

# Mearsheimer's analysis to the Ukraine war

## "One can only hope that a catastrophic escalation will be avoided"

(rs) On 17 August, "Foreign Affairs" published an article by the renowned American political scientist John J. Mearsheimer, "Playing with Fire in Ukraine. The Underappreciated Risks of a Catastrophic Escalation".<sup>1</sup> In the USA, Mearsheimer is one of the weighty voices that have great influence on the public debate. This is not the only reason why we are summarising this essay here. In his analysis, Mearsheimer also does not spare the reader from the possible consequences of this war.

Mearsheimer goes through various scenarios of a further course of the war in Ukraine. In doing so, he emphasises the danger of an overly careless approach to the events of the war, which, in his view, would lead to a nuclear catastrophe because there would probably be a direct clash between the USA and Russia.

Mearsheimer points out that each side has considerably increased its ambitions in order to win or not to lose the war. This could lead to the use of nuclear weapons becoming more likely. In parallel, he notes, "the absence of a possible diplomatic solution provides an added incentive for both sides to climb up the escalation ladder. What lies further up the rungs could be something truly catastrophic: a level of death and destruction exceeding that of World War II."

For the US perspective, the author quotes US Secretary of Defence *Lloyd Austin*: "We want to see Russia weakened to the degree that it can't do the kinds of things that it has done in invading Ukraine.' In effect, the United States announced its intention to knock Russia out of the ranks of great powers." As a consequence of this goal, the US cannot afford a defeat of Ukraine, according to Mearsheimer.

For the Russian position, Mearsheimer refers to a statement by Foreign Minister *Sergei Lavrov*, who calls for a neutral, demilitarised Ukraine that can no longer threaten Russia, constituting a security guarantee. At the same time, Mearsheimer notes, "the threat to Russia today is even greater than it was before the war, mainly because the

Biden administration is now determined to roll back Russia's territorial gains and permanently cripple Russian power." – (However, so Mearsheimer, it is not only since the current conflict that the US has aimed to defeat Russia. This can be easily ascertained from the many years of covert military preparations in Ukraine or the various US military strategies, such as the *Army Operating Concept* (AOC) entitled "Win in a Complex World 2020-2040".)<sup>2</sup>

Mearsheimer summarises the situation: "In essence, Kyiv, Washington, and Moscow are all deeply committed to winning at the expense of their adversary, which leaves little room for compromise." In his opinion, this has led to a "bloody stalemate" situation.

The author then describes three basic paths to further escalation inherent in today's war situation: "One or both sides deliberately escalate to win, one or both sides deliberately escalate to prevent defeat, or the fighting escalates not by deliberate choice but inadvertently. Each pathway holds the potential to bring the United States into the fighting or lead Russia to use nuclear weapons and possibly both."

As it became foreseeable that Russia would achieve its war aims, the US visibly supplied Ukraine with more modern weapons: *Javelin* anti-tank missile, HIMARS multiple rocket system, it arranged for the delivery of Polish and Slovak MiG-29s and its own F-15 and F-16 fighter jets. The US trained the Ukrainian military, provided it with data to destroy Russian targets, and the West had a "covert network of commandos and spies" in Ukraine.

Mearsheimer: "Washington may not be directly engaged in the fighting, but it is deeply involved in the war. And it is now just a short step away from having its own soldiers pulling triggers and its own pilots pressing buttons. [...] A more likely scenario for U.S. intervention would come about if the Ukrainian army began to collapse and Russia seemed likely to win a major victory. In that case, given the *Biden* administration's deep commitment to preventing that outcome. [...]"

Alternatively, a desperate Ukraine might launch large-scale attacks against Russian towns and cities, hoping that such escalation would provoke a massive Russian response that would finally force the United States to join the fighting." Mearsheimer goes on to point out other possible variations on the course of the war that could lead to direct US intervention. A large selection.

After Mearsheimer states that Russia has only applied a very limited military effort, he wonders under which conditions the country would use nuclear weapons: 1 "[...] if the United States and its NATO allies entered the fight [...]"; 2 "[...] Ukraine turns the tide on the battlefield by itself, without direct U.S. involvement"; [...]; 3 "the war settles into a protracted stalemate that has no diplomatic solution and becomes exceedingly costly for Moscow." Then, Russia would start using tactical nuclear weapons and the situation would escalate.

After Mearsheimer points out different variants of the course of the war, he points out that the dynamics of escalation in wartime are difficult to predict or control. His analysis ends pessimistically: "The Biden administration should

have worked with Russia to settle the Ukraine crisis before war broke out in February. It is too late now to strike a deal. Russia, Ukraine, and the West are stuck in a terrible situation with no obvious way out. One can only hope that leaders on both sides will manage the war in ways that avoid catastrophic escalation. For the tens of millions of people whose lives are at stake, however, that is cold comfort."

Mearsheimer's pessimism is understandable, but not necessarily shared. After all, President Zelensky was elected on the campaign promise of "finding peace with Russia"; citizens from Ukraine and Russia are spending peaceful holidays together in Turkey. And the citizens of Europe want peace with Russia. An agreement on grain deliveries through the Black Sea was possible.

If the US government wants to or if the governments of Europe finally come to their senses, an end to the war can be found quickly.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/playing-fire-ukraine>, 17 August 2022

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Wolfgang Effenberger. <https://www.freethewords.com/news/2022/06/10/die-dunkle-strategie-von-wolfgang-effenberger/>