really just a facade for imperialist, expansionist ambitions. Your chapter on NATO injects much needed nuance into this discussion, you argue that Russia does generally view NATO as a threat. But its immediate perceptions are filtered for lots of intervening variables that explain what has historically been a fairly large variance in the way Russia has dealt with NATO. And you argue that, and I'm quoting directly from your book now, Russia does not balance simply with any and every NATO enlargement, such as with Finland, Sweden, Montenegro, but only when the enlargement is accompanied by increased offensive power. Could you lay your layout your argument on this? And it seems to me there are two separate but interrelated components here. How did Russian threat perceptions around NATO change in the decades following the Soviet collapse? Because clearly, there has been a change from the 90 from the 1990s, onward. And, and also what accounts for seeming differences with which Russia treats instances of enlargement where you have Russia ready to go to war, over Georgia, joining NATO, but at the same time, you really don't see much of a reaction at all, when Montenegro joins. So if you could please unpack that.

Sumantra Maitra 17:38

That is the crux of the of the second chapter, which is the biggest chapter of the book anyway, which ties, you know, tries to figure out the rational reaction to different phases of NATO expansion, as you mentioned, you mentioned the intervening variables, but which is, which is the key thing, by the way? I'm glad you mentioned that, because there is a tendency in political circles, whether it's in London or in DC, or Berlin, to figure out the reaction of a great power, and try and find them on a causal way. So Russia, I mean, the liberal internationalism would dictate that Russia is only reacting because it is threatened by its regime change prospects in Moscow. Some other people might say Russia is a fascist country. Russia isn't a Russian imperialist. So but but but all of those things are fundamentally monocultural. Like, Russia stays, that's why it's reacting like that. So you know, one a leads to B directly. Realism doesn't say that realism is multivariate. So it's it's obviously one of the beauties of balance of trade theories, because it gives you four different variables. And you can figure out the interplay of those variables. So geographic proximity, obviously, is one of the variables, the closer the threat, the bigger the higher your chance to react, for example, so NATO expansion in Hungary may be not that big of a threat, but NATO expansion in Ukraine definitely is.

So that's point number one point number two: aggregate power. You know, NATO expanding to Poland increases the aggregate power in a way, that is obviously a lot less than when NATO expands to the Baltics, or NATO flies, you know, NATO planes fly on top of the Baltic airspace. So you know, that's variable number two. So there are like different variables similar to that which kind of leads and interplays with each other. And that determines Russian threat perception. But before we talk of Russian threat perception, we have to understand that NATO expansions phases were primarily a European flight. There is this time idea in the US, especially because the US is a superpower and has been a superpower for so long, especially in a in a unipolar world that most people think that oh, it was, it was just primarily US led NATO

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expansion that has resulted in a Russian reaction. But that kind of takes away the politics that happened in the in the European continent between, say, 1993 to 2008. That's when the Russian Georgian war happened. That's I kind of like put that as a, as a mark of where Russia for the first time in, you know, in post Soviet history crossed over the border, in an aggressive fashion to a sovereign country. So that is a mark where I just kind of like a milestone. So think of 1993, who were the forces who are pushing for NATO expansion in Europe. It wasn't Germans, Manfred Warner was the one with the first guy who mentioned that NATO should expand, welcome through who was the defense minister, the Hungarians and the polls. And the Czech Republic is, you know, they came to, you know, lobby Clinton and Madeleine Albright in DC. There was contrary to public opinion, a huge opposition to NATO expansion in the US is even in the Pentagon, up until 1995. It people have forgotten that, you know, when we talk about NATO expansion, we don't really remember just how much a certain section of US politicians, were opposed to an expansion up until 95. Even 1997. There were people writing open letters in New York Review of Books, you know, George Kennan said NATO expansion was one of the biggest mistakes in 95. So that was when the first phase of expansion was happening. At that point of time, Russia was obviously a very broken power, it didn't have that much money, it didn't have that much capacity, its economy was in turmoil. So regardless of how they felt about it, they couldn't really do much. So fundamentally, the difference between the aggregate power of one side and the other side came into play. The second phase of NATO expansion is when we saw more of a reaction from the Russian side. But that happened around the same time or immediately before 911. So 911 was another causal factor, where when Vladimir Putin first came to power he was undergoing like Russia was undergoing an insurgency in Chechnya, for example. Even though the Chechens were secular, they were not. I mean, again, we, these days, we think of the church and sounds like purely Islamist forces trying to, you know, kill as many Russians as they can. But it wasn't like that. It was a genuine secular movement, which was trying to have carve out a place from the from the USSR, previously, from the USSR and from Russia. Putin came to power, obviously, in his opinion, it was in his interest to Tor, the church and republics, Republicans, as Islamist and the 911 happened, and the US wanted to have bases in central central Asia. And that was a way forward towards the approach more between the Russians and the Americans at that point of time.

So even though they were opposed to NATO expansion, they couldn't really do much because they wanted to have sort of like a mutual understanding that we are both, you know, fundamentally Western powers facing the scourge of Islamism in both of our countries, it's the same threat that we face. And we have to show the world that we are fighting a giant fight when all that all of those things went away with the color revolutions in 2003. And 2004. There were three things that happened. I remember, it's in the book, I mentioned. One, despite previous NATO promises, there were not treaties or not like written guarantees or promises to Russia that there wouldn't be any NATO hardware. Moving towards east east of Poland, that change made a plane started flying over the Baltics. There were bases, which started to pop up in parts of Central Europe, east of Germany. So that was one of the reasons second, the George W. Bush came out of the Ballistic Missile Defense Treaty, which was another slap in the face of the Russians immediately after the Russians helped the Americans with getting bases in Central Asia. And third color revolution started happening in in Georgia and Ukraine and parts of Central

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Asia. All of these things. At the same time, you know, this it spooked the Russian government, you know, they it kind of from their perspective, they felt it to be sort of a betrayal in a way like you know, they have been helping or at least accepting You know, I have like quotes from the book where I, which I wrote in my, in my article, one of the Hang on, let me find it. Yeah. So Ivana, for example, said that Russia no longer considers NATO enlargement to be a menace, because the alliance has undergone a radical transformation from a Cold War instrument to defense against global terrorism, and other 21st century threats. So in their mind, they were determined that we are fighting the same battle against Islamism. And then obviously, with the color revolution, and ballistic missile treaties, and all of these things, they felt sort of a betrayal. So we saw that in various phases of NATO expansion, their reactions change because of the intervening variables that you mentioned. So I think that is something that we need to consider when we are trying to understand Russian reaction, but it's not, it's not a monolithic reaction to any sort of, you know, opposition, or any sort of opposition to any kind of NATO expansion anywhere in the world. But it is very specific to the geography and the material realities that is surrounding Russia.

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 26:06

Can I Can I do a two finger on that? Just to follow up? Because we had a question in the chat. Is Russia aggressive? Or are Russian elites and political leaders mistrustful of their own people and looking to secure their own power base by distracting their population? I want to use that just to launch off my question as to what was going on internally during that time. In the period after the fall of the Soviet Union, all through these different phases of NATO expansion. What was going on, politically for for the Russian government, for Putin, internally was, and I know, you've talked about this in your book, like how internal politics affect foreign policy? Can you talk a little bit about how that was affecting their strategy?

Sumantra Maitra 27:02

Absolutely. No, that's a very good question. I mean, we don't want to completely discard the internal dynamic of Russian, you know, of Moscow. So two things, one, we have a tendency to see some sort of opposition to the Russian ruling elite, and think that this is, you know, a country which is just waiting to be liberated and be liberal. That's not true. It is the same folly that we had in the Middle East. You know, we see 10,000 people marching in, in Baghdad, or 10,000 people marching in Moscow, and we think like, this is a country, which is gonna be Switzerland detainees fine. And all we have to do is just push for it. Not true. If you see the 15 years of polling, of Russian public opinion about Putin, it is pretty stable. You know, it might vary, you know, from 68 to 72%. And, you know, but it stays in that range. There is a significant chunk of opposition to Vladimir Putin. But then there's also number one, not constantly, they did, some of them are communists, some of them are liberals. Some of them are Navalny type liberals or Nemtsov or Islam. So if you guys remember, he died in Moscow that was killed. So again, the opposition to Russia is there has been a consistent opposition to any kind of ruling elite in Russia. But that is, it has never been significant. In fact, the only time it was a genuine threat was around, I think it was 94 or 93, when the election happened, and the Communists came

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one like 26%, something of that sort. And we, by the way, helps Yeltsin. We don't talk about that foreign intervention, you know, foreign influence in Russian internal matters. The second point that you mentioned is Russia. Immediately, when Putin came to power was a basket case of economic you know, misappropriation by various segments in that who weren't number one, there were warlords in various parts of Russia who were fighting their own battle in Dagestan or Chechnya. And number two, they were the Salafi, who were the former intelligence officers of Russia, who took advantage of the post cold war, turmoil and product properties and land. So Putin came to power and he constantly database, there was this huge purge, there was this bombings in Moscow, which is still controversial. Some people think that, you know, the FSB did it. I don't know either way I can't claim. But Putin came took advantage of that situation consolidated, the internal ruling elite, figured out a patronage system, where some of the people who are close to him are going to stay in our provided there is no genuine threat to the managed democracy in Russia. But that doesn't mean that he he faces you know, a massive opposite like Vladimir Putin. It's not like some I'm saying in Iraq, where a minority is ruling over a majority, he enjoys the support of much of the of a healthy chunk of Russia, which is outside Moscow and St. Petersburg. So while there is domestic opposition in various cities of Russia, it has stayed pretty same when it comes to Putin support he had he enjoys the backbone of support in his own country.

Mark Episkopos 30:26

Yeah, Russia, I would classify as a soft authoritarian state. But this doesn't mean the leader is is unpopular, or at risk of being That's exactly right. Say there is really no risk of and also mean that this gets us to a different track. But the idea that Putin can realistically or will realistically be replaced by a pro Western leader is really a pipe dream, there is nothing to suggest this is remotely possible.

Sumantra Maitra 30:50

We also forget that, you know, we worship Navalny, if you think what Navalny was saying in the 90s he was talking about eradicating like cleaning Russia of central Asians and Chechens and kicking all people out of Russia, only for the Russians, you know, even the Liberals are not quite James Madison, let's just let's just keep an eye out.

Mark Episkopos 31:14

Navalny said things that I think would be criminally liable in a European country under your votes, like we forget those things. But I mean, the back to this idea of threat, per se, you're doing a really good job of explaining that the complexity of threat perception so that it's not a binary isn't native a threat is NATO, not a threat, it's actually a lot more complex, yes. And additional nuances. A country can agree to host Western military infrastructure without joining NATO. And that too, would be unacceptable for Putin. If we're talking about, say, Ukraine, hosting a Western military base without enjoying article, protection, so that would be unacceptable for the record of Russians as much as Ukraine joining NATO. So it's not even so

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you mentioned this in the book, NATO, the West, the US led West, all these terms are kind of melded together in Russian strategic culture, they don't really see a distinction between all but I wanted to ask sort of a devil's advocate question, if I may. I think you are, right. I mean, Sweden has been so firmly integrated in the western security orbit for so many years. That its formal membership in NATO changes very little in Russia's point of view. And I think the Russians are right about this. But I wonder Sumantra if Russia's reaction to Finland, joining the alliance is perhaps more difficult to explain in your balance of threat paradigm, because Finland, unlike Sweden, was functionally neutral. And its accession to NATO has increased the NATO Russia border by I think about over 800 miles. So just going by geographic proximity alone, one might think Russia would perceive this as a major threat. Yet Putin so far appears to have downplayed the significance of Finland, joining NATO and I mean, aside from obviously, the militarization of the Russia, Finland border, we haven't seen significant Russian counterbalancing behavior against Finland. So how will you respond to a skeptic who might point to Finland as an example of Russia, not reacting to NATO enlargement in the way that your theory might predict?

Sumantra Maitra 33:30

I'll try. I've tried to address that, first of all, it's not my theory, it's Stephen Walt's, I'm just, I'm just trying to explain his theory. But no, I've tried to address that, well, the simple answer to the question why we haven't seen a steady balancing behavior in either Finland or Sweden was because one, both of those countries were nominally neutral, and both of those countries joined NATO at the same time, at the same time when Russia was bogged down in Ukraine. So the one sentence answer to this question would be the sign of Finland and Sweden joining NATO is contrary to their rhetoric, not a signal or not a sign of Russian power, or Russian growing menace, but a sign of Russian weakness. When Russia was powerful, those countries did not join they hedged. When Russia was the Soviet Union, Sweden and Finland hedged against joining any security alliance. They understood that their geographical position makes it precarious and might invite a balancing reaction from Russia. The fact that they don't see that is a revealed preference. They understand that regardless of what Russia might feel, they have shot themselves in the foot and Ukraine. So their non hedging behavior is a sign of of Russian weakness rather than Russian strength. I mean that I mean, the proof is in the pudding states actions determine what they're actually feeling, regardless of what they say. We have seen that throughout history, one can say a lot of things, but how they're acting is what Germany, for example, can talk about. So I can lend and talk about liberal democracy. But the fact that the Germans are not enhancing their defense, or you know, expanding the defense budget, makes people understand that they feel very secure, because their borders of different use have moved east reveal preferences, determine, you know, what a state, what kind of threat the state is actually facing. The second point that you mentioned earlier in the question about Ukraine, Ukraine, when if you go through the Ukraine chapter where I've mentioned, the debate that was happening in Russia, there were a couple of things which they were thinking about one. The eastern part of Ukraine was essentially a USSR, Military Industrial Complex throughout history. You know, that was the part where the silos for SSA teams were, you know, designed, the hydraulics for the aircraft carriers were designed and manufactured. Some other things, jet engines for the 60s were designed and manufactured in some parts of those, you know, those

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industries that mean, it's all gone. Now, obviously, it's devastated because, you know, 10 years of war, but it was a place, you know, you can have that understanding with Russia, that they they were exporting and importing each other's stuff from each other. So that was one. Number two, when Ukraine wanted to join both NATO and the European Union, one of the things that we forget to mention is Russia was also threatened, that if Ukraine joins the European Union, it would have quality control over Ukrainian products, and Russian products coming to Ukraine. So Russians used to sell cheese and wine out if you remember, I think it was a few years back when the Russians got cheese from Ukraine, and they use bulldozer to destroy the cheese. And it was this huge news that came out, I think it was a New York Times or somewhere where they showed, you know, photos of Russians, you know, bulldozing you know, kilograms of cheese that came from Ukraine, that was a concern for Russia, you know, they were worried about quality checks, again, war changes, everything that's gone, kind of devastated.

And third thing about Ukraine was not just the military industrial complex, or the Russian speaking people in Donbass, or the, for the cheese and wine. But Crimea, Crimea was historically a Russian port. Now, we don't tend to consider history like that, because it's colonial and it's Czarist, and, you know, the wall has moved forward and all that, but the Russians don't think of it that way. You know, they're there, we don't get to decide how the Russians feel threatened. You know, if you read their military literature, Crimea is a big part of it, they are worried about their second biggest warm water poured going away from their hand, which has been historically Russian for over 200 years. So there is this, you know, Peter Hitchens always talks about it that, you know, in Russian, there is no word for safety, the closest word Russian to safety in Russian is Bucha partners, which means no danger. You know, their threat perceptions is very different from the from the analysts and the Americans. So, once we are trying to determine their political, you know, reaction, we have to understand how they are seeing us, rather than how we are seeing them. One of the things that I mentioned in the definition chapter of the book was, we tended to divide European Union and the US and Germany and the West. And all these are different, you know, category categories, from the Russian perspective didn't really see a difference. You know, to them, it doesn't matter whether it's European Union, expanding, or NATO expanding, or the US putting its forces in Ukraine, it's all the same. There is this random force or club or Alliance that's inexorably moving towards its own border. And we have to stop that by all means. So it's they they they even think of the First and the Second World War as not, you know, D-Day or El Alamein, but rather German expansion to the east and Russia in reaction to it. So their understanding of history, you know, is very different than us.

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 39:26

Can I can I step in for a second. You mentioned the word history. And I actually have a good question from the audience by Michael Reynolds. He said, leaving aside the realist IR theory and the assumption of states being like billiard balls, ie self contained and interchangeable, how significant are the historical and cultural links between Ukraine and Russia and the formation of Russian foreign policy? Every Russian school child is taught that the birthplace of Russian identity and history is Ukraine. Whether one agrees with that view or not, has been held by Russians for centuries. And up until recently, many if not most scholars in the rest would not

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have dismissed this interpretation of history. How does that play into Russian positioning in the last 10 years?

Sumantra Maitra 40:19

No, I think that's a very good question. I think there is this this odd obsession. I mean, and I, I am guilty of that at times as well. There is this obsession of privileging structural explanations, and not thinking of the cultural or the other or the unit level, you know, explanations that might might be there. But yes, it is. I mean, structural theories are obviously historically more accurate, but that doesn't mean that there isn't, you know, an idea that the Russians feel some kind of like a historical cultural tie with Ukraine. inside Ukraine, it gets more complicated. The western parts of Ukraine has more, how do I put it more cultural solidarity with the, with the Catholic polish, you know, Western European ideas, and the eastern parts of Ukraine are more culturally aligned to Russia and all that that is changing. At the end of the day, when you have bombs running on top of your head, you're you it doesn't matter what kind of God you believe, you know, it's your your, your ideas change, you know, Richelieu had to align with the with the Protestants against the Habsburg fellow Catholics. So, realism doesn't really care much about regime type or religion.

At the end of the day, what matters is interest and threat perceptions. But that being said, from the Russian perspective, absolutely. I mean, we they are taught that, you know, Ukraine is, you know, historically the birthplace of Russian, you know, civilization. But also they kind of feel weird that Ukraine, that you talk to the Baltics, you know, the, you know, the politicians from the Baltic states, or politicians from the Ukraine, and they, it it's, it's almost colored, or painted as if it's, they were, they had no agency and it was all Russian imperialism throughout the Soviet Union. That's like saying the Scots were under the colonial rule of the English during the British Empire. You know, it's stupid. You know, if you go to Calcutta today, and if you see the name of the roads, it was all Scottish, you know, the churches, Scottish church, you know, the market, Stuart Hogg market, who were they, you know, they were they were they were preachers and missionaries and bureaucratic backbone of the British Empire from Scotland. The same goes with Ukraine, you know, you talk to the Hungarians today. And they're going to come and say that, Oh, you know, when the Ukrainians talk about war, all we think is in 1956, when the Soviet tanks came, it was driven by the Ukrainians. You know, this idea that this entire country was under completely under the grip of Russian imperialism, throughout history, throughout the Soviet Union, is historically inaccurate. And from the Russian perspective, they think that, you know, we are getting all the blame, it's good that they kind of feel like the English like, we were getting all the blame for the Empire. And even though it was our empire, we were not the only people who were, you know, doing this thing. So, so I think, yes, the cultural tie, the historical question is obviously very important. That doesn't negate the fact that structural theories are more superior when it comes to explanations, but it's obviously a factor.

Mark Episkopos 43:36

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Here, there are deep cultural ties that go that stemmed back many, many centuries. And there's almost I mean, there was an issue for us when you try to impose your kind of modern, liberal way of looking at the world on a very complex, intertwined history between two peoples, stemming back to and to the Middle Ages. But I wanted to when the time we have left, turn, perhaps to the prescription, sir, what what can we do? You you establish that Russia is a defensive realist power that is broadly interested in upholding the status quo. And you discuss in the book the possibility of establishing what you call a negative piece, that brainian neutrality along the lines of the postwar Austrian state treaty model, which is something we can see have discussed a lot. And I do think this model would offer clear tangible benefits for Ukraine. But I wanted to probe you a little more deeply, not so much on Ukraine, per se. But on the broader question of what a sustainable architecture of European security can look like, in light of your prescription, which I fully agree with, that Russia will not become a liberal, democratic ally anytime soon, but it need not be an enemy. So how do we balance engagement with competition?

Sumantra Maitra 45:05

I think to answer your question I, the more pessimistic answer would be like we can't really do much now, we have to wait and let you know, time played out, there was a chance of having a grand bargain with Russia. But both sides lost it, we more than them to be honest, because you know, it was not in our interest to be engaged in a conflict in the, you know, further down in Eastern Europe, where there is no strategic direct strategic interest for America. But at this point of time, that that boat has sailed, so we probably will have to wait a little bit and figure out like how the game is being played. That being said, there are a few things which we could do. Russia is obviously not going to be a liberal democratic power anytime in the future. That is our question. What is more important than that are two different things, one, for how long do we continue funding or, you know, being engaged in Eastern Europe? And what kind of, you know, war that would lead to we, it's easy, there is no direct manpower cost to America yet, doesn't mean that might not change. But American men are not dying inside Ukraine. Ukrainian men are dying there. There are hundreds and 1000s of Ukrainian casualties. It is a country of widow. And it is partly because of our constant funding and weaponization of that country. We might not take the moral responsibility for it. But there will be a time when history will come back and haunt us because it is related to our strategy in Ukraine. Now, whether it would be ethical to let Ukraine come to a negative peace with Russia? I think so, from from my perspective, absolutely. Whether that will satiate Russia, at this point of time, I don't know. It might associate with Russia at an earlier period. But now they have kind of smelled blood. So I don't really know, you know, how you know what to do in that situation. But from the Ukrainian perspective, it is our policies, which resulted in the death of hundreds and 1000s of men, which could have been avoided, because Ukraine couldn't have fought a war to that level without Western weapons. So the leverage is not I mean, Joe Biden can keep saying that it's it's up to the Ukrainians to decide when to stop the war and when to move forward. But at the end of the day, the leverage is in American hands. And it is, again revealed preferences like we if we stop money and weapons, who's going to who's going to house Ukraine going to sustain? So that's question number one,

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when the competing ethical considerations in this question is very difficult for small webinar to to address.

The second point that is far, far more dangerous from the American perspective is the Russian Chinese alignment. And that is a danger in a way, because for the first time in history of Chinese great power, modern Chinese great power, they have fuel coming from the northern border. The entire American grand strategy to balance China was predicated on choking off Chinese navy, and stopping their consumption of oil and fuel. That is gone. We are not going to bomb the Russia and Chinese border. If China goes to Taiwan and needs fuel and buys it from Russia. America is not going to bomb two nuclear powers, you know. So that is for that again, for the first time, the Chinese don't have to worry about getting their oil tankers passing through the Strait of Malacca, they can just buy oil from Russia. That's just one of the various different alignments and different, you know, shared interests that Russia and Chinese are exploring space, for example, Russian technology in space, you know, these are the kinds of things that we don't AI hypersonics joint research that's happening. Material considerations about just, you know, buying stuff from Russia, settling down in some of the provinces of eastern parts of Russia and starting businesses, Russians are making it easy for both Indians and Chinese to go and start business in the in the east of Russia. These are not the things that people in DC really think about because it doesn't really directly bother us yet. But if there is genuinely a competition with China in the future, those are the kinds of things that will come and haunt the American strategy strategic community. So I think more than Ukraine More than a negative feast, we have to figure out an equilibrium, where we understand that we are not going to push Russia out of the European balance, we don't have the capability, they don't have the capability either to do anything about it. But it is, it is never going to be a an alignment between Russia and us. But there could be a negative piece where we we come to an understanding with them, and don't try and push and don't try and rub them the wrong way in some ways, so that in the broader, you know, grand scheme of things, they don't need us when we eventually, in some, you know, at some time figure out that we are in the middle of a cold war with China. Again, that's not something that I want. But just in case that happens. We don't want the Russians to be adding as a power enhancer to the Chinese power. So that is a bigger threat to us.

Mark Episkopos 50:56

Well, if I can follow up on on the issue of China, because I agree that the Washington Moscow, Beijing strategic triangle is an important aspect that looms over all of this. And Russia has been pursuing an external balancing strategy of deepening its ties with China. But I mean, it seems to me there is some good news here because your book really disproves this notion of an autocratic convergence between Russia and China. This is not ideologically motivated, we can draw the inference that the Russia China relationship is really simply a Russia's reaction to Western attempts. Yes, I relation and diplomatic maximum pressure. But if that is the case, then it seems to me this kind of partnership can be weakened, or even partially reversed. Yes, Russia perceives the West as less of a threat and therefore doesn't need to devote so many resources to balancing against it, especially when that balancing comes at, at the cost of Russian sovereignty. Right? Russia is increasingly dependent on Beijing in a major way. This is not

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something Russian elites are happy about. They don't see this as optimal or desirable. In a policy of engagement with Russia, we actually give Moscow opportunities to balance with the West, against China on certain issues, especially when it comes to China's gargantuan economic influence over Russia. So how does the Russia China relationship fit into this kind of strategic triangle? And what can we do to maybe to stop this convergence that clearly is not in our interest?

Sumantra Maitra 52:36

I think I think one of the things that I constantly mentioned to people who said that there's never going to be a Russian and American alignment, because it hasn't happened post cold war, and I just mentioned, like, 15 minutes back, like, you know, it was there was an alignment against Islamist in the early 2001. Right, the Russians were helping us with space. The Russians, were helping us with intelligence, the Russians were giving us maps of Afghanistan, bases in Central Asia, you know, a whole bunch of things. So, absolutely. I totally agree with you. The Russians don't really like the Chinese. They are for they're very worried about the aggregate power of China that the only reason you're absolutely right. The only reason they are together, is because it's a it's an alignment. It's not a natural airlines. The Chinese production capacity and manpower is 1.4 billion people. 1.6 probably now. But anyway, it's more than the combined manpower and production capacity of U.S. 338 million, European Union route 500 million UK 66, Australia 37-38, Canada 33, New Zealand Five, it's more than the combined population and manpower of all of these countries and you know, organizations going to federal systems. That is huge. The Russians understand that. The Russian economy is 1.8 trillion. You know, it's dwarfed compared to the Chinese economy. So they are not very happy about this alignment with China, but it is a balancing coalition unbalanced and coalition's are determined on what kind of threats they perceive, and they perceive a threat from NATO and U.S., but also, if Russia is a realist power, that automatically expire explains that you can come to sort of an understanding with a realist power because they understand their interests much. So to answer your question, one, we have to stop needling them with human rights and all that nonsense.

People say that, you know, Barack Obama wanted to have this this detente with Russia. I think that's nonsense. You know, the American ambassador at that point of time was walking with protesters in Moscow and St. Petersburg so that if that is a deterrent, I don't really know what But you know, what aggression looks like. So we have to stop needling them with on human rights, we have to figure out a way to stop, not just NATO expansion, which is absolute must, but also European Union expansion. I know that goes against their, their idea of a Europe whole and free and all that. But again, retort, it is not real politic, you know, I spoke to I can't name who but people in the, in the, in one of the European embassies. And and I asked him the same question like, how do you define where do you stop? And you know, where does the expansion stop, and they were like, this is completely off the record, but the Russians have decided that for us, this is the border of Europe, you cannot move any further east, because you would face reaction, and some of it might lead to war. So, if we already do realize that, then we need to stop, we need to start saying that in public and say that, like, you know, NATO has expanded fine. If you're part of the talk to the Baltic states and say like, if you're part of the club, shut your

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mouth and be part of the club, you don't, you don't be in, you don't get to be inside the club, and then poke out of the door and find someone and then come back and expect everyone to defend you. You know, you don't pick a fight. You know, if you're within NATO, stay within NATO, stop talking, stop the gates pull the drawbridge up, you know, all of those metaphors, you know, stop expanding east, that's one of the absolute primary requested to have some kind of balancing understanding with Russia. And third, I think the Russians are interested in economic, you know, help, we did that during the 90s, we, the early 90s, the troops in Europe, I can't remember the exact numbers, but it went down from 330,000 to around 60, or 100. And then 60. Move troops out of Europe, give them you know, a way to say like, Fine, you go out of Ukraine, you go back to you just keep Crimea and go back to your you know, we come to a negotiation where you leave, you go to status quo ante. And then we are going to help you with economy, we are going to help you with some of the things that you can't get from China, for example. So there are ways to come to the negotiating table. But whether that's doable now. I'm not that optimistic.

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 57:24

Can I can I do finger that in this kind of dovetails with a question that I had already teed up for, for you, as we're nearing the end of the hour. The United States has identified Russia as a threat to democracy, and has identified Putin as a member of a pantheon of illiberal authoritarian leaders who are threatening not only Europe, but global freedom and democracy. Is this a a position of a realist power the United States and be How does the United States pursue a more positive foreign policy with Russia vis a vis, all the things that you just said, if it is set out this ideological agenda, which doesn't seem to realist to me, but how do they how does the United States get beyond that in order to make peace and provide for a new European structure and new alignments if possible?

Sumantra Maitra 58:33

Well, the US is not a realist power, I mean, I don't think there was any question on that. It hasn't been a realist power since at least 1994 95. For this, but definitely since Kosovo. I mean, one of the things that the Russians constantly talk about is, you know, how Kosovo changed the European politics. It was the first time in history where a supranational institution intervened inside a sovereign country, for what up until then was considered an internal policing matter. You know, that, that that's a template. The Russians use the exact same words when they went to Georgia in 2008. They were there for humanitarian intervention in Kosovo was the first time when NATO changed from a defensive alliance to a humanitarian and ideological Alliance. So 1999 I go back to 95. But at least since 99, the US has not been real. I mean, the Iraq war was a really No it wasn't, you know, it was I mean, it's funny the Russians, the Russians consider that they are a bastion of what they say stubbornness, which is like stability, so they are the the Westphalian power, which is sovereigntist and they understand that fixed geographical boundaries or fixed geographical boundaries. And we in the United States, and especially in UK, for some reason, they are fixated on UK they think like Britain is still like British Empire. Fine. But, but they think like these on this side are the Jacobins like we are, you know, the

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revolutionary power is, is on this side. You know, it's the Americans who are flying flags and trying to fly, you know, ideological flags in different, you know, capitals. So from the Russian perspective, they are the sovereign power, and they are the guardians of sovereignty. And the only reason they have to go to war is to stop a revolutionary power from marauding in throughout the globe. So yeah, I don't think America is a realist power. I mean, I, there is, quite literally no direct geographical or strategic interest for America to be in Ukraine. It is there's this entire European continent in the middle as a buffer state, between America and Russia. It doesn't need to be in the Middle East in the ways it you know, it is. Conceptually, the only place that America might potentially feel threatened is in Asia. But other than that, the America could absolutely, you know, take its hands off and be a more normal power, but unipolarity has its own hang ups. So that takes a while to get over with.

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 1:01:15

Mark, you want the last question?

Mark Episkopos 1:01:20

Sure, well, I feel a sense of duty to at least try to strike a kind of optimistic posture as we think about what exactly can be done in the context of the Ukraine war, but also in the context of really a security spiral with Russia that has been going on for since the end of the Cold War. It seems to me, I mean, as you mentioned, Russia has long stopped distinguishing between the US EU, various European states and NATO, and everything is lumped together in this concept of a collective West, we see this concept being used in Russia, the West, yes, it's a monolithic adversary. And this consolidation between the US and Europe has made Europe less safe, it seems to me by heightening Russian threat perceptions in a way that sees American military power everywhere. And we do ourselves no favors by being everywhere. So I mean, one way to dampen Russian threat perceptions, would be to encourage a greater degree of European strategic autonomy, which is something you've written about, not just to put an end to future waves of NATO expansion. But to Europeanized NATO in a way that decouples American military power from the European continent and therefore, reduces the threats that exists for Russia to balance against, we're not talking about pulling America out of NATO, which I don't think would be possible or necessarily even desirable. The US nuclear umbrella would still be there over Europe, and Article Five would remain in place. But away Article Five is not an automatic commitment to go to war. That's correct. But the upshot for me is simply that American security, security interests are better served, Europe becomes a safer place, and there is less chance of catastrophic escalation between US and Russia, if Europeans assume the burden for their own defense. What do you think?

Sumantra Maitra 1:03:15

I absolutely. I mean, I, I don't know if you've read but I've been harping on about dormant NATO for a while now. That the fundamental idea is the same. It's I don't think it's again, we are realists. So it's one thing to be utopian about what we want. And now the thing is what's possible

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to do in DC I don't think it's possible to, for the US to come out of a treaty guarantee. Even though you know, anyone who wants to, you know, take us completely out of European continent. Whether it's desirable or plausible is a different question. It's not possible to do and its current, you know, moment. But that being said, there could be a lot of things that could be done through just executive power. And one of the things that got one of the beauties of Dortmund NATO is it doesn't need the Congress to come out of the treaty, it can just force free positioning in the European continent is a presidential power and the president can do that on its own. He can tomorrow take troops out. There is already a template in the early 90s. But it's already been done once. You can take the troops out and tell the Europeans that, the logistics, infantry, armor intelligence, these are all yours, you know, we are not going to have Stryker Brigades going from Germany, Lithuania to be German guys. So it's going from Germany to Lithuania. We are going to provide the nuclear weapons and nuclear umbrella and the airbase in Ramstein and in Turkey would remain. But other than that, figure it out yourself. You know, it's you're a big continent, you've got 500,000 People 18 trillion GDP. Good luck. I also don't think that one of the things that I also feel is probably my Take a we try and think of Europe as one whole, when it comes to its interests. So if Europe needs to take power, the European Union needs to act together. I think that's stupid. I don't think that's going to happen because one America, again, it's not going to allow one flag one army, European superpower. If it's, we, you know, it's not going to happen. But the second, Europe itself will not be able to do anything, and they are still going to struggle coming to a coherent idea of their defense, and you know, and their force posture, and they are going to rely on America, a far easier way to do is have Mignon tongs, like have many, many laterals, between different countries, if the British and polish are trying to decide on having a security pact, good luck, if the French and the Greeks are trying to provide Navy in the Mediterranean, great well done if the Germans want to put brigades in Lithuania, Latvia, excellent. We don't have to micromanage the European defense, we all we have to do is just keep the nuclear force posturing in place and keep the second fleet and move the rest of it out. And so you're on your own.

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 1:06:12

I'm afraid we're gonna have to stop it there, because we've already gone six minutes over time. But I'm happy to do that, because this is a great conversation. Thank you so much, Sumatra, and I'm very excited about your book. Thank you. Where can people find it?

Sumantra Maitra 1:06:27

It's everywhere. It's on Amazon. You you Google the name and it's just gonna be right on top.

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 1:06:33

Exactly. Sources of Russian Aggression, thank you and congratulations. And I'm glad that you could join us on on this book talk.

Sumantra Maitra 1:06:43

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Thank you, thank you