**John Mearsheimer explains why abandoning captured Ukrainian territory**

**may be Putin’s masterstroke**

Interview by Zakka Jacob, December 16, 2022.

(<https://twitter.com/Zakka_Jacob>)

(Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a3xP1OTfSvk>)

Synthesis by Jean-Marie Choffray

**Abstract.** John Mearsheimer is one of the leading Foreign Policy experts in the world. His analysis of what happened in Ukraine over the past ten months is of the utmost importance. As the two parties to the conflict (Russia and the United States) cannot contemplate the prospect of defeat, this immoral war is likely to last a long time. As of now, there seem to be only two options: some kind of neutral Ukraine or a dysfunctional rump State. Let’s hope that the gloomy evolution of the world economy, with the political forces it inevitably unleashes, will help rationality prevail over madness. “*Men have forgotten God; that’s why all this has happened.*” ([Templeton Prize Acceptance Address by Mr. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, 1983](https://www.templetonprize.org/laureate-sub/solzhenitsyn-acceptance-speech/))

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For your analysis, the appendix provides the transcript of this exceptional interview. As far as I am concerned, however, here are the most important points.

(1) “I think this is going to go on for a long time […] And I don't know anybody who has any confidence that they know how it's going to end. […] So, I don't know where this goes from here. I just hope that leaders on both sides are remarkably careful in how they manage this conflict, because the threat of nuclear escalation is ever present, and we don't want to lose sight of that fact.”

(2) “I don't think that Putin's looking for a face saving outcome here […] It is going to end up as a dysfunctional rump State or, if some sort of arrangement can be worked out, you may get instead a neutral Ukraine. But Putin is not looking for an off-ramp here.”

(3) “Putin is betting here that, over the long term, he can either break that bond between Ukraine and NATO, and make Ukraine a neutral State, or if he can't do that, he can so thoroughly wreck the country that it's useless for NATO.”

(4) “I think what Putin did, was that he rationalized the front lines so that the Russian military had enough forces to defend the lines that were separating the Ukrainian forces from the Russian forces. So, I think it was a very smart move on his part because the Russian army again was overextended.”

(5) “It's very hard for me to imagine us reducing our commitment to Ukraine […] It would be a tremendous defeat for any American President, Republican or Democrat, to be in office when Russia won the war in Ukraine. So, I think it's more likely that we will hang in there, than we will walk away.”

(6) “Well, I think American domestic politics matters enormously for domestic policy. I think it matters hardly at all for foreign policy […] There is a powerful consensus between the Republicans and the Democrats on foreign policy.”

(7) “The blue/red divide is enormously important for what's going on inside of the United States, but in terms of foreign policy, as I like to say, the Republicans and the Democrats are like Tweedledee and Tweedledum.”

René Girard’s final conclusion ([History is a test. Mankind is failing it](https://stanfordmag.org/contents/history-is-a-test-mankind-is-failing-it)): “*We must face our neighbors and declare unconditional peace. Even if we are provoked, challenged, we must give up violence once and for all.*”

**Appendix**: Transcript (slightly edited) of:

**Why Abandoning Captured Ukrainian Territory May Be Putin’s Masterstroke.**

**John Mearsheimer Explains.**

By Zakka Jacob, December 16, 2022.

(<https://twitter.com/Zakka_Jacob> )

(Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a3xP1OTfSvk> )

**Zakka Jacob**: Joining us now is one of the most preeminent voices in foreign policy in the world. He is the Wendell Harrison Distinguished Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago. Professor John Mearsheimer, thank you very much for speaking with us. Let's talk about the Russia-Ukraine war. It's going to be ten months soon since this war began. The last time we spoke in April, you said this is going to be a long war. It's going to be a grinding one, and possibly at the end of it, Russia could seek out a victory of some sort. Where do you see the war right now. What is your best understanding of what is the situation right now. And what may likely give because ultimately this war can't seemingly go on forever. So, something's going to give. What may that be?

**Prof. John Mearsheimer**: Well I think what's happened here is that the war has settled into a stalemate and the Russians who envisioned this as a limited military option, or excuse me, a limited military operation in the beginning, see it now more as a serious war and they are increasing their forces on the battlefield. Putin has mobilized 300 plus thousand soldiers and at the same time they are destroying Ukraine's infrastructure. They're destroying its energy, its water and its transportation systems, and in effect, what they're doing is they're wrecking Ukraine. And at the same time, they're continuing to fight these battles in places like the Donbass. But there's no evidence that the Ukrainians are going to lose any time soon, and in fact if it looks like the Ukrainians are losing, the Americans and their European allies will up the ante to back the Ukrainians. So, I think this is going to go on for a long time. You asked the question which many people ask: how does this end? I have no answer to that. I don't know. And I don't know anybody who has any confidence that they know how it's going to end. I think you can tell a story where the Ukrainians actually win on the battlefield and begin to push the Russians out of Ukraine, and in response to that, the Russians try to rescue the situation by using nuclear weapons inside of Ukraine. Is that likely? I think no. Is that possible? I think yes. I think you can also tell a story where the Russians up the ante. The West loses its interest in supporting Ukraine so forcefully, and the end result is that Russia makes big gains at Ukraine's expense and the war is eventually settled in ways that point to a Russian victory. Those are two very different outcomes. Both possible. Neither is going to happen for sure. So, I don't know where this goes from here. I just hope that leaders on both sides are remarkably careful in how they manage this conflict, because the threat of nuclear escalation is ever present, and we don't want to lose sight of that fact.

**Zakka Jacob**: I'm curious to know if it's got to a stage this war where Putin is looking for some kind of a face saver. I think Emmanuel macron, when he was in the us a few weeks ago, he suggested, or at least he indicated, that Putin needs a face saver. What may that face saver look like if at all one were to be offered?

**Prof. John Mearsheimer**: I think that logic is flawed. I don't think that Putin's looking for a face saving outcome here. That argument meshes with, or dovetails with, the argument that merely an imperialist trying to create a greater Russia and it hasn't worked out very well. He has been unable to conquer Ukraine, and he surely recognizes that, and therefore if we give him an off-ramp or a face-saving device he'll take it and we can end the war. I don't think that's what's going on here. Putin views Ukraine as a western bulwark on Russia's borders, as an existential threat. Putin thinks what is going in Ukraine with regard to Ukraine's moving toward joining NATO, moving toward joining the EU, and cozying up with the West, is just unacceptable from a Russian security point of view, and he is determined to either turn Ukraine into a neutral State, and if he can't do that, to turn it into a dysfunctional rub State. And if you look at what's happening now, he is in effect turning it into a dysfunctional rump State. He has annexed four oblasts, or four regions, in the eastern part of Ukraine in addition to having annexed Crimea in 2014. He's not going to give that territory back, and furthermore, he is wrecking Ukraine as a functioning Society. It is going to end up as a dysfunctional rump state or, if some sort of arrangement can be worked out, you may get instead a neutral Ukraine. But Putin is not looking for an off-ramp here. What he's looking for is victory. He's looking to achieve his objectives, and he will go to enormous lengths to achieve those objectives, because he believes he's facing an existential threat.

**Zakka Jacob**: I'm just curious to know, because with the war, by launching this war against Ukraine, hasn't Putin only further pushed Ukraine into NATO's embrace? There are many who are saying [… inaudible] is inevitable and it's not just Ukraine. Now you have neutral countries like Sweden and Finland already on an expedited path to becoming NATO members.

**Prof. John Mearsheimer**: Well, he doesn't care that much about Sweden and Finland. He cares greatly about Ukraine, and that has been very clear since 2008 when NATO first said that Ukraine would become a member of the alliance. The Russians made it clear at that point in time, not only Putin, but his lieutenants, that this was the brightest of red lines. So, Ukraine is very special, and he cares enormously about that. Now, there's no question, as you point out, that in the short term, NATO and Ukraine have become closer, but the question is what does the situation look like in the long term. And Putin is betting here that, over the long term, he can either break that bond between Ukraine and NATO, and make Ukraine a neutral State, or if he can't do that, he can so thoroughly wreck the country that it's useless for NATO. So, that's I think what's going on in this conflict.

**Zakka Jacob**: what do you make of the recent losses of territory that Russia seems to have suffered whether it was in Kherson, whether it was in [… partially inaudible] before that, and as a consequence, what are you hearing about voices within Russia? We're seeing a lot more hawkish voices within Russia suddenly all of a sudden questioning military commandment on the ground, saying that the battlefield strategies are all wrong. We've heard also from these quote/unquote non-state actors like Evgeni Prigogine and Ramzan Kadyrov, even on State television, like Alexander Dugin and Igor Girkin, are suddenly beginning to question not just Putinstrategy but also military commanders on the ground. Do you see any kind of internal pressures or ruptures which may threaten Putin?

**Prof. John Mearsheimer**: well, I think, first of all, the reason that the Russians effectively abandoned three big chunks of territory, and allowed the Ukrainians to reconquer that territory, was because the Russians, the Russian army, was overextended. It could not defend all the territory that it conquered, and I think what Putin did, was that he rationalized the front lines so that the Russian military had enough forces to defend the lines that were separating the Ukrainian forces from the Russian forces. So, I think it was a very smart move on his part because the Russian army again was overextended. What he has now done is he has mobilized 300 plus thousand more troops, and I would imagine over time they'll mobilize even larger numbers. He's put a general in charge who is very competent and that the Ukrainians fear much more than they did his predecessors. So, the Russians are now performing better because the front lines have been rationalized and the troop levels are increasing. And therefore the complaints against Putin have diminished significantly. There's no question that, you know**,** two three months ago Putin was taking a lot of heat for Russia's poor performance in Ukraine. No question about that. But what's happened over time is that that that criticism has basically gone away, or has been reduced greatly, and the Russians appear today to be in much better shape than they were, let's say in September, or even in August.

**Zakka Jacob**: you said, a moment ago, that the bond between Ukraine and NATO, at least right now, is quite strong, but you don't see, I mean you could envision the possibility that it could weaken over time. Maybe people in America, people in Western Europe, will get tired of this War. I'm just curious to know, with the Republican control of the House of Representatives, do you see American funding to Ukraine reduce or, at the very least, as Kevin McCarthy said [… partially inaudible] we're going to ask some questions about the blank check.

**Prof. John Mearsheimer**: it's possible. I don't think it's likely. The fact is that the United States is so deeply invested in this war at the same time, and that includes Republicans and Democratic Elites, it's very hard for me to imagine us reducing our commitment to Ukraine, which would in effect mean that Ukraine would get defeated. If anything, what we have to do to keep the Ukrainians in the fight is to increase the amount of aid that we're giving them. The Ukrainians are really having a tough time hanging on these days. They're hanging on because we're giving them so much aid. You take that aid away, the Russians will win and the Americans do not want that. It would be a tremendous defeat for any American President, Republican or Democrat, to be in office when Russia won the war in Ukraine. So, I think it's more likely that we will hang in there, than we will walk away, or we will begin to diminish our support for Ukraine moving forward.

**Zakka Jacob**: one final word. Just wondering what ramifications domestic political developments in the U.S could potentially have going forward in 2023, and then in 2024, on not just the Russia-Ukraine war but also the China-Taiwan situation? Do you reckon Donald Trump running, if his bid to become the next president would have strengthened, that could have some kind of a rub-off effect both on the war in Ukraine, as well as on China-Taiwan, and what may not be, or do you believe, with the Democrats having done better than expected. They certainly have reined in the Senate, even the house, they haven't lost by a great majority, that Biden's hand has been strengthened, and whatever is going on in Europe, in Russia-Ukraine and in China, people are okay with [… partially inaudible].

**Prof. John Mearsheimer**: Well, I think American domestic politics matters enormously for domestic policy. I think it matters hardly at all for foreign policy. The fact is there is a powerful consensus between the Republicans and the Democrats on foreign policy. When Joe Biden came to office he did not change Donald Trump's policy toward China. When Joe Biden came to power he did not change the Trump administration's policy toward Russia. You want to remember that Donald Trump in December 2017 was the president who decided to start arming the Ukrainians. Trump talked about having good relations with Russia, and pulling out of NATO, and so forth and so on, but in the end, he couldn't do that. The foreign policy establishment beat him back at every turn, and Republican foreign policy looked like Democratic foreign policy. So, I just don't think it matters on the foreign policy front. There's no question it matters in terms of domestic politics. The blue/red divide is enormously important for what's going on inside of the United States, but in terms of foreign policy, as I like to say, the Republicans and the Democrats are like Tweedledee and Tweedledum. There is just not much daylight between them.

**Zakka Jacob**: all right professor John Mearsheimer. As always, a pleasure speaking with you. Thank you so much for your time and your insights. Thank you.

**Prof. John Mearsheimer**: you're welcome.