



The Past, Present, and Future of Realism

A CONVERSATION WITH STEPHEN M. WALT

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Fletcher Security Review: The Fletcher School recently celebrated the 90th anniversary of its founding in 1933. There were high hopes at the time that international law and disarmament would lead to peace. What went wrong with “utopianism”, as E.H. Carr described it? How did realism develop in the following decades?

STEPHEN WALT: It’s important to realize that the utopianism of the 1920s and ‘30s occurred in the shadow of World War I—this enormous tragedy that had befallen Europe—and not surprisingly, lots of smart people were trying to figure out ways to never let that happen again. Unfortunately, the solutions they seized upon were inadequate to the task, and I think there were two big problems. First, they underestimated the degree to which there would be conflicts of interest among the major powers going forward, that you had created a situation after World War I in which there were a number of states—Germany, Japan, the Soviet Union, arguably Italy—who were all revisionist powers in one way or another, and therefore were going to push for changes in the international order.

Second, they overestimated the power of international law, including agreements like the Kellogg-Briand Pact which purported to outlaw



President Coolidge signs Kellogg Treaty before a distinguished gathering in the east room of the White House, including Vice President Dawes, members of the Cabinet and members of the Senate and House. Harris & Ewing | Public Domain

warfare, and the weight of global public opinion. They thought these things would be real barriers to war, and of course they proved to be quite inadequate. So, the utopianism of the 1920s had fallen apart by the end of the 1930s and we had another great and cataclysmic war.

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Realism didn’t begin in World War II, of course, and in fact there were people—G. Lowes Dickinson before World War I or Nicholas Spykman in the 1930s—who were writing about international politics very much from a realist perspective, and you mentioned E. H. Carr. His famous book, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis*, is not a realist book, but it does lay out the realist critique of utopianism very clearly. After World War II, and particularly here in the United States, you finally see realism becoming central to how Americans think and talk about international politics. This begins with people like Hans Morgenthau and George Kennan, and some others, then eventually Kenneth Waltz and structural or neo-realism, and finally debates between offensive realists like John Mearsheimer and people like me who are more in the defensive realist camp.

FSR: What drew you to international relations theory and realism in particular?

STEPHEN WALT: Well, I got interested in the broad subject matter because I was interested in military affairs. I liked reading about wars when I was a kid. My father was a military history buff in addition to

being a physicist. So, I think I got infected with an interest in what countries did and in trying to explain it. I got fascinated by theory because theory is what allows us to understand the world. We can't understand this extraordinarily complex world we live in without some set of theories that tell us to focus on certain things and leave others aside. I also found when I started studying political science and international relations that theory was extraordinarily interesting. The world looked different once I had a new set of theoretical tools and I found that process fascinating as I began to study the subject.

I liked realism from the start because I thought it did a much better job of explaining how states behave than other theories. It is not perfect, and it's not that other perspectives don't make their own contributions to our understanding, but I felt that realism had a much better track record in explaining how countries behaved. It also had extraordinary range across time and space: realist ideas could explain a lot about how empires acted, how city-states acted, how nation-states acted. It had explanations for why wars occur, why alliances form, why some states rise and fall. So it had a very wide applicability. And I thought that the main modern rivals to realist theory just weren't as



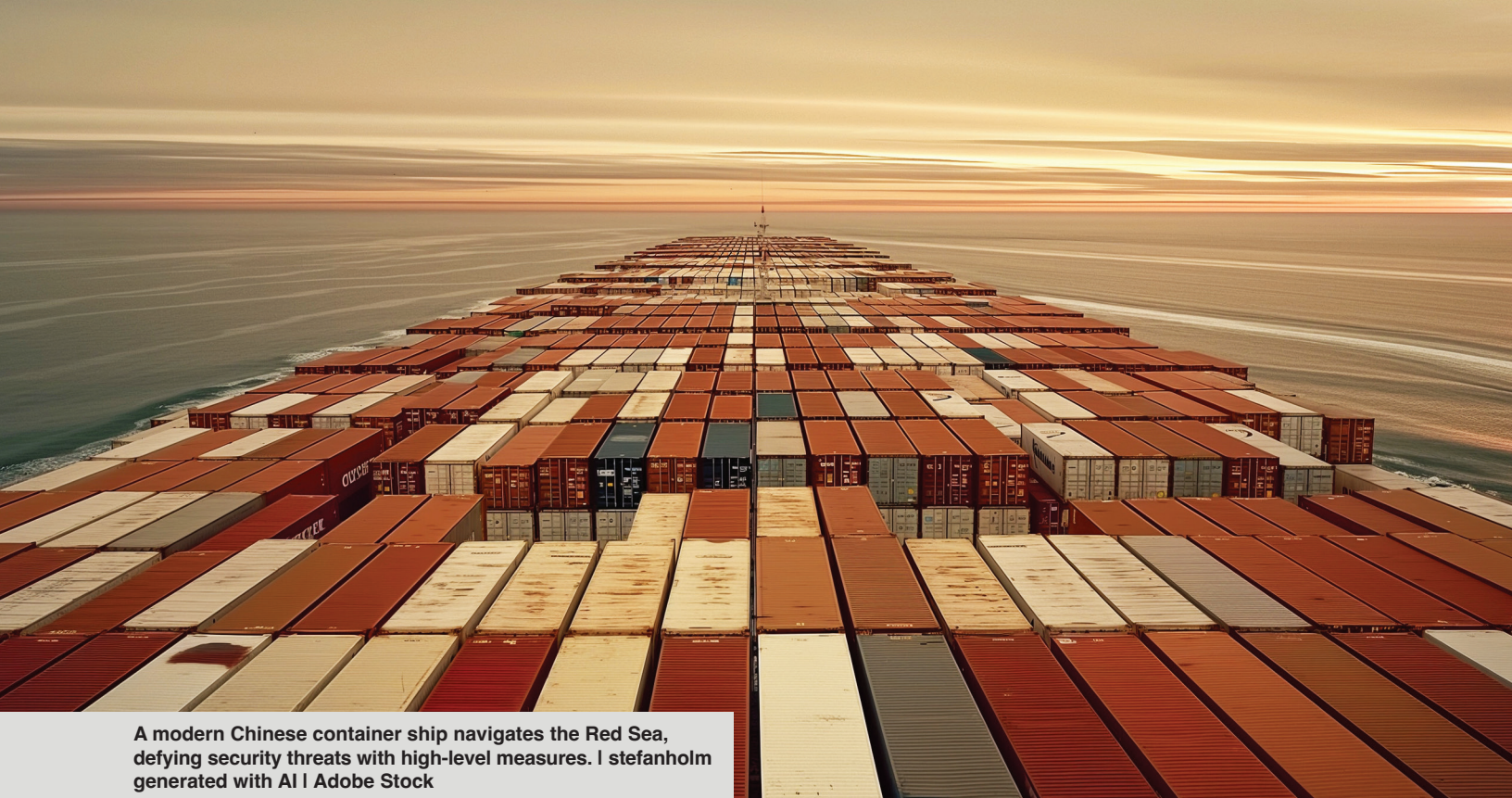
Rethinking Open Society—Stephen M. Walt: Open Societies at home and abroad. May 29, 2017 | CEU, Daniel Vege | Public Domain

persuasive. Liberal theories didn't predict that well. A good liberal would think that democracies would act fundamentally differently than autocracies, but the evidence that they do is limited. And as we talked about before, realism tells you that international law or norms will be of only limited value in controlling what the most powerful states will do.

FSR: As a professor at the Kennedy School of Government, how do you think realism can help international relations practitioners? What do you hope your students take away from it for their future careers?

STEPHEN WALT: Well, I sometimes like to say that realism is like the theory of gravity. It explains some basic forces that are there, forces that shape what states and non-state actors do and the challenges they have to contend with. Gravity doesn't mean you can't design an airplane that flies, but if you don't take gravity into account when you design your airplane, you're not likely to get off the ground, or you're going to have a plane that crashes a lot. So, realism is telling you what the overall environment that you're going to have to navigate is like. In particular, realism highlights the central problem that all states face: how to be secure in a world where there is no government or agency to protect states from each other. That's the central problem that realism highlights and if you're going to be a foreign policy practitioner, you don't want to lose sight of that.

I think it also highlights the central role that military power plays, but most realists also have a healthy respect for the limits of power. They understand that there are things that military force cannot accomplish and that overusing it is likely to backfire. Realism highlights the need to balance power and interest, and reminds leaders that they have to be mindful of their relative power but also mindful of the interests of others. If they don't do that, they're going to provoke lots of opposition



A modern Chinese container ship navigates the Red Sea, defying security threats with high-level measures. | stefanholm generated with AI | Adobe Stock

and find themselves worse off. So, for that reason, I think realism also tells policymakers not to be overly ambitious. If you try to conquer or transform the world, you'll face growing opposition and you're doomed to fail.

Realism also insulates us against a black-and-white, good-versus-evil view of the world. There's a tendency, especially here in the United States, to assume that if we have a conflict with some other country, it's because they're evil and there's something fundamentally wrong with them. But realism reminds you that all states are trying to be secure, and very different states often do similar things as a result. Countries with very different core values or domestic structures often act in very similar ways. So realism helps protect us against the tendency to see ourselves as wholly virtuous and others as completely evil. I might add that realism also encourages a certain humility in the conduct of foreign policy: it is a messy, unpredictable world and therefore the first rule for most realists would be akin to the Hippocratic oath—first, do no harm. It's a dangerous world and we need to be careful how we use our power and how we deal with others.

FSR: In your 1985 article, “Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power”, and subsequent 1987 book, *The Origin of Alliances*, you made a major contribution to international relations theory by introducing the concept of the “balance of threat”. What was the major idea, how did you develop it, and how do you assess that work now?

STEPHEN WALT: I'm very grateful that work was as well received as it was. Balance-of-threat theory emerged out of studying with Kenneth Waltz at Berkeley and taking aboard his very parsimonious, very abstract, neo-realist structural theory, and I thought it was a brilliant theory. I learned an enormous amount from Waltz, but I was puzzled as I started working on a dissertation on alliances by some anomalies. There were historical patterns that were inconsistent with the way Waltz had described and explained international politics. In particular, he argued that states balanced against power. In anarchy, they were always worried about unchecked power and any single state becoming too strong. I thought that was correct as a first cut, but I noticed that there were lots of examples where alliances had formed that were vastly stronger than their opponents. In these cases, states weren't in fact

balancing power. In the Cold War, for example, the United States was far and away the most powerful country in the system. The Soviet Union was always lagging behind the United States in various ways—a smaller economy, etc. And yet the United States had lots of allies, and our allies tended to be powerful and wealthy countries like Germany or France or Japan or Great Britain, and the Soviet Union had lots of weak states on their side, either in Eastern Europe or the developing world.

This result seemed to be inconsistent with Waltz's argument that it was power alone that states really worried about. If that were true, states should have been ganging up to contain and balance the United States. I kept puzzling over that, and began to think that there were other features that went into making these decisions. It took a long time for this to come together in my head, but eventually I realized that what I was really saying was that states formed alliances to counter what they regarded as the greatest threat. They balanced, but not just against power. Power was one element of threat, but not the only one. You would worry about what a powerful state might do, but you'd also be more worried if they were nearby, so geographic proximity mattered. If they were a powerful state that appeared to have military capabilities or other features that were designed for conquest—that would make you even more worried. And finally, if a nearby powerful state appeared to have highly revisionist ambitions, then it would be even more threatening and you'd be eager to find allies to help deter or contain it.

I thought this revision did a nice job of not only explaining the cases I looked at in the Middle East,



President Joe Biden was joined by Vice president Kamala Harris as he signed the Instruments of Ratification giving the United States' approval for Finland and Sweden's membership in NATO. White House | Public Domain

but it also explained the Cold War alliance structures. The Soviet Union was weaker than the United States, but it was more threatening to its neighbors in Eurasia than the United States was because it was close to them and we were far away. The Soviet Union also had an aggressive ideology and a military that was designed for offensive conquest, and these factors, taken together, explained why the United States was such a popular ally for countries like Japan or South Korea or our allies in NATO. It took me a long time to pull this all together into a coherent whole, but that was where it came from.

You asked me how well I think it stood up—I think it has stood the test of time remarkably well. If you look at the first Gulf War in 1991, Iraq invades Kuwait and is eventually repulsed by a coalition of 30-some countries whose GDP is something like a hundred times that of Iraq. It's an overwhelming coalition. If you look at Sweden and Finland's

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decision to abandon decades or centuries of neutrality and join NATO now, they are doing so not because Russia is more powerful than the Soviet Union, but Russia at the moment appears to be more dangerous, more willing to take risks, etc. So all of a sudden these two countries abandon neutrality and join NATO. I think if you look at the response of countries in Asia to China since Xi Jinping became president, it is partly a reaction to China's rising power, but also to Chinese behavior and the signs that China wants to alter the status quo in significant ways. China looks more threatening, and that perception has led to more vigorous balancing behavior by a number of other countries close to China. So I think balance-of-threat theory is holding up reasonably well. I should add I'm probably not the most objective judge of how well the theory's doing, but that's my view.

FSR: In your most recent book, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy*, published in 2018, you argued that the United States should adopt a grand strategy of "offshore balancing". What is offshore balancing and what are its merits?

STEPHEN WALT: Offshore balancing is a realist grand strategy because it focuses on the balance of power in key strategic regions. I would argue that it's been the strategy the United States has followed for most of the period that it's been a great power, from 1900 forward, with the exception of the past thirty years or so—the so-called unipolar moment. The basic idea is that the United States is in the unusual position of being the only great power in the Western hemisphere. We are a regional hegemon. To maximize our security, therefore, what we want to do is make sure that no other great power is able to dominate its region the same way we do. If such a great power were to emerge in Europe or Asia, that country might have a larger economy than the United States and be able to build a lot of military power. It would also be free to project power around the world the same

way we do. We can do that today because we don't face any threats close to home, and a hegemon in Europe or Asia could do much the same thing—including, if it wished, trying to project power into the Western Hemisphere. If you want to maximize American security, you want to prevent that from happening if you can.

The only question is, how much effort do we have to put into this? If there's no potential hegemon, if there's an even balance of power in the rest of the world, we don't have to do very much. You can rely on countries in Europe and Asia to check each other. If, however, the balance of power starts to break down, then the United States should become more actively engaged, and possibly even put military power onshore in key areas the way we did during the Cold War.

The advantage of offshore balancing is that when there isn't a hegemonic threat anywhere else, you can save some money, and you're less likely to get dragged into local quarrels that aren't necessarily of great concern to us. It keeps us out of trouble, and we don't have to have an enormous military establishment. But we do have to keep an eye on what's happening in other parts of the world and be ready to re-engage if, in fact, potential



A U.S. Air Force pilot looked down at the suspected Chinese surveillance balloon as it hovered over the Central Continental United States February 3, 2023. Recovery efforts began shortly after the balloon was downed. Department of Defense | Public Domain



The case for offshore balancing | Lowy Institute

hegemony start to emerge. I think most people who favor offshore balancing would say that China is a potential hegemon in Asia, so the United States should remain actively engaged there. How much effort it has to exert depends on just how dangerous you think China is and what our partners in Asia are willing to contribute as well.

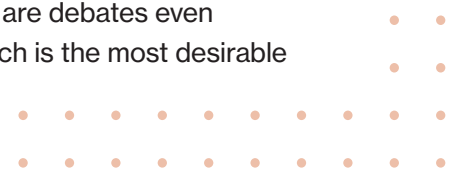
The third area that most offshore balancers would say has been important to us is the Middle East, largely to keep oil and gas flowing to world markets. But an offshore balancer would say the United States should have normal relations with all countries in the region, rather than having special relations with some countries like Israel or Egypt or Saudi Arabia and no relationship at all with countries like Iran. If you're an offshore balancer, you want to be able to play different sides off against each other, to ensure that no country can dominate the region, and that requires greater diplomatic flexibility than we've had in recent decades.

FSR: Let's turn to current issues facing international relations practitioners and aspiring practitioners. What does realism have to tell us about the idea of multipolarity? Do you think the world is multipolar now?

STEPHEN WALT: Yes, I think the world is currently in a condition of very lopsided multipolarity, with the United States number one, China number two, Russia a distant third, and you might want to throw in a few other countries as well, conceivably Japan and India. But again, this is a very uneven multipolar order.

What I think realism would now tell you is that multipolarity is not as stable as a bipolar system or a unipolar system. In multipolarity you have a greater risk of miscalculation. The impact of realignments is greater as well, and there are more great power dyads where war might break out. So, the general view is that multipolarity is not as desirable as either bipolarity or a unipolar world in which the United States is the unipole.

It is worth noting that prominent realists disagree about this issue. Hans Morgenthau thought multipolarity was better because it was more flexible, and the late Nuno Monteiro argued that unipolarity was unstable largely because the unipole would be so interested in maintaining its position it would end up fighting lots of wars in various places. So there are debates even among realists as to which is the most desirable structure of power.



FSR: Does realism contribute to our understanding of nuclear weapons?

STEPHEN WALT: No question. Unfortunately, this is another place where you'll find disagreements among realists. Waltz always thought of nuclear weapons as a unit-level factor, not a structural feature. He did not think they altered the nature of the system. It was still a "self-help" system. But he also felt that nuclear deterrence was extremely robust and stable. He and other people—Bob Jervis would be a good illustration—believed that nuclear weapons were a revolutionary event in international relations because they allowed major powers to be protected against direct attacks through deterrence. No one would attack or try to conquer a nuclear-armed power because they might face retaliation with nuclear weapons and no gains would possibly be worth that. For this reason, they believed the nuclear revolution would usher in a long period of peace and a serious reduction in inter-state rivalry.

But other realists—and here I'm thinking of John Mearsheimer, Keir Lieber, and some others—have argued that the nuclear revolution didn't change things very much. Nuclear weapons were important, but their invention just shifted the competition into an endless effort to try to gain first strike advantages of one kind or another. It remained a deeply competitive world, and therefore you would see the reduction in tension that scholars who believed in the nuclear revolution had predicted.

I'm sort of torn here personally, because I think that the arguments in favor of the nuclear revolution are very powerful. I think nuclear weapons do have extraordinary deterrent effects in terms of the core security of major nuclear powers. That said, the major nuclear powers do not seem to be listening to this compelling argument, and they continue to devote far too much money and effort into a fruitless pursuit of usable nuclear options. So there's a debate among realists on this as well, and I'm not going to be able to resolve it in this conversation.



Moscow, Russia - May 2, 2024: Nuclear weapon, Russian strategic missile system "Yars" on city street before the Victory Day parade | Oleg | Adobe Stock

FSR: One of the most pressing issues faced by the United States and the world in recent decades has been the rise of China. What would you say are the realist perspectives on this development?

STEPHEN WALT: Every realist I know thinks the rise of China is an extraordinarily important event because anything that has a dramatic effect on the global balance of power cannot help but affect world politics in a variety of ways. China going from being a large but very poor country to being a large and sophisticated industrial power is a truly significant event. I think most realists would agree that it's a potentially dangerous event—not because China is inherently aggressive, but simply because rapid shifts in the balance of power tend to be destabilizing in various ways. There is a strand of realist theory—power transition theory or the theory of hegemonic war—developed by Robert Gilpin, A.F.K. Organski, Dale Copeland, and some others, that makes this argument. Rising states typically want to change certain aspects of the international order that were established when they were weaker, and other powerful states usually resist this. Rapid changes in the balance of power also foster miscalculation because no one can be sure what would happen in a real test of strength. Thirty years ago, it was clear what would happen if the United States and China fought over Taiwan, but it's not as obvious now and it's easier for both

sides to think they might be able to win. So for all of those reasons realists see the rise of China as a worrisome development from the point of view of international stability.

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That said, realists disagree among themselves on how dangerous it is and what the United States should do about it. Some of them—John Mearsheimer being a good illustration—have a very hawkish view, and believe that intense competition between the United States and China is hard-wired into the international system. In this view, the United States has no choice but to wage this rivalry in an all-out fashion, not by starting World War III, but by doing everything in its power to slow China’s rise and contain its influence. But there are other realists—Charlie Glaser would be a good example—who think, “yes, there’s going to be competition, but it can be managed in a variety of different ways.” They emphasize that neither the United States nor China could ever hope to conquer the other at an acceptable cost, so coexistence is the only alternative. Realists agree the rise of China is significant, but we disagree about how imminent a danger it is or exactly what the United States should do about it.

FSR: Many students of international relations are interested in working on issues of global governance, like environmental issues and climate change. Does realism allow for that kind of international cooperation?



A landing craft, air cushion, assigned to Assault Craft Unit (ACU) 5, approaches the well deck of San Antonio-class amphibious transport dock during Exercise Balikatan 24, in the South China Sea—an annual exercise between the Armed Forces of the Philippines and the U.S. military designed to strengthen bilateral interoperability, capabilities, trust, and cooperation. | U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Evan Diaz CC BY-NC 2.0

STEPHEN WALT: Sure, but it highlights the obstacles to solving these problems. Realists recognize that states cooperate all the time—they’re doing it on a daily basis—and that states create, develop, and support institutions in order to facilitate cooperation, whether it’s in trade or communications or air traffic control or you name it. When a set of states are interacting with each other on a constant basis, they need some rules to regulate that. What realism also tells us is that the major powers end up writing and enforcing those rules and that institutions always reflect the underlying balance of power.

The other point that realists would make is that even when you have compelling reasons to cooperate—and climate change is certainly a compelling reason—it’s not going to be easy. States may not agree on how serious the problem is, or they may not agree on what the best solution is. Even if they agree on how serious it is and what the best solution is, they won’t agree on who should pay to solve it. And there’s still no world government that can actually impose a set of solutions or a set of policy responses on other states, or enforce compliance with any agreements that might be reached. Put all those things together,

and realists conclude that solving a potentially existential problem like climate change is still going to be very difficult.

FSR: Last question. What are the major areas of research for scholars in international relations theory in recent years? What is the future of the field?

STEPHEN WALT: That's really hard to say, and it will be determined by other people than me at this point. It will be determined by people who are in their twenties now.

I'd make three points. First, Like the rest of political science, the subfield of international relations has strayed from theory and become very empirical. It's all about testing hypotheses with either case studies or with datasets of one kind or another, without devoting nearly as much attention to the underlying causal explanations that lurk behind those hypotheses. The result is you get a lot of work with a very short shelf life, work that doesn't suggest new ways to think about things, and ultimately isn't all that interesting—not nearly as interesting as the development of a new theory or the refinement of an existing theory that sheds new light on a bunch of problems. And I'm hoping that that trend reverses itself. That's point number one.

The second point I'd make is that international relations has always been a field that's driven by real-world events. The invention of nuclear weapons created a need to figure out what these things mean, and we get the development of deterrence theory and theories about how to do arms control. There were a whole new set of problems to address, and it took a while to come up with good answers and good theories to cover that. So, I would look at how people are going to theorize the role of artificial intelligence, for example. How's that going to change world politics? That's a new technological development that requires us to think hard about what it means, not just for the

balance of power, but for a whole variety of other things. I think globalization as a phenomenon has been studied a lot, but its current phase was a novel development with far-reaching effects. There are earlier periods where something like that happened, but the tying together of different countries more extensively through trade, through investment, through communications as occurred over the last thirty or forty years had effects that I think still need to be theorized as well.

Finally, we are seeing the end of the unipolar moment and the return to a world of great power competition. Students of international relations for the next ten or twenty years are going to be spending a lot of time thinking hard about what that means and how it should be understood, especially in light of all the other changes that are occurring at the same time. Some of that will involve rediscovering things that people like me wrote 20, 30, or 40 years ago about multipolarity, about bipolarity, about alliances, about the dynamics of tripolar competition, but some of it's going to be trying to figure out and study things that we weren't thinking about 40 years ago simply because they didn't exist yet.

FSR: Thank you for your time. I enjoyed this conversation very much.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Professor Walt is the author of *The Origins of Alliances* (1987), which received the 1988 Edgar S. Furniss National Security Book Award. He is also the author of *Revolution and War* (1996), *Taming American Power: The Global Response to U.S. Primacy* (2005), and with co-author J.J. Mearsheimer, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (2007). His most recent book is *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of US Primacy* (2018).