

[Transcript] The Realignment / 383 | Sean A. Mirski: How the USA's Rise to Regional Hegemony Rhymes with China's

Marshall here. Welcome back to The Re-alignment.

My guest today, Sean Mearsky, is a lawyer and foreign policy analyst who's worked on national security issues across multiple U.S. presidential administrations.

His new book out today, *We May Dominate the World, Ambition, Anxiety, and the Rise of the American Colossus*.

As we discussed during the episode, Sean sees the trillion dollar question this century as being, how will the Asia Pacific region, the U.S., and the world accommodate the rise of the Chinese superpower?

The defining fact of the 20th century in this telling was the rise of the United States from a regional power to regional hegemon

to an eventual superpower after the end of World War II.

So in this conversation and in the book, we're looking at how we can learn lessons from the history of the rise of America's bid for regional power

to a lot of the questions that the international system is confronting with the rise of China today.

All that said, hope you all enjoy this conversation and a huge thank you to the Foundation for American Innovation for supporting the work of this podcast.

Sean Mearsky, welcome to The Re-alignment.

Pleasure to be here, Marshall. Thank you for having me.

Yeah, I'm really glad to speak with you. So, favorite question to ask any author of a work of history that has relevance and lessons for today.

Why this book? Why right now? Why is the story of how rising powers often lead to aggressive expansion? Why is that a relevant story right now?

So in one word, China. The multi-million dollar question I think for this century is, will China rise peacefully? Or will it be aggressive and expansionist?

And the historical record does not give a lot of optimism on this front. I think if you look at rising powers throughout history, the one thing you see in common is that they tend to be aggressive and expansionist.

And by that, I mean, they pick fights with other great powers. They invade and meddle in the affairs of their neighbors, and in general, they just try and dominate bigger and bigger slices of this world. And so this project actually started, I mean, eight years ago, if you can believe it, and China even then I think was starting to act kind of in a more assertive manner.

And I thought it would be interesting to look at the case study of a power that started out, you know, when it was first, you know, entered the international scene with a real commitment, I think, to, you know, pro sovereignty, republicanism, anti-intervention, anti-colonialism.

And nevertheless, a century later just went on a rampage through its region. And of course, that's the United States. And so this book tells that story, but it also tells it from the perspective of trying to understand what is it about rising powers in particular that makes them act the way they do, hopefully with some insights into what China might do today, as well as insights into what other powers like Russia and Iran are doing.

Yeah, and I think the interesting question just to ask then is, what does the word expansionism mean in a 21st century context, because let's think of the Asian Pacific region, we could talk about, you know, Imperial Japan post, you know, 1868 expansion in that case, wasn't just, you know, to different domains like Okinawa, etc, etc. It was Formosa, which is what we now call Taiwan. It was Korea, it

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was invasions of China, etc, etc, etc. If we're thinking of Chinese expansionism today, obviously there's the big other trillion dollar question, which is Taiwan, but expansion wouldn't likely involve invading all of Japan proper, or taking South Korea in a way that it meant in the 19th, the 20th century. So talk about expansionism today, then we'll get into the history.

Yeah, so I think that's exactly right. I mean, in a lot of ways we've moved beyond the kind of the, you know, previous ages of imperialism where the European powers were going on tears through the rest of the world and, you know, colonizing just everything in sight.

I think there's a little bit of potential for that. I mean, you see that as you mentioned with Taiwan, there's a lot of border disputes that China has. And to some extent, you can extend it also to the maritime space where China very clearly is trying to dominate the South China Sea, you know, with the nine dash line and all that.

But in general, I think you're right that sort of the conquering of territory is for the moment, at least sort of off the table. And so when I talk about expansion, what I really mean is expansion in the way that the U.S. actually primarily did it, and in the way that I think you see today with other powers, which is essentially extending a nation's political influence over another nation and sort of running it from the outside.

So, you know, at the most naked level, that's going to be occupation, you know, and as I said, sometimes annexation, but it can also be much more subtle forms of control that nevertheless functionally hand another, you know, nation's government over to a foreign power.

And so I think that in some senses is a little bit more what we're risking with China today, you know, not just in places like Taiwan, but also in a number of other countries along with periphery.

Yeah, that's fascinating. So the two things you know, then. So number one would just noting that a good way of defining expansionism in your framework is just upsetting the regional status quo, throwing your weight around.

It's not just a question of who is innovating what and I guess that also gets to why the United States and like the Caribbean and Latin and South America, Central America are actually the proper historical example to look at.

Because obviously you have pressure and you have then like Imperial Germany, it's expanding, it's a rising aggressive power, but the dynamic there, Central Europe, Western Europe is different than the dynamic in the Asia Pacific.

The questions of Vietnam, Taiwan, the, you know, the Korea's, you know, China proper are much similar to the Caribbean 19th century America's example, then it will be to the European continental examples.

I think that's exactly right. I mean, in American history, and particularly the period that I look at in the book, which is from about the start of the Civil War to about the start of the Cold War.

In that century, we do have this, you know, burst of colonialism right after and around the Spanish American war. So we annex Hawaii, we annex the Philippines, we annex Puerto Rico.

But in a lot of ways that's an aberration, right, most of what the US was doing during this period was not expanding its continental borders. By the time you get to the Civil War, we more or less filled out the continent.

And there's not really a ton of appetite for annexing the rest of Mexico. There's more interest in annexing Canada, but just never goes anywhere.

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And instead, what you see is mostly an effort to sort of expand our influence in politically in these other countries in a way that doesn't necessarily involve us taking over them formally. But to one extent or another means that we essentially control what's what they're doing and kind of they're especially their foreign relations, but oftentimes they're internal affairs as well. Something I'm curious to kind of go back to the present day moment is, how do you think through writing and researching this history and then thinking of what about is and like the hypocrisy accusation because it's kind of interesting like you're coming from and stop me from mischaracterizing your politics, but it seems like you're coming from a center right background. Typically, the focus on like Latin Central America, this tends to be a hyper leftist topic that I've really engaged with.

And it ends up turning into a sea. The United States is really bad. Therefore, everything we're doing today needs to be looked through and from that perspective. And I think it honestly ends up becoming problematic and unhelpful when seen through that lens.

Because, okay, I'm sure and we will go through all these examples of disastrous US policies taken towards smaller weaker countries. I don't think it's a proper decision from a strategic perspective to say well because we did this bad thing 100 years ago, we're going to throw in Taiwan to the wolves that from a policymaker perspective is in particular. So that's how I think through the hypocrisy thing like acknowledge and learn from but I don't think it's particularly helpful from thinking through current policy questions.

How do you think through this when you're writing and researching.

Yeah, so that is such a great question and one that was on my mind the entire time I was writing this book. I should say that upfront that I don't think I'm writing this from a center right perspective or even a leftist perspective or really anything that kind of falls neatly on the partisan spectrum. I would think I would hope that most people reading my book will sort of be have trouble putting it in a stereotypically liberal or kind of conservative camp.

Because, you know, I think the record is sort of indisputable right like we we behave towards our neighbors in ways that I think not many Americans are going to be really proud of and there was certainly a period in our history, where there were real efforts to sort of justify what we did in terms of like how it was good for the nations that we intervened in. I just don't think it's, I don't know anyone that's kind of making that argument to this day.

But at the same time I do think there's sometimes a tendency to assume the absolute worst, not only about what we did, but also about the reasons why we did it and to sort of assume that because this bad thing happened, surely the intentions behind it were bad or at least surely the intentions were neutral.

And I think that's also a mistake, I think it's a mistake, not only because it makes it.

Not only because I think it's sort of inaccurate and not really supported by the underlying historical material, but it's also a mistake, because it makes it more difficult for us to learn from the past.

If you're, for instance, a prominent kind of narrative, I think, in some of the Latin American studies kind of literature, not so much recently, but a few decades ago, really focused on sort of economic factors as sort of driving US expansion.

And at its crudest, you sort of have this view that, you know, it was the banana companies, it was the Wall Street banks, and they basically, you know, US foreign policy was a puppet dancing on the end of their strings, and that's how you explain this period.

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And, you know, setting aside whether that's right or wrong, and I think there's certainly elements of truth to that, although it's, I think, for the most part, not exactly accurate.

But even setting aside the merits, I think one of the things it naturally leads to is this assumption that this period doesn't matter to us today, right, because we no longer have united fruit running, you know, US foreign policy.

I think there are, you know, more claims that kind of US banks are kind of involved and, you know, there's more influence there.

But I think the truth is that we don't, it just sort of seems like it's from a different era. And the second you fall into that trap, you sort of miss that kind of empathy and understanding of kind of what actually was the driving force.

It makes it much more difficult to learn from history. And so, so, you know, what I try to do in this book candidly is I tried to look at the historical material and tell kind of the most honest story there was.

You know, and I have a particular kind of view on what was the primary driver of US expansionism, but it's not one, but I try at least to be, you know, to concede kind of the interventions where it really wasn't a factor or it didn't matter or other factors were more important.

And so you see kind of the spectrum of human motives across the board, even if I think one kind of ultimately sort of wins out and is the most important in the end.

Yeah, I love your point about the empathy aspect, because, you know, we're talking about China at the start of the podcast, but obviously if we're taking a step back and just looking at the central question you're asking, which is how does a rising power confront its region and then how obviously do the

maintainers of the status quo or do other countries in the region handle that question? That is the question which is separate from, you know, United Fruit, Dole, all the various banana companies that we could do a different podcast on.

So I guess the question I'd ask for you then is, from an empathy perspective, what do you think a rising power is entitled to? In the sense that, so for example, if I'm going to put on my, you know, CCP apologist hat, I would say,

Okay, Marshall, most of these podcasts, when you're talking with, you know, all these people who are saying China's doing all these bad things, if we just get to the core of it, it's all cope for the fact that you guys want to preserve the status quo at all costs.

And it's a status quo that looks like the way you want it to look. And honestly, we have different interpretations of that status quo should look like. So that's what our rises. That's what us pushing on the international system looks like.

So that's my kind of empathy version. Like how do you think about empathy from the perspective of, look, the world looks different than it would have looked at colonialism hadn't ended. That's just a factor. And then there are certain things you can make requests for or just assert.

So yeah, how do you think about that?

Yeah, so I mean, I think a huge part of this and it goes back to your previous question of how do you sort of avoid the what about ism. I think first before you do anything else, you know, as a foreign policy policymaker as you know, just an engaged member of the American public, the thing that it's important to think about first and separate from sort of normative questions separate from questions of value is just basically the factual question of what causes, you know, X to happen.

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And so, you know, in the book, I basically make this argument that rising power is often a face this problem which in the book I call the problem of order. And the basic ingredients of that are that first you have an area that's strategically important to the to the rising power which most of the time is just going to be its immediate neighborhood for obvious reasons. Second, that strategically important area is under threat by foreign rivals that have a real capacity to hurt the rising power. And third, that strategically important and threatened area is also weak and unstable and there is a power vacuum there.

I think when you bring those three things together, what ends up happening is that you have a real problem from the perspective of the rising power, right? So if you have a neighbor and that neighbor is really strategically important, but it is, you know, in today's terms of failing or failed state, there's a real risk, and it's under threat because there's

another great power that wants to come in. You know, I think at that point you are going to be motivated, extremely, you're going to be extremely motivated to do something about it just from a survival kind of instinct perspective because the last thing you want is some rival great power coming into that nation and taking advantage of that power vacuum.

And suddenly you're facing these like massive military forces right on your border, right? That's the last thing you want to do. And so in that context, what ends up happening is that even if you're a power that has incredibly strong values, like you really care about democracy, you really care about classical liberalism,

you really care about sovereignty, it's not going to matter, right? Because at the end of the day states are a lot like people. When your survival is at stake, that's the thing that matters and you're going to do just about anything to protect that survival.

And so security, I think, ends up being the driver for a lot of these decisions that rising powers make, at least kind of the big decisions of like war and peace.

And so how does that come back to your question about sort of the what aboutism aspect and how do you think about the normative values and all that? And so I think the point that I would make is we have to sort of understand from China's perspective and from Russia's perspective, you know, think about it in those terms,

right? Like understand that whatever you may think about, you know, the Russian invasion of Ukraine or China's, you know, interest in let's say not having North Korea get reunited with South Korea, you know, it's completely understandable from these powers perspective

that, you know, Russia doesn't want NATO on its border, right? That makes sense, right? I mean, you can say as an American, well, NATO doesn't need anyone any harm, we're not going to overthrow Russia, don't be ridiculous.

But from Russia's perspective, it doesn't know that, right? I mean, it can truly, and even if it could have some concrete assurance that NATO is not eventually going to turn back into an anti-Russian alliance, it doesn't know what policymakers are going to be doing in 10 years.

It doesn't know what Americans are going to want in 20 years. And so there's a real threat and a real risk there that leads these powers to basically say, no, we don't want American power next to us, right?

And so, so first the book just makes the point that that is, you know, that's a reality, stripped of any kind of normative layer that is the truth. But I think that there is then this danger for American policymakers to, as you said, lapse into what about

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Well, you know, because this fear is understandable on Russia's part, because this fear is understandable on China's part, we should accommodate ourselves to it, especially because we did the same thing, you know, a century ago.

And I think that's the point where I sort of get off the ship, because it sort of seems to me, as you said that that's not a good way of looking at the world.

I think it's important to understand where other powers are coming from and to have that empathy, but at the same time to recognize like now that we are a global superpower, we have certain interest, we have certain values, we have allies who count on us.

And there are, you know, we have an avested sort of stake in protecting all that.

And I guess the final piece of this that I think ends up becoming really important is that a large part of this ultimately also sort of depends on normative judgments about your particular political system, right.

So if you believe in classical liberalism, if you believe in democracy and you think that it's, you know, at the end of the day, a better system to live under than let's say, you know, China's authoritarianism or Russia's sort of quasi authoritarianism.

That means you make certain calls, right, and that those calls might justify you acting in a certain way that you won't allow others to act that way.

And there's definitely a degree of sort of hypocrisy, there's a degree of, you know, for me and not for the, but I think that just naturally flows from the fact that this is sometimes a zero sum game and there are difficult choices that have to be made.

Yeah, and, you know, these episodes that are more focused on history are definitely focused on the part of the audience is interested in kind of tools and frameworks for confronting policy questions.

I want to go back to something you said around the origins of US expansionism and why it's actually helpful to not ignore but almost like disaggregate the questions of racism and imperialism and those things because it actually gets to once again, a 21st century

dynamic and issue which is that how does a country and protect itself and confront strategic threats.

So in that context when you're talking about your focus of US foreign policy in the 19th century you're focusing on the

issue of fear. The very direct and very empirically tangible idea that this Western hemisphere is by no means secure. European powers are kind of on the march again, and you could fall back into this trap of European intervention in the content in a way that

is very mysterious to a, you know, not even middle age just decently young Republic that actually just barely made it through a civil war and I think the thing that's really relevant for listeners is that you know in the 1860s, you know, Mexico is destabilized

before the 1860s, but you know pulling the third installs a Austrian Duke in the country, who in many ways has aggressive intent towards the United States so it's not as if the Europeans have just given up and moved on so from your perspective like introduce us to a 19th century post civil war where this fear.

Once again, not racism, not capitalism, but just if we don't preserve security in our region stability, etc. We will face other threats introduces to that idea because it's just so it's just not tangible today in the same degree.

Yeah, in part because the situation has changed so much for reasons we can discuss later. But, you know, starting in about 1870, you have what historians often call the second age of imperialism

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right. The first age was Christopher Columbus and sort of the Spanish and Portuguese empire is carving up, you know, the Western hemisphere. The second age of imperialism is deals primarily with Asia, the Middle East and Africa. When you hear things like scramble for Africa that's this period, and the numbers are I mean just really really shocking.

But all these European powers had already claimed colonies in these areas to certain extent. But during this period you just see an explosion of colonialism right.

Germany, Great Britain and France from 1870 to I think about 1910 colonize more than 9 million square miles, which is just such a mind boggling number that it's it's sort of hard to put into context but concretely that's twice the size of Europe, right.

To start a World War One you have a situation where basically almost 85% of the world is under the control of colonial powers.

And you know you can cite sort of similar statistics of what percentage of countries in Asia, the Middle East and Africa were still independent by the end of this period, depending on how you count it you could argue that the only three countries in those regions that stayed independent were Ethiopia and Thailand, and every other aspect of those regions was just colonized in part by Japan itself actually. And so this is you know this is not a process that happens on you know January 1 1870 but it is a process that sort of starts to unfold then.

And as it picks up steam, if you're sitting in Congress if you're sitting in the White House and you're watching this world, you know there's a lot of unfamiliar names like Cameroon and kind of all these places that are getting colonized, and you might not be able to put them on the map.

But I think you as a policymaker understand what's happening and that there's this sense that these European powers are not going to be satiated when they finish with the old world and they you know the rest of the world, and that there's a real chance that they're going to come back into the western hemisphere.

Let me give you the example of Mexico and France during the Civil War and I think that's a great example. If you look at British and French policymakers during the Civil War, they were overjoyed, absolutely overjoyed that the north and the south were tearing each other apart.

And from their perspective there could have been nothing better than for the South to secede and successfully sort of splinter what they see as this rising power.

And France really tries to accelerate that process to some extent by going into Mexico by invading the country and by occupying nearly all of it.

And you know there's a real argument frankly that if they had done it just a little bit faster, they would have gotten to the border just in time to start helping the South in a way that maybe could have led the South to win the Civil War.

And you see that calculation playing out in Abraham Lincoln's mind, right? I mean, I don't get into this into the book just for space reasons, but he sends troops down to Texas and ends up launching expeditions.

They're much earlier than most of his generals are saying he should just to prevent the French from connecting up with the South, right?

And so, you know, it starts and as I said in the Civil War, but kind of over the next couple of decades, you have this very tangible fear on the part of policymakers that if they're not careful, you're going to have European powers coming into the hemisphere.

And one of the other things to just note is that there's a risk that if even one power makes it right,

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like, it might seem sort of intangible.

Like why do we care if Germany takes a little bit of Venezuela? It's not like the United States is going to get invaded the following year.

But there's this sense that like once you have one power come in, the others are going to have to come in as well just because they're in this competition and they can't afford for someone else to get a leg up.

And so the US becomes, I think there's this real crisis mentality.

I don't want to say paranoia because that I think diminishes it a little bit, but at least this crisis mentality that we have to be extremely careful, we have to be extremely vigilant, and we really have to hold the line against this European expansion.

And that's fascinating because like you said, I think this gets to why the past 20 years are relevant because like once again, if it's September 12, 2001, the strategic and security question is, how do we prevent future attacks, future catastrophic attacks on the United States?

That question has a variety of answers. Some answers were taken, some answers were, you know, past not taken. But I think it's important that if we're critiquing how the Bush years went and how the Obama years went, the Trump years, it actually starts with a, okay, but here was a very legitimate strategic question that needed answering.

So in the case of the 19th century, once again, this is why I think it's important to start from here.

And then you get into, okay, well, like, do we really need Puerto Rico maybe and okay, like, could we have just sailed by the Philippines?

This, this, this, this and that starting with, okay, what do we deal with fading and rising European colonial powers is a strategic question that really matters here.

So the question is, to the September 12 point, what was the strategy that we actually enacted then in response to that strategic question? And where do you see that strategy as, as going wrong?

Where did it go right? Past not taken wherever you want to go with that question?

Yeah, so the strategy that the American calculation was first, the homeland was probably going to be pretty safe. There was a period I think in the 1870s, 1880s where the US sort of freaked out about the lack of its navy.

And that's in part why you see the rise of what's called the new navy and eventually you get this like massive battleship fleet, right? But for the most part, the US wasn't super worried about, you know, Germany attacking, you know, New York, although for whatever it's worth,

Germany was developing plans to in fact land in New York and take over, you know, the Eastern seaboard. Instead, I think the US, the threat that it saw was that these powers would come in, carve up the rest of the hemisphere, and you would have them sitting on the US border

in a way that then would lead to real trouble down the road. And I think it's fair to say that that probably would have happened if the US had ended up in that scenario.

And so from the US perspective, I think at that point, the US is not really looking to expand into its neighbors, at least not primarily. Again, Canada is kind of a weird exception, actually. But at least to the south, the US doesn't have a lot of appetite for annexation,

somewhat counterintuitively, the reason honestly is racism. The US did not want to annex any more nations that were primarily non white.

I mean, this is why the Philippines, the Philippines is like an interesting like side story, like they were, they were Filipino representatives in Congress, it's like a territory, but it will be complicated, but

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like it was, it wasn't there.

The 1890s, like imperialism debates are like fascinating because you have like racists align against the, you know, you have like Mark Twain, who's like, you know, anti imperialist and you have like racists who are allying themselves with Mark Twain because they're arguing, hey, if we admit them as a colony, we're going to have like, you know, Filipinos and they're like not white. So it's like a fascinating, it's a really like commingling story of different factors.

Yeah, no, absolutely. I mean, it's, you know, the anti imperialist movement in the US, I think has rightly to a certain extent earned its kind of reputation as being, you know, you know, as being on the right side of history in some ways.

But you look at a lot of the arguments they were making and probably the most powerful argument they made, at least in terms of its political impact at the time was, why on earth would we bring in these brown people into, you know, body politic.

And you, you know, some of the speeches that were being made, I mean, just really repulsive, like atrocious stuff.

And it didn't carry the day for Hawaii, it didn't carry the day for the Philippines, but honestly, but for American racism, there's a very good chance that Cuba and the Dominican Republic and maybe some other nations would be part of the United States today.

So anyway, that's its own kind of discussion. And obviously a fascinating one, because, you know, racism was just so omnipresent during this period that even on all sides, the way it sort of played out, I think it is really fascinating.

But, but yes, so, so going back to the strategy, you know, the US basically didn't really have an appetite for annexing its neighbors.

It also, and it wasn't really worried about the neighbors that were sort of strong kind of, you know, nations that had their governments in order.

So for instance, like most of South America at this time was like relatively stable, you had the occasional coup or revolution, but it wasn't, you know, they were strong enough that they could repel a European invasion.

And so from the United States perspective, we don't need to worry about Brazil that much, we don't need to worry about Argentina, Chile, they're fine, right.

And they're fine, even though they're sometimes very anti American, sometimes they're like friendly with European powers, but they're fine because they're not going to be letting European soldiers land on their soil.

Right. It's just the US knows that the rest of the hemisphere still has these memories of being colonized, and they don't want to bring Europe back in.

And so the US strategy ends up becoming, okay, what are the places that we're concerned about. And it's these vulnerable neighbors that are just falling apart, right.

And, you know, I think there's this, you know, I think there's this appreciation nowadays that the US sort of form of government is not the only possible form of government that you can have.

And that other nations might do things a certain way and that we should respect that and not basically look down on this sort of different.

But that's not what we're talking about here. We're talking about states that, you know, basically had a new president more than every other year that was just a nonstop revolution civil war.

Honduras, you know, like the finances of these countries are just an absolute mess, right Honduras

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at one point, I think owes \$120 million to European banks.

And it's like annual revenue is a few million dollars each year, right. I mean, it's just like situations where just things have gone badly off the rails. And I think, you know, in today's terms, you might fairly describe them as failed or failing states.

And the key thing is what on the financial debt side, those debts were an actual impetus for intervention from the European side.

So it wasn't just as if there was like a debt owed to some bank in X European country, like oftentimes that would then invoke the actual Navy or the actual military of that country to provoke potential conflict.

Is that correct? Like that's exactly what I mean, at least under international law, it was lawful for at least from the perspective of the great powers to go in and collect on debts, right.

I mean, if you if you know Venezuela owes you a bunch of money and it hasn't paid, you're allowed to send gun votes to basically say we're going to shell your ports or we're going to sink your Navy until you comply and kind of pay off these debts.

And, you know, so from the United States perspective, as you said, these these disordered finances of its neighbors are a real kind of vulnerability because they can very easily bring these nations into into the hemisphere.

And so the US basically kind of looking at this disordered hemisphere and particularly in Central America and the Caribbean decides that I think what it really needs to do is it needs to help strengthen and stabilize these states because if these states can just get their affairs in order and they

don't have to be perfect models of governance, they don't have to be, you know, as kind of stable and orderly as the United States was, they just need to not, you know, be constantly subject to civil war and evolution.

And the US, I think, tries to go about that strategy, starting in sort of an indirect noninvasive way. And so there's a real effort in the 1870s, the 1880s to stabilize its neighbors by, you know, having warm and kind of friendly diplomatic relations,

having trade reciprocity treaties that sort of lower the tariffs on goods and so that you can trade back and forth in a way that kind of hopefully kicks some, you know, a cycle of prosperity into effect and then leads these nations to grow more stable and,

you know, capable of resisting European encroachment. And this sort of noninvasive strategy doesn't really work from the perspective of policymakers. And so you both have these, this kind of accelerating disorder in the region, and you

simultaneously have this threat that just ramping up as Europe kind of finishes colonizing the rest of the world, and then starts launching these interventions into the Western hemisphere that really seem very problematic.

And what the US basically does is it says, All right, well, we're going to stabilize these countries. And we're going to start doing it a little more invasively and more directly. And that starts with Cuba in the wake of the Spanish American War.

But it really just picks up steam in the 1900s in the 1910s. And eventually it's sort of culminating in us occupying I think at one point, two entire countries, parts of three other countries, we have protectors over a number of other countries, we're running these countries fiscal systems. I mean, we just get very, very deep into it in an effort to stabilize them, you

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know, by basically running them and governing them ourselves. And, you know, suffice it to say this, this strategy does not work very well, it just completely and utterly ends up falling apart.

So here's the difficult part for me then I'm once again not speaking in moral terms and really speaking pragmatically. I mean, didn't the strategy work the Europeans didn't get a foothold in the Western hemisphere again. So how do we basically separate that out.

And once again, like, did it work for the people of Haiti? No, didn't work. But and this is once again why, you know, Wilsonianism and like debates about, you know, progressive foreign policy get interesting in the sense that I don't think a strategist in the 1870s is thinking, I mean, this isn't these are these aren't the white year. These are not the years of like the white men's burden yet. But is that correct? Like there's no, there's no assert is there an assertion that we're doing this once again 1870s 1880s, because this is going to result in my the greatest good of the great

month, the greatest number of people. I guess I'm curious about that side of it.

No. And so, so certainly in the 1870s and the 1880s, I mean, even, you know, from the kind of relatively more racially progressive North, I mean, the idea of sort of, you know, affirmatively going into, you know, places and kind of ministering to like non white peoples is just like an anthem. No one wants that, right? So I'll give you just like a concrete example. So few people know this because it never really came to anything but President Ulysses S. Grant was obsessed with annexing the Dominican Republic.

And as it turns out, the president of the Dominican Republic was obsessed with getting annexed by the United States for a variety of kind of domestic political reasons.

And so, so Grant signs a treaty to annex the Dominican Republic and the treaty goes to Congress and there is a vicious fight.

Grant, I mean, this is like his just number one priority during this particular part of his presidency, and he applies as much pressure as he can.

And the vote fails by a basically tied vote and so pretty far off from the like two thirds you need for for a treaty to get approved by the Senate.

And, you know, as I mentioned earlier, racism is a pretty big part of that. I mean, there's just no appetite for like, why on earth would we want to do this? We have enough problems, you know, with race at home.

You know, we just finished the Civil War, like let's not open this can of worms again. And so all this of course gets tied up in reconstruction and kind of all this other stuff that's going on in the country. But certainly in the 1870s and the 1880s, there's just there's no appetite for it.

I guess what I'm kind of wondering that is, what was the alternative. So we're starting from a strategic problem that I think everyone left right and center could agree to.

The United States is this post revolutionary country that has thrown off the chaos of the old world, we're building a new world, that new world is really dependent on there not being European imperialist or intervening left and right.

So I guess the question is what alternative was there to the catastrophe. So for example, if we're talking about 911, it's like, okay, we do Afghanistan, but we don't nation build, or we don't go into Iraq, etc, etc, etc.

Those are like examples of alternatives to that strategic question. What were the alternatives to the basic 50 years we went down that path in the case of.

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Yeah, and so.

Yeah, and so this ties to your earlier question of, you know, to some extent, didn't this succeed, right? And I think the answer is, yes, in a very narrow sense that, as I mentioned, if you look at what happened in the rest of the world, all of Asia, almost all of Asia, almost all of the Middle East, almost all of Africa ends up getting colonized. The Western Hemisphere is basically unscathed, at least by European imperialism, right?

There's no additional colonies, there's just nothing. And so if you look at those two case studies side by side, there is this sort of implication that something that we did may help to make the Western Hemisphere the exception, even though a lot of these countries in the Western Hemisphere were just as weak, if not weaker than some of the states that were being colonized across the oceans.

And so from that perspective, I think it's, I think it's right to say that the US strategy did in some sense, mean that it kind of emerged from this period as the only power in its hemisphere and that these other powers never were never colonized. At the same time, the reason I said it failed is because in every other respect, the ultimate or the immediate objectives of US policymakers just didn't pan out. And so in particular, what I mentioned is that the United States didn't want to be occupying these nations as a way of precluding European imperialism. What I wanted to do was to have these nations precluding European imperialism on their own because they were stable and strong nations. The problem was that these interventions which were meant to stabilize these countries just end up doing the exact opposite. For the most part, each initial intervention leads to more instability than in turn pulls the US in further. And so you have this kind of vicious dynamic where the US more than anything just wants these nations to be strong and stable. And instead, it's just making them less weaker and more kind of warred by civil war and revolution. And eventually, this just culminates in the only kind of logical endpoint, which is the United States ended up taking over them entirely.

And then of course, it's stuck running Haiti. It's stuck running the Dominican Republic. And no one wants that. I mean, you're looking at like the internal memoranda from like the administration and all that. And they're like, you know, how do we get out of here?

Right. And it's, it's not, you know, I think that, you know, when you when you sort of look at it in those terms, the question becomes, okay, is there a way that the United States could have done on this could have achieved that ultimate end of keeping European great powers out without having to intervene as aggressively. And I think on the margins, the answer is yes. In some cases, I think you can look at some instances of threats that the United States thought it was responding to that probably really didn't warrant the kind of reaction that the United States gave them. And some of those, you know, misfires were I think reasonable, others definitely less so. But there is a sense in which if the United States had kept a better sense about it, it would have had, you know, a more, at least a more restrained approach that probably would have avoided some of the debacles without surrendering any part of the hummus fear to Europe. At the same time, though, it's not, it's not as easy as stories just saying, Well, the US if it just hadn't intervened anywhere, everything would have been fine. Maybe. But part of the problem is it's just, it's so hard to know, right. And so one of the examples I give in the book in 1902, Germany and Great Britain launched a joint intervention against

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Venezuela. And Theodore Roosevelt's in power. Roosevelt has no particular love for Venezuela. And in fact, I mean, he says some really awful and racist things about the Venezuelan president and in general things that as he puts it that Venezuela deserves a spanking from Europe. But he basically, you know, there's internal memos in the administration where they're looking at the what's going to happen if Europe goes in and they're realizing that there's a very real chance that once Europe starts this intervention, it will eventually lead to the sort of permanent occupation of Venezuelan territory because that's the only way for them to kind of accomplish their goals.

And it doesn't, it's not necessarily 100% risk. But if you're Roosevelt and you think that the permanent occupation of, you know, Latin American territory by European power is going to lead to a scramble for Latin America. And you think there's a 5% chance that that occupation or that occupation is going to happen and trigger that.

How do you weigh that, right? I mean, what are your options at that point? And how does it change if it's a 1% chance, a 25% chance, 75% chance? And so the policymakers in the US are constantly having to run these calculations about what's the ultimate amount of risk we're willing to bear, given that the consequences could be, if not existential, at least something close to it.

And so I'm dancing around your question a little bit in large part because I don't know that there's a satisfying answer. I think, you know, it's very easy for historians nowadays to go back and say, well, we didn't need to do this. We didn't need to, you know, act in this particular way.

But it's much harder to prove the counterfactual. It's really difficult to know what would have happened had it not done that stuff. And so, you know, I don't necessarily have a good answer. I think we certainly turned the dial up to the interventional interventionism level, much more than we needed to.

I think we didn't kind of... I think there were ways in which our own belief in our exceptionalism blinded us to sort of obvious alternative paths and kind of less interventionist methods.

Racism obviously also played that kind of role from the kind of opposite end of things. But even when you start kind of weeding out the exact imperfections of particular interventions and things like that, I think you still are sort of left with the core that probably, no matter how this went down, the US probably would have behaved at least in an analogous way.

If not exactly the same way.

So for this last section, let's go where we started and take this to China. It seems to me that having read your book and, you know, having had this conversation with you fear from a what can you control perspective.

The most important thing European powers could have done. And the awkward dynamic here too is that what happens in the Asia Pacific from a global perspective is just more important than what happened in Central America and the Caribbean during the 1890s and, you know, early 1900s. But it seems to me that the fear aspect is important here. So like my personal takeaway is like, okay, if you have a rising potentially expansionist China, the most important thing you could do is not give them mischaracterizations and they shouldn't fear.

So from my perspective, the Chinese Communist Party should not fear that the United States is going to enact a policy of regime change. That wasn't possible in the 2000s, but that's just not on the table in any degree whatsoever from a literal policymaker perspective.

China's security from a nation state perspective seems secure. And that can from a fear perspective.

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So communicating the fear aspect is very key. Or the you shouldn't be fearful part is key. How do you how do you think about that?

Yeah, so I think that's exactly right that there is these you if you can communicate your intentions and allay some of the threats that other nations may face and may think they face. It helps ameliorate some of their tendencies to sort of lash out and to think that their survival instinct is activated.

Because when you activate that survival instinct, you know, there's not much a nation won't do. And so, you know, preventing that survival instinct from kicking into high gear, I think is very important. As you said, regime change, I mean, whether you're talking about China, Russia, I mean, that is not the right, that is not language that you should be using when talking about the Communist Party. Just because it does sort of, it does activate that instinct. That said, and just to complicate this and sorry to be a little dark and pessimistic. Yeah.

Part of the thing is that first, I think there are interests that are mutually incompatible, right? And some of them, you know, no matter how much you say, Well, I'm not going to threaten you, don't worry about this, we're not going to try and overthrow you.

You know, how credible is that, right? So for instance, the Biden administration can go to China and say, Listen, we want to come to, you know, an agreement where we, you know, we can sort of demarcate sort of lines that we're not going to cross each of us.

And in particular, we're not going to do anything that sort of challenges, you know, certain core interests, right? Set aside whether that includes Taiwan.

If you're sitting in Beijing, how seriously are you going to take that promise when you know that there's an election next year and that, you know, Biden might not be reelected, right? It might be President Trump again, it might be President DeSantis.

And if you're looking at that, just or even 2028 where you don't even know who's on the ballot, you don't necessarily have a guarantee. And so if you're given the choice of like, Well, it's not a big deal if the US expands its military into this area or this area or keeps its forces here or ramps up in Australia.

You know, why should we care? They've promised us this won't ever be used against us. You can't guarantee that, right? The second complicating factor here is that even if the US government could make those promises, the United States as a whole can't.

And what I mean by that is, even if the US government can credibly commit that it's not going to kind of aim for regime change or anything like that, the fact is there's always going to be civil society groups.

There's going to be Americans who do believe that overthrowing the Chinese Communist Party is in the world's best interest, right? I mean, part of what defines the United States as a power is that we have this universalist belief in liberal democracy.

And, you know, I subscribe to that belief myself. I think it's the best form of government. You know, I'm an exceptionalist in that way, American exceptionalist.

But it does oftentimes lead to this sort of crusading impulse that both affects government but also affects civil society. And so you're always going to have Amnesty International writing reports about what's going on in Xinjiang.

You're always going to have, you know, these human rights observers, these people, you know, I mean, you see it a little bit with like North Korea, for instance, right? The South Korean

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organizations are sending balloons across the border saying, you know, overthrow Kim Jong-un. And there's an extent to which you can't control that if you're the U.S. government, even if you want it to, right? I mean, because of the First Amendment, because of all sorts of other reasons.

And so the end effect is that I'm, you know, I mentioned earlier, I tried to write this book in a non-partisan way. I think maybe a better way of putting it is that, you know, I come from kind of the realist tradition of international politics.

So in that tradition, you don't typically look at the character of a government, you know, authoritarian governments, democracies are supposed to all act the same. I depart from that for basically because history, I think bears that out.

And I do think there's a sense in which us being a democracy in China, being an authoritarian country leads to conflict because just by virtue of who we are and the beliefs that we have, there is always going to be some sense among the American people that the world would be better off if the Chinese Communist Party weren't in charge.

And so if you're sitting in China, there is always going to be that underlying level of threat that makes things difficult and makes it more difficult not to kind of react a little bit more aggressively and expansively.

And again, it doesn't mean you can't affect things on the margins. It doesn't mean there aren't good policies and bad policies, but it does sort of give reason to, you know, for caution.

Yeah, and I think the takeaway I have from what you just articulated is just the US being able to articulate what it interprets.

Basically, I'm interested in like the strategy question, because from my perspective, it seems to me that what we are looking to do, at least from my perspective is deter and preserve.

So deter aggression from a rising power, and then also at the same time, maintain the status quo as much as humanly feasible, despite obviously the fact that the international system is going to change with rising powers.

So for example, it's just likely true that international work, and these aren't my politics, but like if you're like, you know, liberal like internationalist who thinks that you know, international institutions are going to save us and make the world a better place.

That's just not going to be true. Because like once again, a rising, a rising set of expansionist powers who are just not liberal or democratic in their belief systems, that's going to make international bodies reflect values that are going to be in opposition to ideals that people on the left, right and center hold.

And this comes to us to make those institutions difficult. So that's an example. I think we're, I think there's a reason why we just don't hear much talk about the UN, even from center left to left organizations that were more interested in that as a body during the bush yard just because of the changing system.

So it seems deter preserve and then understand the world does change like how would you sum up how you're thinking of like the 2020s moving forward in this context.

Yeah, so I think, I think you got it exactly right. I mean, I will say for the kind of the liberal and institutionalists internationalists, I do think, you know, there's still a place for compromise, there's still a place for tackling kind of issues of mutual concern like climate change or what have you nuclear proliferation, for instance, is one where, you know, China, Russia and the United States are all fairly aligned and not wanting to get the bomb, for instance, right.

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They approach it in different ways, but there's at least a kind of overlapping set of interests there because we all realize what that means if it happens.

But on the sort of big questions, I think you're right, I mean, it's power politics, it's not going to be institutions, it's not going to be the UN saving the day. It really is going to be each nation's calculations of what it needs to do to ensure its own survival.

And so, you know, we're talking about fear, again, depressing dark view of the world, but I think that fear actually ends up being a pretty key part of our policy in the sense that deterrence ultimately rests on that.

And so if you're Xi Jinping, and you know that if you try and invade Taiwan, and the invasion goes awry, you will face a massive backlash from, you know, the Chinese people as well as potentially from the Chinese military, you're probably not going to undertake that invasion, right.

You just don't want to gamble it because you're a domestic sort of security, you're survival as an individual, the survival of the Chinese Communist Party depends on that.

And so, from the US perspective, that's why you build up Taiwan, you know, you give them the arms you need, they need, you give them sort of the security and you in general just make it clear to China that is not going to be successful, a place to expand.

And the challenge for American foreign policy in the 2020s and the 2030s is essentially figuring out, you know, where are the places that we want to draw this line where we sort of really care about our interests where we're willing to sort of, you know, put that we

consider a core to our security, and where are the places where we need to sort of appreciate that it does not matter. I'll give you just one concrete example from that Governor DeSantis actually mentioned on the night of his announcement that he was running for president.

We need a 21st century version of the Monroe Doctrine. And I think that's right to a certain extent, right. I mean, the last thing I think any American, you know, center right or left, the last thing any American wants is 20 PLA divisions on the Rio Grande, right.

That is just something that the United States I don't think would be comfortable with. At the same time, you don't want to go in the opposite direction too far. You don't want to basically say, well, Chile is trading too much with China now, we need to step in and do something about it.

Because at the end of the day, that's just, it's not a core interest of the United States, how much Chile trades with China. It's only one that starts to slip into kind of political and military things that we really begin to care about that from a security perspective.

And so I think having a clear set of the threats and also just having clear lines of communication is the way you get through it. And, you know, as dark and pessimistic as everything I just said was, look at the example of the Cold War, right.

I mean, it was a very similar dynamic. I think nuclear weapons helped stabilize in a lot of ways. And sure, there were proxy wars across the globe. But at the end of the day, we, you know, we avoided Armageddon and that's that's saying something.

Yeah, you're you're pointing around assessing threats, you know, you know, the Rio Grande versus Latin America is just key because if you look at the, you know, the rogues gallery of our worst policy decisions during the Cold War.

It is, it is making this is just beyond just like Vietnam obviously it's not understanding the difference between intervening to defend South Korea and let's say some random socialist in Latin America but actually in the scope of things didn't matter and probably offered the wrong message to the world or

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what you
are saying.

So here's the closing comment.

I think a takeaway from I have from reading your book is that I've never done this but I think folks should be very leery of over quoting George Washington or John Quincy Adams like George Washington is the, you know, no entangling alliances with his farewell address and then John Quincy Adams is

you know, 1820s, we don't go abroad in search of monsters to destroy just because if you're looking at the actual history, as soon as we got power itself, we didn't follow either of those policies.

So the key point is my takeaway of this is that American history is one where we we are an exceptional country like I 100% believe that but intellectual ideas that we put forth are very much shaped by the degree of power we could exert upon the world.

It's not quite clear to me that the George Washington who was president in 1890 would say the same thing that a George Washington who closed out the 1790s said because once again they were responding to a situation where no entangling alliances was let's just not get involved in the Napoleonic wars of the European continent so yeah that's just a closing thought because I think it's a useful way to understand those phrases that matter in terms of our intellectual heritage and history, but we can't just take that phrase and apply it to a policy debate in the 2020s because it misses the context.

I think that's exactly right I mean and the very last passage of my book is a little bit of a meditation on my end of American exceptionalism and sort of what these principles and values that we hold mean and why you know in large part the book tells the story of how we didn't exactly comply with them and we didn't act consistently with them and I think one of the key takeaways is that just because the United States doesn't act consistent with liberalism classical liberalism or you know democracy or sovereignty or whatever doesn't necessarily mean that we don't hold those beliefs you know genuinely it just means that at that particular moment there was something that overrode them and I think the thing that overrides that whether it's the United States or whether it's ideology in any other nation is going to be that security threat that's that that very survival instinct that at the end of the day you know is the is the most important thing from a nation's perspective because you know as much as you might love promoting democracy if you don't exist there's not going to be a lot of democracy promotion that happens same thing for classical liberalism being the city on the hill you know whatever your ideological metaphor is that all presupposes the existence of your state and so I do think there's real value for instance understanding that Chinese Communist Party ideology because I do think at some level president she really believes that and it does sort of inform a lot of what he does same goes for for instance Putin and Russia and you know invocation of Peter the Great and all that stuff that stuff matters it's not to say that it doesn't but when pushed comes to shove and survival is at stake you can I think you know states end up acting very very similarly to each other regardless of what their ideologies are or how strongly they hold them.

That is an excellent place to end Sean can you just shout out the book to listeners so they could go pick it up.

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Yeah so the book is we may dominate the world ambition anxiety and the rise of the American Colossus.

It's available for preorder now coming out on June 27th and you can get it anywhere the books are sold.

Thanks for joining me on the realignment.

Thank you.

Hope you enjoyed this episode.

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See you all next time.

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