

Get realist: How the EU can secure its position amid great power rivalry

Europeans should take seriously the thinking of figures such as John Mearsheimer. If they are unable to answer his critiques, they might thereby prove his point

Just two years ago, the European Union appeared to have finally found its place in the world. The bloc was swift to stand in solidarity with Ukraine following Russia's full-scale invasion. The EU set about supporting its beleaguered neighbour through humanitarian, economic, and even military aid.

But optimism is now waning about the future of the EU as a geopolitical player. To understand why, it is instructive to listen to voices that remained sceptical of Europe's moral moment. Figures such as John Mearsheimer belong to the offensive realist school, which believes great powers are inherently driven by an insatiable need for security. Its precepts emphasise the critical role of military capabilities, population size, and economic strength in ensuring a state's survival and dominance in an anarchic international system.

Perspectives such as Mearsheimer's are not those of a lone wolf, but sit within an increasingly influential panoply of American viewpoints - played out right now with raw political brutality in the US Congress. But the offensive realist analysis also contains important ideas whose validation only becomes ever likelier the longer Europeans take to counter it.

Mearsheimer suggests the coming decades are set to be dominated by great power politics - specifically by the United States, China, and Russia. The importance of Russia's inclusion in such an analysis lies in the stark omission of Europe. When Europe does appear in this thinking, it as a largely irrelevant regional formation.

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