

Opinion **War in Ukraine**

Putin's American friends

'Realist' critics of Nato echo Moscow's talking points on Ukraine

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Vladimir Putin with US President Donald Trump in 2025. Trump's pro-Russia tilt has drawn praise from the Maga right and what used to be called the tankie left © Andrew Caballero-Reynolds/AFP/Getty Images

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America has two types of exceptionalist. One believes the US is a unique force for good in the world. The other blames the world's ills on America. What they share is incuriosity about non-Americans. Whether light or dark, only America has agency. The light version has been badly discredited by wars of choice in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere. Negative exceptionalists have thus been on the rise. Their long-held expectation of Russia's victory over Ukraine is starting to look possible.

Though he follows neither school, President Donald Trump's ending of what remains of US support for Ukraine makes him the dark exceptionalists' harbinger. Those applauding his pro-Russia tilt come from the Maga right and what used to be called the tankie left. During the cold war, American tankies saw the Soviet Union as the anti-imperialist bulwark against a rogue America. Like Tucker Carlson from the right, today they seek to explain Vladimir Putin.

Their in-house intellectual is John Mearsheimer, champion of the "offensive realist" foreign policy school. He holds that big powers seek to dominate their regions — in Putin's case, the former Soviet world; for America, the western hemisphere. Internal politics are irrelevant. Big powers act similarly because they are big. Attempts by one power to meddle in another's region invite global conflict. The US has thus been as reckless in supporting Ukraine today as the USSR was in putting nuclear missiles in Cuba in 1962.

Mearsheimer merits attention because he lends academic respectability to those blaming the west for Russia's bloody war of conquest. A majority of Americans disapprove of Russia's war. But their sentiment is mostly passive. The activism of those who back Putin — in Trump's orbit and on the left — gives them influence beyond their numbers. At a moment when the US has swung behind an autocracy's attempt to snuff out a sovereign neighbour, their cover is invaluable.

Yet their indifference to what foreigners think is no less ignorant than George W Bush's idea of spreading democracy at gunpoint. Their forecasting record is equally poor. A week before Russia's 2022 invasion, Mearsheimer said Putin would not be so foolish as to invade. A few days later, he pivoted to saying the west had given Putin no choice. He has been predicting Ukraine's imminent collapse ever since.

Such talking points surface almost verbatim at each end of the spectrum (Carlson interviews Mearsheimer often). Chief among these is the claim that the US provoked Putin's war by pushing Nato's boundaries to Russia's borders. In practice the timing of Putin's invasion had little to do with Nato, which, since Bush's rash 2008 offer of future membership, had routinely ignored Ukraine's application.

Nor was Nato chief among the reasons Putin cited for his 2022 invasion, which was to “denazify” and “demilitarise” Ukraine and protect its Russian-speaking minority. Putin has made it clear that he sees Ukraine as belonging inside Russia’s civilisational borders. George Orwell would have fun with the claim that the west is fighting Russia “to the last Ukrainian”. It is as though Ukrainians have no minds of their own.

This kind of framing thus has little explanatory value. Even Mearsheimer’s one apparently prescient forecast in 2015, that the west was leading Ukraine down a destructive “primrose path”, bears little scrutiny. Ukraine was already in the meat grinder. Russia had in 2014 annexed Crimea and flooded the Donbas with “volunteers”. This came shortly after Ukraine’s ousting of Viktor Yanukovich, its pro-Russian president who had defied parliament by junking Ukraine’s EU association deal. Another critic of Nato, Noam Chomsky, echoed Moscow’s description of Yanukovich’s flight as a “coup”. But he fled because he had lost the country.

Putin’s US apologists also like to cite George Kennan and Henry Kissinger as having warned Nato against expansion. Yet Kennan, the father of cold war containment, opposed Nato from the start. It should be no surprise that he opposed new members decades later. Kissinger, meanwhile, abruptly endorsed Ukraine’s Nato hopes in 2023 having spent years warning against it. Either way, as the poster child of US worldwide meddling, Kissinger is an odd source of authority.

That Trump is now abetting an aggressor’s carnage ought to be seen as brutal and reckless. The Russian bear and American eagle are moving like pincers against European security. But even naked power seeks to clothe itself. A moth-eaten outfit can go a surprisingly long way.

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This article has been amended to clarify Putin’s reasons for the 2022 invasion

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