

## PERSONA GRATA

### Faces and Personalities



WILLIAM WOHLFORTH

## “RUSSIAN AND THE US BOTH LACK REALPOLITIK KIND OF THINKING...”

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*William Wohlforth is a leading scholar in the theory of international relations, the history of the Cold War and modern American and Russian foreign policy. He is one of the founding authors and most eminent representatives of Neoclassical Realism – a powerful theoretical school which markedly influenced our thinking about the US ‘grand strategy’ in the 1990s and particularly in the 2000s. He has taught at Princeton University, Georgetown University, Dartmouth College (Ivy League). Between 2006 and 2009, he chaired the Department of Government at Dartmouth, where such prominent professors as Stephen Brooks and Richard Ned Lebow work. This Department was ranked the top undergraduate political science program in the world by researchers at the London School of Economics in 2003.*

*William C. Wohlforth is the author of 6 books and over 60 articles on topics ranging from the Cold War to unipolarity and contemporary U.S. grand strategy. His recent research concerns whether and under what conditions we might expect the return of rivalry and conflict among the world’s most powerful states, and whether these states can cooperate to address the common problems that beset them.*

On his visit to Moscow he kindly agreed to talk with the editors of our Journal.

**M.P.** *Your remarkable academic career just started out in 1989–1991 when the Eastern block collapsed and the Soviet Union disintegrated. Many at that time blamed International Relations scholars, and Realists in particular, for their inability to anticipate those developments. How did you manage to keep your faith in studying international politics and go on relying on the tradition going back to Hans Morghentau, Kenneth Waltz and others, while some scholars were claiming that they should be abandoned completely?*

**W.W.** Well, the first question concerns the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union which is roughly the time I got going in this profession. And, I wrote a lot of works in those days and essentially they amount to three responses to the question that you have posed. One is that realist theory strained too far from classical realism. And, it needed to recover key insights from that kind of scholarship, and among those insights was the importance of certain non-material interests like prestige and status. If you incorporate these into the theory, you would at least be intellectually prepared for events such as those that occurred if not capable of predicting them.

The second one, the second response I have had was that when the Cold War ended (began to end) in the 1980s the dominant realist

school was neorealism, or so-called structural realism advanced by Waltz. And my argument was that stray realism had dominated too much at the expense of the theory of rise and decline advanced by former Princeton colleague Robert Gilpin. If you looked at Gilpin's theories and combined them with Waltz', you would have a better way of understanding the end of the Cold War and events, sticking purely with neorealism. And the final response I had was that international relations theory cannot fully substitute for area expertise, for knowledge about countries and for willingness, if not to become an expert in the country politics yourself, at least to work very, very, hard to be abreast of the expert literature of a given country. That was especially important in the bipolar situation where two countries really had an outsized influence on international politics, and the fact that international relations scholars did not follow carefully the events within the Soviet Union explains their surprise at the events that occurred.

**M.P.** *You are recognized as one of the founders and major representatives of Neoclassical Realism. However, there is sometimes a claim that rather than being a research programme in its own right, it is just an eclectic mix of ideas drawn from Foreign Policy Analysis and Constructivism, which somehow unnaturally attached to the structural Realist core. What is your perception of Neoclassical Realism?*

**W.W.** The second question is about Neoclassical Realism. Neoclassical Realism is an approach to the study of the international relations that is fast and progressing and in fact some of the key scholars behind this school of thought have just finished a book that is forthcoming, that takes neoclassical realism one step further to what they consider to be a full-scale theory or theoretical approach to the study of international politics. Whereas in the past neoclassical realism was focused on the explanation of foreign policy. But that it, I think the question which asks how different neoclassical realism is; I think it's a perfectly legitimate question. I think if foreign policy analysts and Constructivists are concerned with the issues of power and attentive to the

ways the international system can pressure states, they do get very close to neoclassical realism. The fact is that many constructivists and foreign policy analysts do not do this, but those who do do it, for an objective observer it will be hard to discern it from neoclassical realists. There is the school that calls itself Realist Constructivists (and here I think about people like Daniel Nexen, Stacy Gudderd, Samuel Barkin) who are explicitly taking a constructive approach and taking onboard the core realist arguments about power and struggles for power, and that theory I think it overlaps in many important ways with neoclassical realism.

**M.P.** *Do you think, if we go from that, that more generally, because there are so many types of realism nowadays, different neorealisms, neo-classical realisms... Is realism a paradigm, a theoretical framework, or is it more a kind of discourse, a community of people rather than a set of theories that are somehow interrelated? We know that Gilpin's realism is very much different from Waltz's realism, from Mearsheimer's realism, from your realism? Maybe, it's now just a kind of catchword to bring different, very intellectual people together under one framework, people who like to debate with each other, rather than some kind of research programme? Is there still a theoretical core in it, if we take Lacatos's conceptualization?*

**W.W.** I think, it's not a Lacatos-style research program and never was. The idea that it was became an illusion that led to a lot of problems. I think, realism is best described as a school of thought, an approach to the practice of foreign policy and statesmanship. As dispersed as it is, and as heterogeneous as it is, nevertheless, it is defined by a couple of core basic propositions about the world including the centrality of power in international relations, including the focus on a group's interests as opposed to an individual level of analysis. I think all of these theories and approaches share the sense that egoism traps the altruism in human behavior, and there is a kind of communality across all of these dispersed schools and writers, and so students should still learn about realism. I think that a student who tries to un-

derstand international politics, who does not know about this school and what holds it together would be intellectually impoverished compared to the student who does know. I would not stress the scientific premises too far but there is definitely a coherent school of thought that is unified by these core outlooks or assumptions about the world.

**M.P.** *Neoclassical realism, which we discussed earlier is very diverse in itself. You and your colleagues take unit-level variables, but they are so different. Do you think that neoclassical realism could be considered as a kind of research program?*

**W.W.** Those scholars that I have mentioned and I think the chief among them are Steven Lobell, Jeffrey Taliaferro and Norrin Ripsman are really trying to turn neoclassical realism from just a sort of a school of analysis into an out-and-out research program. In their new book they attempted to do this. And, the school, the field will have to judge whether they are successful. So, there are clearly people within this subgroup or sub-school of neoclassical realism who want to translate it into a research program. But, you are right, as for this moment, as we are having this conversation, it has not yet cohered, rather than attempting to be a research program, it is more like an approach to the study of foreign policy that tries to take the insights of realist theories seriously and is less strained than neorealism. It is not yet a research programme.

**M.P.** *You've already started to speak about combining realism and unit level variables. One of the pieces that come to mind when we think about neoclassical realism is your writing on unipolarity which is not just looking at this as structural conditions, but also on the more specific example of unipolarity. The article which you published in 1999 envisaged a particular pole at that time – the USA – and described the 2000s as quite problematic years for the American perception of security, and its assessment of its role in the world, its assessment of the global environment, due to 9/11, the Iraq War of 2003 and other challenges. Have you had any second thoughts regarding your theory of the*

*stability of unipolarity after these events, did they affect your thinking?*

**W.W.** My answer is yes and no. It is tough to discuss this, because it seems so self-referential to my own work, but that is what you are asking. I would say yes and no. No, I would say I'm not rethinking anything about the theory. In a 2002 article that I wrote with Stephen Brooks on Foreign Affairs I argued as strongly as I could that the USA needs to follow a policy of restraint in its powerful position and that was the best course for the USA. You have to realize when you write these scholarly articles that they are always influenced by the time in which you write them. Indeed, many journals want you to make policy implications. When I wrote that article which came out in 1999, I actually wrote it in 1998 and there was the Clinton administration and it was a very different world. As the Bush administration came into office I then teamed up with Stephen Brooks and wrote an article on Foreign Affairs, and in that article I argued very very strongly, as strongly as I possibly could (because we could see what was happening) that the USA needed to adopt a policy of restraint in foreign affairs, that it should not do unilateral actions. It should actually act in a very wise magnanimous way, that was the smartest way for a country in a unipolar position. The article's title was "American Primacy in Perspective", and we tried to argue that the USA was very much more powerful than any other state in the history of international interstate relations, but that did not mean it was omnipotent and you have to have a reasonable benchmark for assessing U.S. power, not that kind of crazy benchmark that you could just effortlessly go into Middle Eastern countries driven by sectarian strives and tumble their regimes to make democracies. That's the craziest standard of power as it makes you a God rather than a great power.

So, we made these two arguments, you need to have a perspective in assessing American power and you need to follow a policy of restraint and magnanimity, and these arguments were completely in line with the theory. They were in no way a departure from the theory. But, the Bush administration especially in its first years took a different approach and the

results are well-known to the world and to the USA. So, I do not believe any of that in any way undermines the theory.

I have rethought the theory and Brookes and I have a new article coming out on International Security in next issue in which we've rethought the usefulness of polarity as a way of thinking about change in international systems. In a way, polarity tends to force debates into an all or nothing kind of mold. It's either unipolar, or it's bi-polar. It's either bi-polar, or it's multipolar. There is no good way with polarity to think about changes within the international system. That was a problem in the 1980s and it was one of the reasons why we did not see the end of the Cold War. The system was so formally bipolar, but it was changing too dramatically and we did not have an architecture to think that through. I think it was a mistake in my 1999 article to use unipolarity as a means of thinking about change. There has been a huge change in the last 20 years, especially with the rise of China, but we also see Russia kind of reconstituting a more capable state and a military capability it did not have in 1999. The world is changing and the polarity concept is not catching it very well.

So, I would say the answer is yes and no. No regarding the fundamental theoretical claim on how unipolar systems work, I don't think the events of the 2000s really undermined that, but yes, about the unipolar concept getting in the way of and even frustrating conversations about the changes in the international system, particularly with the rise of China.

**M.P.** *What strikes me then from what you've said right now is that you are writing this article and you are arguing against too much of interventionism on behalf of the USA. Also, the TRIP's survey, I don't know if you've seen this, this is the Teaching, Research and International Politics, they also asked questions to scholars, most of whom said that they were against the Iraq War. John Mearsheimer who belongs to a very different tribe of the realist camp also argued against this military affair. Why is it that politics is so detached from the academic world that politicians do not follow such warnings from*

*scholars? And what do you feel is the point in academic discussion, if it cannot shift policy on such important issues?*

**W.W.** I think scholars now have and have always had very little influence on politics. There is some influence. They are not completely divorced. Scholars matter. They can push the conversation in one direction or another, but it has never been the case that scholars dominate actual politics.

The first big post-Cold War example was NATO expansion. An overwhelming majority of scholars in international relations and history opposed the idea of NATO expansion, and especially opposed the second phase of the NATO expansion. John Luis Gaddis and George Kennan wrote opinion pieces, which were ignored. And, then with Iraq there was an overwhelming opposition. And not only by scholars of international relations. Obviously, very few Middle East experts thought that you could democratize Iraq. You could count them on the fingers of one hand, and yet the administration chose to ignore the opposition and went ahead with it.

So, scholars influence is limited, but first of all its primary goal is to explain and understand things. The influence on policy is a secondary goal, and even if you failed to influence policy at least you are performing your scholarly mission, the academic mission of explaining international politics. I also do think that at the margins there is an influence. I believe that the conversation in the country about foreign affairs is better if there are independent nongovernmental experts who can hold governments to account, who can expose the fallacies of these policies even if they just expose them after the fact — that is a valuable contribution. I'd rather think now that it's very unlikely that the USA is going to come to a conclusion it can effortlessly walk in the Middle East overthrowing regimes to create democracies, you can see this much more circumspect approach in the U.S. today. That's not really the result of scholarship, that's the result of the painful experience of Afghanistan and Iraq. Still, scholars can influence the conversation, and the conversation gets better. It leads to better policy choices in the long run, if you have inde-

pendent nongovernmental scholars, especially in Universities who can criticize and hold to account their governments even if they don't have a decisive influence over policy choice.

**M.P.** *We spoke a bit about the flaws of politics, so we could switch to the flaws of academia as well. We would like to ask you about fashions in the world of academia, as, for example, now there is a growing number of scholars, think tankers and other types of authors who are writing on emerging multipolarity. Some wrote on a nonpolar world, for example. And, since 2008 at least, this idea has gone viral. Do you think there are fashions in international relations scholarship and what is your own shield against these trends, how do you manage to avoid being taken by the agenda of the day, and still be able to re-think your theories taking into account the changing circumstances? How could we manage to keep the balance between standing against fashions if they are fashions and at the same time be open to changes?*

**W.W.** That a very tough thing to optimize across those two goals: the goals of being relevant to the world, on the one hand, but not imprisoned by the fashions or ideas of the day, on the other hand.

I don't have any clear response. Like everybody else I get caught by the events of the moment. Like everybody else, I'm looking at ISIS and at the situation in Syria. Like many people, I am obsessed with the rise of China, which is obviously a big deal, and it is impossible not to be focused on these things. I think the response is to be based on clear concepts, that you clearly defined and that you measure with evidence.

In the public conversation when people throw out terms like multipolarity or polycentrism, often I don't really know what they mean. Very often if you find the definition, it's perfectly sensible. It means things like the U.S. is not all powerful and there are many actors or there are issues which require many people to settle (they cannot be settled unilaterally). All these things are obvious! Or that there are lots of non-state actors, like ISIS or Al-Qaeda, and they can influence. Who can disagree with this?

So often, however, terms are thrown around – like 'non-polar world' – and it is completely unclear what it means, how we will know we are in it, what measures you would use to say we are not in a non-polar world. They are just catch phrases. I'm trying to make things concrete with terms I can understand and measures I can understand. That's why, as I was saying before, I was a little nervous about the term polarity which tends to feed these all or nothing conversations – 'yes the world is still unipolar', 'no it's not unipolar'. You get this all or nothing kind of debate.

I made this argument, when I was in MGIMO. How about you just say: how many superpowers are there or what is a superpower? Well, a superpower is a country that can simultaneously sustain major security guarantees in multiple regions, with a big expeditionary capacity that controls or has commanded the global commons. And then you ask how many superpowers are there, and how likely is it that one of these countries cease to be one? The best I can figure out and reckon looking at all the available data, is that it just does not look likely that China is going to rise to a superpower status, or even to the status where it can stop the USA from acting as a superpower for quite a long time. In this sense I think the rhetoric about a coming multipolarity is exaggerated. Yet, at the end of the day most of what people say when they talk about multipolarity or polycentrism is obviously true, and I don't disagree with it. So, sometimes I think that these fashions, or waves, or moods about changing international relations are shared by using terms that don't really very carefully capture what people are talking about, and also they are a reaction on critical events.

You've mentioned the 2008 financial crisis. It came on the heels of the clear failure of the USA in Iraq, that really started this "post-American world" kind of conversation. There is no doubt that those were important events. It just happens that, as it is often the case in such kinds of conversations, the political impact was probably exaggerated.

**M.P.** *You were giving your definition of superpower. Don't you think that this definition is a bit*

*American-centric, as it is a definition which applies to a maritime superpower. You spoke about command of the commons, which traditionally was understood as a command of the oceans. Now the situation is changing. We could say, that outer space and cyberspace, for example, are global commons as well. Yet, essentially, when we talk about the predominance of the U.S. as a superpower, we often think about control of the maritime routes and of power projection capabilities, which are related to a strong navy. Don't you think that there could be other types of definitions of a superpower, for example for those continental powers like Russia and maybe, China? For those, perhaps, there could be another measurement of power and influence?*

**W.W.** There is a great scholarship on this question, especially by William Thompson. It compares global powers with continental land powers. In a way there is a pattern of competition between land and global powers. I know that there is a lot geopolitical thought in Russia on this question. The Cold War could be thought of this way: whereas the Soviet Union was clearly a superpower, it was less of a global one than the United States.

The reason I find this definition a reasonable one, today.. Again, we can debate it. Maybe, someone has a different definition and we can have a wonderful conversation. At the very least I could say on behalf of the argument I'm making, that I clearly defined what I'm talking about. It is not always the case. Here are the facts for this definition of superpower. First of all, it is not just command of the sea, it's the air and space. Command obviously is a tough term. Other actors can interfere. It is just that the United States has an undeniable capacity, especially, on the sea and the air outside the near territorial areas of these powers. That allows it to have security guarantees in those regions. The United States has 80 allies. A lot of these are Latin American countries. But it has 45 allies with which it has security relationships.

My simple claim is that the world, that we live in today, is powerfully influenced by the fact that so many countries have these security alliances with the United States. The only way these alliances could be credible is if the

United States is in fact a superpower. When the day comes that the United States is not capable or unwilling to sustain these security guarantees, the world will be very different. This will be a world with powers, which will be more comparable to each other, more like each other. It will be a world without superpowers. In other words, it will be more like a multipolar world.

So, I think it is legitimate to highlight this expeditionary capacity to sustain far away alliances credibly. This is something, which really makes today's international system different from the future one and from many of those we've known in the past. So, I will stay by this as a legitimate definition, recognizing that clearly there could be gigantically powerful states, whose power is fundamentally focused on their own region. But, the world as a whole is very different, when you have one power which is capable of dramatically altering the security setting in multiple regions at the same time.

**M.P.** *Let's transfer from this very specific question in relation to the current agenda to a more metatheoretical one. Today, many scholars agree that we are living in a post-paradigmatic age, when different ontological, methodological and epistemological premises are accepted as equal. So to say, an "End of History" of the discipline. However, there are specialists, who proclaim the onset of the fifth grand debate in IR. Do you think grand debates are conducive to the development of scholarship in the first place? And, how would you assess the state of the discipline and its major challenges?*

**W.W.** When a discipline completely lacks these debates about fundamentals, it gets boring and self-satisfied. Not all fields are raked and dominated by these debates about fundamentals, but most sciences and Social Sciences have periodical debates about basic assumptions and basic approaches, methodology (who knows, maybe even epistemology) of the discipline. And it is good when they do. It is actually a bad sign when no introspective debate about fundamentals is going on. So, I like these debates. There are other subfields of Political Science, for example, in this country that have fewer of these debates and I think

this is less interesting (but that just may be a matter of taste).

Finally, though, I could say that it can get out of hand. When people refer to a post-paradigmatic age in the study of the international relations, mainly they refer back to the 1980s and 1990s, when there was the idea that there will be a grand debate between, let say, a Constructivism of some sort, a Realism of some sort, a Liberalism or an Institutionalism of some sort. All scholarship will be somehow fitted into this tripartite division of grand theories or paradigms. That was really taking it too far. Every little article and every little contribution somehow to be included in this grand debate. If that's what people mean by post-paradigmatic, then I think they are right. You could go too far in the direction of organizing the entire field of inquiry around gigantic debates among theories or paradigms. I think there is a golden middle here, between overdoing it (as we arguably did in the 1980s and 1990s) and underdoing to and ignoring fundamental debate, as I think is the case in some other areas of inquiry.

**M.P.** *You very much personally contributed to the inter-paradigmatic peace. You've written some articles and participated in some book-projects together with John Ikenberry, who is usually regarded as a liberal. It seems sometimes that your writings are much closer to his, than to the writings of some realists, who, for example, refuse to accept the presence of global powers at all. Of course, your works on status bring you closer to Constructivists, than to some of the Neorealists. What do you think of these inter-paradigmatic connections and your own experience in this?*

**W.W.** I think it is really important. I never really understood why one would confine oneself to one set of assumptions when trying to understand some real world phenomenon. At the end of the day, if I am forced to choose one approach to study international relations, I admit that I will choose realism. But, fortunately, I'm not forced to do that and I can use insights from different theories and traditions as necessary to try to understand some phenomenon.

As you know, nowhere is it as clear or more obvious as in the case of the very strongly growing research program on status or prestige in international politics, which is bringing in insights from political psychology, cognitive psychology, social psychology, constructivism as well as classical realism. In fact in a recent article, that I wrote with two other scholars in American Political Science Review, we explicitly show this melding of status, prestige, Constructivist understanding of national identity on the one hand and power on the other (which is a core realist variable). This melding was central to classical realist theories of statecraft.

It is incontestable that Constructivists are right that identity in some sense is not a fixed natural phenomenon, but is constructed from social interaction. That's true, right? In addition it's quite obvious that national identity or national feeling is a fundamental source of power in international politics and power is the central preoccupation of realist theory. It goes without saying, that anyway you could understand the rise and decline of powerful national feelings will help you understand the relative power of states in the international system.

And, finally, if all of these is true, then statesmen, the people who are making decisions on behalf of states will understand this and themselves will understand that constructing a national identity will be a crucial part of power politics. We make all these points in that article. Clearly, the only way you could do this is by being willing to reach out across different intellectual traditions, different theories, different research programs.

**M.P.** *You spoke about identity, there is another part which is somehow related to Constructivism, which became very popular in recent years. It is the study of strategic cultures of various countries. Do you think there is such a thing as strategic cultures? Do they play a significant role in affecting nations behavior? In this regard, there are a lot of specialists, who are working on general theory of international relations, who are preoccupied with the current state and prospects of U.S.-China relations. Yet, some could question to what extent these assessments*

*could be valid, while most specialists in Strategic Studies and IR Theory have never studied the Chinese language and culture. To what extent, in your opinion, contextual knowledge is critical in these matters and what could be drawn from a generalist's perspective?*

W.W. As I mentioned before, I think it was a mistake during the Cold War to think that you could study a bipolarity in some sense and its properties without engaging the understanding of what's going on with the poles themselves (the United States and Soviet Union). And, that was a very important potential mistake that was made by scholars in the 1970s–1980s.

Similarly today we are all interested in China, but only some of us can read the language and immerse themselves in Chinese language sources on crucial questions. Those scholars are highly valuable. I'm talking about those who are International Relations scholars on the one hand, but also bona fide China experts. People like Emily Gold, Thomas Christensen, Taylor Fable here in the United States. IR scholars, who are fluent in the language and spend a lot of time in China. Their writings deserve close and careful attention.

Still, International Relations scholars can essentially make propositions about what happens or what are the incentives for conflict or cooperation, rivalry or cooperation at the systemic level. They can make these predictions and then they could be either right or wrong. As long as they are clear that they are making a system-level argument and they recognize a limitation of this, then there is nothing illegitimate about saying things, making projections about China, even if you are not a China expert. So, I think it is just a matter of being careful what sort of inferences you make and determining how well you are positioned to make them.

*M.P. But let's come back to the broader question regarding the relevance of the notion of strategic culture, as there is a lot of writing now on different types of strategic cultures. Don't you think that people overuse this explanation. Basically, when they do not know how to explain things they refer to the 'cultural explanation'.*

*Couldn't it be that sometimes we put too much emphasis on cultural explanations?*

W.W. Exactly, that's why, this hard to achieve, but nevertheless wonderful combination between international relations theory and general understanding of international relations on the one hand and specific knowledge about specific countries always need to be considered together. When you get too far in the high-level structural arguments with actually no consideration for the state's historical experience, its domestic political system, strategic culture, if you will, you make the risk of missing potentially extremely important sources of change in international politics. The reverse that you say is also true. If you look at the country and only look at the country and never look at any other countries, of course, everything about the country seems completely unique and special and so forth.

Russia is a great example of that. People who study Russia, but never study any other country tend to think that Russia is this weird special place which has this affection for great power status, as if other countries don't care about the great power status. Or Russia is bizarre and strange, because it wants to control the region in which it lives. Any great power wants to control the region where it lives! You could only sustain the claim about the uniqueness of some country's strategic culture by carefully comparing it with other countries in similar strategic settings and asking if countries response to a strategic setting is genuinely unique or genuinely surprising, given the way states tend to behave. You could only make a claim like that with both kinds of knowledge: with both area and general international relations knowledge.

*M.P. Speaking of how grand theories translate into specific political analysis: many people in Russia wonder about the nature of the interests Washington pursues in the post-Soviet area and in Ukraine in particular while denying Russia the right to proclaim its own interests. So which theory in your view accounts best for the US interests in Ukraine? Would it be realism, liberalism or something else?*

**W.W.** Broadly speaking and very roughly, I could imagine three theories that are relevant. One is the offensive realism of John Mearsheimer, which, basically, says that states are always trying to expand their power, whatever opportunity arises they tend to follow. If you take that theory seriously, in the long term the United States would like to weaken Russia as much as possible, to just drive down the probability that Russia will ever be a problem for the U.S. and the Eurasian balance of power. To drive this probability down to as low as possible. So, any opportunity to expand at the Russia's expense, to prevent Russia from exercising its influence, the U.S. will seize it. For offensive realism states are always aggressive, they are always revisionists, they always want to change things in their favor, even when they basically are already in a very strong position. That's one theory.

The second theory is liberal theory. Michael Doyle's brilliant book on international relations theories has a wonderful section on liberalism, where he notes that liberalism has different strains within it, just as realism does. And one strain of liberalism is fundamentally expansionist. It claims that a democracy will only ultimately be secure in a world of democracies and that liberalism contains a strong crusading spirit. This is: wanting to spread likely minded or similarly organized polities around the world and we have a long tradition of this kind of thinking going back to Greece, Thucydides and Athens wanting to spread its political system around the Peloponnesian world. Definitely, you could see the United States actions in Ukraine as essentially fitting into this worldview. So, this is the second theory.

The third is essentially domestic politics. Essentially, domestic politics are often cited in respect of Ukraine. It says that there are powerful forces within the United States that believe in all of this stuff. They put pressure on the President that he has to look strong and there are domestic political costs to be paid if you are seen as standing by and doing nothing, when there is a European country which seems to want to join the Western world, which seems want to join the democratic community and

you don't stand up for that country. The idea of the domestic political cost to be paid is strong in the United States, but also in other European countries.

I mentioned three theories (offensive realism, what could be called offensive liberalism or liberal imperialism and domestic politics). There is also a fourth one though, which I should have mentioned and it is really serious and I doubt that anyone in Russia will believe it, but there is a lot of evidence for it, which is basically a kind of bureaucratic politics theory. Under this theory these big organizations like NATO and the EU operate according to a sort bargaining mechanism and complicated politics among their members and they've reached some crazy decisions, and they cannot quite determine whether they need to continue to expand or not.

Really, if you look at the Ukraine story, don't underestimate the role of the EU. The EU neighborhood policy and the EU partnership agreement was a very important part of this thing. When you talk to people in Brussels and you talk to people who know the history of this, they'll tell you, there was really not much strategy behind this at all. It was a bunch of different players and an unbelievably complex organization that settled on this idea and didn't really think through what Russia would do and didn't carefully look at Moscow's changing attitude towards EU expansion and its policies on Ukraine. Again, it's at least a part of the story – the strategic incoherence of these Western institutions, and one should not assume that there is beautifully laid out Bismarkian plan regarding Ukraine.

I think those four theories (offensive realism, liberal imperialism, U.S. domestic politics and a kind of bureaucratic/organizational politics) in some combination capture a lot of what's going on.

**M.P.** *Do you think one of them gets closer than the others in explaining the bulk of the U.S. policy towards Russia and the Ukraine crisis?*

**W.W.** First of all, I don't think offensive realism works that well. Indeed, according to Mearsheimer himself and to most realists, it is not strengthening the United States position at

all. In fact, it's weakening it. Adding, weak, divided, politically unstable, vulnerable countries to your alliance, does not strengthen the alliance and it actually weakens the alliance. This has been the argument against NATO expansion from the very beginning. So, it is very dubious to me that people in Washington really think that by bringing Ukraine into the West, it will dramatically strengthen their power position. It just objectively won't. It actually weakens it. But that said, I think there could be some evidence for that.

So, no. I actually think the liberal theory is the most important one. People really strongly believe in it. We can debate whether Ukraine's leadership is genuinely liberal or democratic. There is a big debate about this. But if you believe that it is, if you are convinced that the government in Kiev is really attempting to make a democracy, for a lot of people in the West (and I stress not just in the United States, but also Germany, France, all around Europe), it is very hard to say no to that government, when it's asking to be brought into your institutions. It just contradicts their basic ideology. So, I believe, this liberal thinking that you need to respond to people moving to democracy has a huge impact. I understand that many people reading this interview will be skeptical, but I can tell you that a lot of people here really believe in this democratic idea and that it is very hard to say no. To say to some country: 'you don't belong, you are not worthy to be part of the West, you are just too far East, you are too close to Russia, we need to respect Russia and I'm sorry, just no. We are closing the door'. It is very hard to get people to agree to that policy, so I think the fundamental reason is not geopolitical aims as it is their liberal convictions.

*M.P. Perhaps, this is what really bothers Russia – this offensive liberalism, which is often perceived (rightly or not) as a source of regime*

*changes around the globe. Probably, Washington in this respect is sometimes seen by external observers as more powerful than it really is, but this creates questions whether Moscow could become the next target of offensive liberalism.*

**W.W.** Yes, and I think it is very unrealistic and unlikely that people seriously believe that they can do this with respect to Russia. That's not to say, that there are lots of people in the West, who wish the Russian government were different and wish it to be more liberal. Even though they recognize that the 1990s were a terrible times for Russia, that in the minds of many Russians democratization is associated with a very difficult period, nevertheless, there is no question that many people here wish that Russia were run differently, more openly, liberally and democratically in their view. That does not mean they think, that as a real policy matter they can actually affect the situation. I doubt that that's the case.

When they are presented with the situations in the Russian near abroad, when there are countries like Georgia and Ukraine, they make their case to their leadership that they want to become part of the Western world and Western institutions. For example, no one today really believes that NATO is ever going to accept Ukraine. It is just not serious. There are just too many people within the Alliance who oppose to it. But they do not want to say that. Just saying that is very hard for the alliance, it is very hard to close the door and make it an official, unambiguous statement, a NATO announcement, that says we here formally announce that the Alliance will never expand anymore and no other country will join. That's just really hard for them to do, even though in practice it is very unlikely to occur.

*M.P. Thank you, Professor Wohlforth, for your time and for your willingness to share your ideas with our Readers.*