

When Expertise Becomes a Constraint

John J. Mearsheimer, Ukraine and Model Lock-In

A case study in theory-induced blindness, anchoring, authority bias and the discipline of falsification



CENTRAL ASSESSMENT

Mearsheimer's realism remains valuable because it identifies structural pressures that many policymakers underweighted. The failure appears when the model becomes a sufficient explanation for almost every outcome. The Ukraine case shows why even eminent expertise must be exposed to falsification, competing hypotheses, recorded forecasts and structured dissent.

CASE STUDY SUPPLEMENT

Executive Assessment

John J. Mearsheimer is one of the world's most prominent scholars of international relations and the leading contemporary exponent of offensive realism. His work deserves serious engagement precisely because it is rigorous, coherent and influential. This case study is therefore not an argument that realism is obsolete, nor a personal criticism of Mearsheimer. It is an examination of what happens when a powerful analytical model becomes so dominant that evidence is repeatedly interpreted through the model rather than used to test whether the model itself requires revision.

The Ukraine record contains genuine insight alongside material forecasting failures. Mearsheimer warned as early as 1993 that an independent Ukraine could face future Russian attempts at reconquest and argued that a Ukrainian nuclear deterrent would reduce that risk. In 2014 he correctly identified that NATO enlargement and the prospect of Ukraine's integration into Western security structures were treated in Moscow as major strategic threats. He also anticipated that a prolonged geopolitical contest could be disastrous for Ukraine. These were not trivial insights. [1] [2]

The analytical problem is that this structural explanation increasingly became the organising answer. In a 2015 University of Chicago lecture, Mearsheimer argued that Russia did not want to conquer Ukraine and said of such an attempt that "Putin is much too smart to try to do that." Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, including the rapid thrust toward Kyiv, made that a material forecasting failure. RUSI's later reconstruction of Russian planning concluded that Moscow intended a rapid campaign followed by occupation and annexation, based on the expectation that the Ukrainian state would fracture and organised resistance would be limited. The central point is not that every pre-war analyst should have predicted the exact operation. It is that the evidence ultimately falsified a high-confidence proposition at the centre of the model. [3] [7]

CENTRAL ASSESSMENT Mearsheimer's case illustrates model lock-in more convincingly than it demonstrates the obsolescence of realism. Structural analysis remained useful, but it was treated too often as sufficient. The professional lesson is to apply the strongest challenge to the most authoritative analyst: define falsifiers, preserve competing hypotheses, record forecasts and force explicit updating when events contradict the model.



Figure 1. Mearsheimer and the destruction of the early invasion campaign.

1. Why This Case Matters

The value of the case lies in the difference between intelligence and explanation. International-relations theory is designed to simplify complex systems so that recurring patterns become visible. That is indispensable. Intelligence assessment has a different requirement: it must also identify when the pattern is breaking, when a decision-maker is pursuing an objective the theory considers irrational, and when variables treated as secondary are becoming operationally decisive. A theory can therefore be analytically useful while still producing a poor forecast in a particular case.

Mearsheimer's Ukraine analysis also demonstrates why analytical accuracy cannot be reduced to whether an analyst was 'right' or 'wrong' in aggregate. The proper audit separates propositions. Was NATO enlargement viewed as threatening by Russia? Yes. Did that make confrontation more likely? Plausibly and, in Moscow's own statements, clearly. Did it follow that Russia would avoid a large-scale invasion because conquest would be strategically self-defeating? No. Did Putin's own historical and ideological conception of Ukraine have independent explanatory value? The evidence indicates that it did. Did Ukrainian society possess agency and the capacity for national mobilisation that could alter the strategic balance? The war demonstrated that it did. Each proposition must be scored separately rather than bundled into a single ideological verdict.

This distinction is important for the [Beyond Tradecraft](#) framework. Sections on institutional blind spots, structured analytical techniques, mirror-imaging, structured dissent and measurement of the final product all converge on the same professional requirement: expertise must remain falsifiable. A senior specialist who has spent decades refining a model is not less vulnerable to anchoring because the model is sophisticated. In some circumstances, sophistication makes the anchor stronger because contrary evidence can be explained away rather than allowed to change the conclusion. [12]

2. What Mearsheimer Got Right

A fair case study must begin with the parts of the record that worked. In 1993, when much Western thinking assumed that post-Soviet Russia and independent Ukraine could coexist without a major security confrontation, Mearsheimer argued that Russian-Ukrainian relations were likely to deteriorate and that Ukraine might ultimately face Russian aggression. His nuclear-deterrence prescription was controversial, but the underlying risk identification was strikingly prescient. It shows that his realist framework was capable of recognising dangers that more optimistic post-Cold War thinking underweighted. [1]

His 2014 analysis also captured a real Russian security perception. NATO's 2008 Bucharest declaration that Ukraine and Georgia 'will become members' had become a persistent issue in Russian strategic discourse, and Moscow repeatedly described further NATO enlargement as unacceptable. Mearsheimer's insistence that analysts should examine the conflict from the Russian security perspective was analytically valuable. Intelligence professionals must understand how an actor defines a threat even when they reject the actor's legal, moral or historical claims. [2]

After the full-scale invasion, Mearsheimer also recognised features of the war that many short-war narratives underestimated. His 2023 work emphasised attrition, the difficulty of reaching a comprehensive settlement, the danger of escalation and the structural advantage that Russia could derive from larger manpower and firepower resources. His assessment of the Ukrainian 2023 counteroffensive was notably pessimistic before its failure became widely accepted. His broader forecast that Russia would ultimately 'win' the war remains an unresolved final-outcome prediction and should not be scored prematurely. Forecast discipline requires the same restraint when a prediction appears favourable to the analyst as when it appears unfavourable. [10]



Figures 2-3. The graphics illustrate the prominence of Mearsheimer's Ukraine analysis in public debate.

3. The Key Forecasting Failure: Rational Strategy Was Treated as a Constraint on Putin

The most useful single episode is the 2015 lecture. Mearsheimer's reasoning was internally logical. A Russian attempt to conquer Ukraine would be expensive, would provoke intense resistance, would create an occupation problem and could severely damage Russia. On the costs, his reasoning was strong. The failure came in the next step: because conquest would be strategically damaging, Putin was assessed as too smart to attempt it. The analyst moved from a sound assessment of consequences to a high-confidence assumption about the decision-maker's future choice. [3]

The 2022 invasion exposed that assumption. Russia did not merely reinforce Donbas or conduct a limited punitive operation. It attacked along multiple axes, attempted to seize Kyiv rapidly, targeted the political and command structure, and committed forces on an operational design that depended on Ukrainian political collapse. RUSI's post-war reconstruction assessed that the Russian plan envisaged a ten-day invasion followed by occupation and annexation on a much larger scale. CSIS had warned before the invasion that a northern thrust toward Kyiv and broader seizure of Ukrainian territory were plausible military options. The operation therefore represented precisely the category of behaviour that the earlier model had discounted as irrational. [7] [9]

This is a classic intelligence lesson. Actors do not optimise against the analyst's objective function. Putin could accept costs that an American academic regarded as strategically prohibitive because he assigned different value to Ukraine, regime security, historical legacy, Russian status, control of the near abroad and the risk of permanent Ukrainian alignment with the West. The correct analytical response to an apparently irrational course is not to assume that the actor will reject it. It is to reconstruct the actor's own hierarchy of objectives and test how much cost the actor may be prepared to absorb.

Putin's public language before the invasion should therefore have carried greater weight. His July 2021 essay and subsequent comments described Russians and Ukrainians as part of a single historical entity, portrayed separation as the product of external manipulation and questioned aspects of the political settlement that created independent Ukraine. These statements did not, by themselves, prove that an invasion was imminent. They did, however, challenge a model that treated Russian behaviour principally as a defensive reaction to Western expansion. An intelligence process should have treated them as indicators supporting a competing hypothesis: that strategic security concerns and a revisionist historical project were operating simultaneously. [6]

ANALYTICAL LESSON Correctly identifying that a course of action would be costly is not the same as establishing that an adversary will reject it. Cost-benefit analysis must be built from the target actor's objectives, tolerances and worldview, not the analyst's own definition of rational strategy.

4. Model Lock-In and Theory-Induced Blindness

The central failure mode is better described as model lock-in than simple confirmation bias. Confirmation bias implies a tendency to favour supporting evidence. Model lock-in goes further: the analyst possesses a coherent explanatory system capable of absorbing almost any new evidence. NATO expansion, Russian intervention in 2014, Western military assistance, the 2022 invasion, sanctions, mobilisation and the prolonged war can all be interpreted as consequences of the same structural competition. The theory therefore remains internally coherent even when a specific forecast fails.

That is analytically dangerous because a framework that explains every possible outcome becomes difficult to falsify. If Russia had not invaded, restraint could have been explained as rational deterrence. When Russia did invade, the invasion could be explained as the predictable result of Western encroachment. When the initial campaign failed, the failure could be treated as a tactical problem that did not alter the structural cause. When the war became attritional, attrition could again be incorporated into the same great-power framework. At each stage, the model survives. The question for professional analysis is therefore not whether the model can explain the new event, but whether the event should change the relative weight assigned to competing explanations.

Harald Edinger's 2022 critique is particularly useful because it does not simply reject realism. It argues that a realist analysis can produce different conclusions depending on which actor's security dilemma receives attention. Eastern European states and Ukraine also faced insecurity and had reasons, consistent with realist logic, to seek protection against Russia. A model focused overwhelmingly on the US-Russia relationship risks reducing Ukraine to strategic space rather than treating it as an actor with preferences, fear, political identity and capacity for mobilisation. [5]

This is where Ukrainian agency becomes decisive. Russian coercion did not simply respond to Ukrainian alignment with the West; it also strengthened the domestic political demand for Western protection. The causal relationship is recursive. Russian pressure increased Ukrainian fear; Ukrainian efforts to secure Western support increased Russian fear; Russian escalation then produced deeper Ukrainian national consolidation. A linear narrative in which Western expansion acts and Russia reacts cannot fully describe that feedback loop.

5. Causation, Responsibility and the Problem of the Single Deep Cause

Mearsheimer's post-2014 argument distinguishes a 'deep cause' from precipitating factors and does acknowledge Russian nationalism, Putin's worldview and Ukrainian domestic politics. The problem is therefore not that these variables are absent. It is their analytical weighting. By assigning Western policy the role of principal structural cause, other variables can become secondary by definition even when they are the variables that explain why one option was chosen over another at a specific moment. [4] [5]

Intelligence assessment should resist the temptation to collapse causal analysis into a single question of blame. NATO policy can be strategically consequential without being sufficient to explain the invasion. Putin's historical beliefs can be important without making structural security concerns irrelevant. Ukrainian domestic choices can matter without transferring responsibility for the decision to invade. These propositions are compatible. The analyst's task is to separate necessary conditions, enabling conditions, triggers, intentions and decision points rather than seek one morally or politically satisfying master cause.

The same distinction matters when assessing Mearsheimer. His warning that the West was creating a dangerous security confrontation should not be discarded because the 2015 forecast failed. Equally, the accuracy of that warning cannot be used to immunise the rest of the analysis from challenge. A strong professional culture permits both statements to remain true at the same time: the framework generated important insight, and the framework also produced a major error.

6. Individual Bias or Institutional Bias?

The first-order problem in this case is individual and methodological. Mearsheimer developed a highly coherent theoretical lens over decades, became strongly identified with it, and applied it consistently to Ukraine. That creates the conditions for anchoring, theory-induced blindness and reputational consistency pressure. None of these requires bad faith. Indeed, the more coherent and intellectually developed the framework, the more difficult it can be for its owner to recognise when it is screening out variables the framework does not privilege.

The institutional lesson is different. There is no evidence basis for claiming that a university or academic institution simply failed to 'control' Mearsheimer, nor should scholarship operate that way. The relevant institutional bias arises among consumers of expertise. Prestige can become a proxy for probability. A famous scholar's view may receive less rigorous challenge because of authority, or it may receive disproportionate attention because controversy attracts audiences. Both dynamics are unhealthy. The correct safeguard is not deference and not dismissal; it is structured challenge applied independently of status.

This is directly analogous to the intelligence problem examined in Beyond Tradecraft. A junior analyst facing a senior regional authority may possess relevant contrary evidence yet lack the confidence, status or institutional protection to force reconsideration. A mature intelligence organisation therefore cannot rely on personalities to generate dissent. It must require explicit alternative hypotheses, independent review and preserved minority assessments precisely when the prevailing view is associated with a highly respected expert. [12]

AUTHORITY BIAS TEST Would the same proposition receive the same confidence rating if the author's name and institutional affiliation were removed? If not, the consumer is evaluating authority as evidence rather than evaluating the evidence itself.

7. Is Mearsheimer a Generation Behind?

The evidence does not support treating age or generation as the primary explanation. Mearsheimer's later writing on the war engages directly with attrition, manpower, artillery, industrial capacity and the operational limits of offensive action. He has also repeatedly updated tactical assessments. The problem is therefore not simply that a Cold War scholar cannot understand modern warfare.

There is, however, a generational dimension in the weighting of variables. Classical great-power analysis privileges geography, military mass, industrial capacity, alliances and spheres of influence. Those factors remain central, but the Ukraine war has also demonstrated the strategic significance of national identity, societal mobilisation, distributed digital networks, commercial satellite imagery, open-source intelligence, drones, rapid civilian-military technological adaptation, international financial networks and the ability of a smaller state to mobilise external support at extraordinary scale. These do not invalidate realism. They alter the conversion rate between latent power and political control.

The more precise diagnosis is therefore not that Mearsheimer belongs to the wrong generation, but that his preferred level of analysis is great-power centric. That lens can underweight the capacity of smaller states and societies to shape the strategic environment. A younger analyst can make exactly the same error. The corrective is not generational replacement; it is analytical pluralism and recurrent testing of which variables actually explain outcomes.

8. How a Structured Intelligence Process Would Have Challenged the Model

A disciplined intelligence process would not begin by deciding whether Mearsheimer was right or wrong. It would convert the argument into explicit, competing hypotheses. One hypothesis would treat Russian behaviour primarily as a defensive response to NATO enlargement and Western political penetration. A second would treat Russia as seeking restoration of a privileged sphere of influence regardless of formal NATO membership. A third would assign substantial independent weight to Putin's historical-nationalist conception of Ukraine and regime-security concerns. A fourth would treat the outcome as an interaction among structural insecurity, Russian revisionism, Ukrainian agency and contingent leadership decisions.

Each hypothesis would then require disconfirming indicators. The defensive-security hypothesis should lose probability if Russia demonstrated objectives substantially beyond military neutrality, such as systematic preparations for occupation, political replacement, annexation or denial of Ukrainian statehood. The revisionist hypothesis should lose probability if Moscow accepted durable Ukrainian sovereignty and alignment outside NATO without coercive demands for political control. The leadership-ideology hypothesis should lose probability if elite succession or policy variation produced no meaningful change in objectives. The mixed hypothesis should be challenged by evidence showing that one variable consistently explains decisions without the others.

The process should also record forecasts. Mearsheimer's 2015 proposition about the irrationality of conquest should have been logged as a testable forecast with a confidence level and review date. When the 2021 force build-up, occupation-related planning indicators and increasingly revisionist political rhetoric accumulated, the forecast should have been formally reopened. When the invasion occurred, the forecast should have been scored as failed and the explanatory model recalibrated. This is not punitive. Forecast scoring is a mechanism for preventing expertise from becoming self-sealing.

TRAINING APPLICATION For major strategic assessments, require analysts to state what would make them change their mind; identify which actor's agency may be missing; separate capability, intention and perceived rationality; record high-confidence forecasts; and require an independent reviewer to build the strongest case against the prevailing explanation before publication.

9. Lessons for Intelligence Professionals

Lesson One: *Theory should generate questions, not veto evidence.* Realism remains an essential tool for understanding security competition, but no theory should be permitted to determine in advance which variables are important. The analyst must be willing to discover that identity, ideology, regime politics or individual leadership preference has become more consequential than the structural model expected.

Lesson Two: *Explaining an adversary is not the same as predicting the adversary.* Mearsheimer's explanation of why Russia feared NATO could be substantially correct while his prediction of what Putin would do with that fear was wrong. Intelligence organisations should therefore separate causal explanation from behavioural forecast and assign confidence to each independently.

Lesson Three: *The highest-status expert should receive the strongest challenge, not the weakest.* Seniority and reputation provide useful prior information about expertise, but they are not evidence for a specific proposition. Structured dissent is most valuable when a conclusion has become synonymous with the identity of a respected specialist because that is when ordinary peer challenge becomes socially difficult.

Lesson Four: *Failed forecasts must change something.* If a major prediction fails and the explanatory framework emerges unchanged, the organisation should ask whether genuine updating occurred. Not every failed forecast invalidates a theory, but it should alter confidence, variable weighting, indicators or the range of plausible alternatives. A model that can absorb every failure without modification is no longer functioning as a disciplined forecast model.

Lesson Five: *Professional humility.* Mearsheimer's career demonstrates both the value and the danger of deep expertise. He saw risks that others missed, including the future vulnerability of a non-nuclear Ukraine and the strategic danger of NATO-Russia competition. He also made a highly consequential forecast that failed because the behaviour he regarded as strategically irrational nevertheless occurred. Intelligence professionalism requires retaining both facts at once.

Conclusion

John Mearsheimer should not be reduced to a caricature of the scholar who 'got Ukraine wrong.' That would commit the same analytical simplification this case study is intended to challenge. His work identified genuine structural pressures, important Russian security perceptions and some long-term risks with considerable foresight. His later assessment of an attritional, difficult-to-settle war also contained substantial analytical value.

The firmer conclusion is narrower and more important. His Ukraine analysis demonstrates how a coherent and successful theoretical framework can become an analytical constraint. The 2015 confidence that Putin would not attempt the kind of conquest that could wreck Russia was contradicted by the 2022 decision to launch a full-scale invasion built around rapid

seizure of Kyiv and broader political subjugation. The costs Mearsheimer anticipated were real. The assumption that those costs would prevent the decision was not.

That makes the case directly relevant to intelligence training. The professional objective is not to produce analysts without models or without bias. It is to produce analysts whose models remain testable, whose forecasts are recorded, whose assumptions can be exposed, and whose status does not protect their conclusions from challenge. Expertise should increase the quality of the hypothesis. It must never remove the obligation to falsify it.

FINAL ASSESSMENT Mearsheimer's principal analytical failing on Ukraine was not realism itself. It was allowing a powerful realist model to become too dominant in the weighting of evidence. The case demonstrates why individual bias becomes an institutional risk when authority reduces effective challenge. The remedy is structured falsification, competing hypotheses, forecast calibration and protected dissent.

SOURCE NOTES

References and Source Notes

This supplement uses Mearsheimer's own publications and lectures as the primary record of his argument, supported by peer-reviewed criticism, official Russian statements and specialist military studies. The purpose is analytical audit rather than political attribution. Source numbering follows first appearance in the case study.

- [1] John J. Mearsheimer, "The Case for a Ukrainian Nuclear Deterrent," *Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1993. [Source](#)
- [2] John J. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin," *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2014. [Source](#)
- [3] University of Chicago, "Why is Ukraine the West's Fault? Featuring John Mearsheimer," 25 September 2015. The relevant discussion of conquest and the statement that Putin was "much too smart" occurs in the Q&A at approximately 47 minutes. [Source](#)
- [4] John J. Mearsheimer, "The Causes and Consequences of the Ukraine War," lecture delivered at the European University Institute, 16 June 2022; text reproduced by Russia Matters. [Source](#)
- [5] Harald Edinger, "Offensive ideas: structural realism, classical realism and Putin's war on Ukraine," *International Affairs*, Vol. 98, No. 6, November 2022, pp. 1873–1893. [Source](#)
- [6] President of Russia, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," 12 July 2021, and subsequent presidential remarks on the article. [Source](#)
- [7] Mykhaylo Zabrotskyi, Jack Watling, Oleksandr V. Danylyuk and Nick Reynolds, "Preliminary Lessons in Conventional Warfighting from Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: February–July 2022," *RUSI*, 30 November 2022. [Source](#)
- [8] Jack Watling, Oleksandr V. Danylyuk and Nick Reynolds, "Preliminary Lessons from Russia's Unconventional Operations During the Russo-Ukrainian War, February 2022–February 2023," *RUSI*, 29 March 2023. [Source](#)
- [9] Seth G. Jones and Philip G. Wasielewski, "Russia's Possible Invasion of Ukraine," Center for Strategic and International Studies, 13 January 2022. [Source](#)
- [10] John J. Mearsheimer, "The Darkness Ahead: Where the Ukraine War Is Headed," 23 June 2023. [Source](#)
- [11] Stimson Center, "Testing Assumptions About the War in Ukraine, One Year Later," 23 February 2023, on pre-war overestimation of Russian military performance and underestimation of non-material factors. [Source](#)
- [12] ADG Consult NZ, *Beyond Tradecraft: Training the Analytically Self-Aware Intelligence Professional*, Insight Paper, August 2026. This case study is designed as a supplement to that paper, particularly its sections on institutional blind spots, structured analytical techniques, mirror-imaging, structured dissent and performance measurement. <https://adgconsultnz.com/research-papers/beyond-tradecraft-building-the-analytically-self-aware-intelligence-professional/>

Note on assessment: The war's final outcome remains unresolved. This supplement therefore treats post-2022 end-state forecasts as open where appropriate and focuses its firmest assessment on propositions already falsified or strongly contradicted by documented events.