

Interview – Michael Cox

Written by E-International Relations

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Professor Michael Cox taught at The Queen's University of Belfast and the Department of International Politics in Aberystwyth before being appointed to a Chair in International Relations at the LSE in 2002. One of the founding directors of LSE IDEAS in 2008, he is currently Emeritus Professor in the Department of International Relations at the LSE, holds a visiting professorship at the Catholic University of Milan and is an Associate Fellow on the US and Americas programme at Chatham House in London. He is the author, editor and co-editor of several volumes including works on the Cold War, US foreign policy, Northern Ireland, E.H. Carr and John Maynard Keynes. His most recent books include *Agonies of Empire: American Power from Clinton to Biden* (Bristol University Press, 2022), *Agonie dell'impero: il potere americano da Clinton a Biden* (Vita E Pensiero Press, 2022) *Afghanistan: Long War – Forgotten Peace* (LSE Press, 2022) and with the same press, *Ukraine: Russia's War and the International System*, which will be launched in October 2023. He is also now working on a study of the China-Russia relationship entitled *Comrades* to be published by Polity Press in 2024.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

I am impressed and encouraged by the resurgence of critical discourses across the field of IR in the past few years. Previously underexplored or unexplored issues such as race and the legacies of colonialism have by now made a major contribution to the modern debate. It is perhaps ironic then that just as IR was moving in new directions, it has been pushed by events – the war in Ukraine and rising tensions across the Pacific – to focus on what might best be described as more traditional 'geopolitical' issues, most notably great power conflict and the causes and consequences of war. Was it Trotsky who once quipped that even if *'you may not be interested in war' ...war will always be "interested in you."* Worth pondering!

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

When I set out lecturing in the 1970s at Queen's Belfast – right at the start of the 'Troubles' – Third World revolutions were shaking the world, China was still viewed as being a deeper shade of 'red', and the USSR was still being talked about as being a major threat to the international order. Nor did anybody back then refer to something called 'globalization'. Europe was also a long way off becoming a 'union'. And the US post-Vietnam looked to be in deep trouble. One thing however looked certain: The Cold War would go on either because neither side seemed to be on the verge of collapse, or because the two superpower rivals could co-exist reasonably enough in a bipolar order from which both drew advantage.

What prompted change in my thinking – and not just mine – was the quite unexpected disintegration of the communist project in the USSR in less than a decade. I later tried to explain what 'we' got wrong (and why) in two articles: one published in 1994: 'The end of the USSR and the collapse of Soviet Studies' in *Co-existence*; and another in 2009 entitled 'Why did We Get the End of the Cold War Wrong?'. Whether or not I succeeded in convincing either myself, or others, I will leave that for later generations to judge!

In your most recent book, *Agonies of Empire*, you explore the American Presidency and American power abroad. What is your assessment of Biden's approach to foreign policy and how do you think that

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compares to other presidencies?

Incoming US Presidents invariably define their foreign policy not just in futuristic terms – sometimes made respectable by calling the new policy a ‘doctrine’ – but also in terms of being completely different to what had gone before. Thus, Clinton in 1992 insisted that unlike Bush senior he would not ‘coddle’ dictators (and yet he did in the case of China). Obama then claimed he would soon be winding up G. W. Bush’s “war on terror” (but didn’t quite manage to). And Biden said America would be ‘back’ as a major player in world politics after the Trump years, but then cut and ran in Afghanistan in August 2021. The war in Ukraine may have restored Biden’s credibility to some degree, but there is still a nervousness amongst allies about where the US might be heading long term. Biden may be preferable to Trump. Yet if opinion polls are to be believed, then even amongst Democrats Biden is not exactly everyone’s candidate of choice.

It is also worth remembering that in some key areas the Biden approach has not been so different to that of Trump, whether on China (both have called it the great challenge of the 21st century), free trade (no longer a US priority), or in making the American economy ‘great again’. Even so, his administration’s at least formal commitment to climate change, democracy and gender equality does put some clear blue water between Biden – a very old-fashioned Democrat – and Trump.

Is US power in decline?

For many years I took the view that even if the US was capable of making the most egregious of foreign policy errors – witness here its decision to invade Iraq – this did not equate to ‘decline’. Here I was much influenced by the work of Susan Strange who very early polemicized against the idea of US decline in her ‘The Persistent Myth of Lost Hegemony’. As the unipolar moment gave way to a period of uncertainty caused in part by America’s failed interventions in the Middle East, and in part by the 2008 financial crash, it became fashionable once again to call time on what Henry Luce had earlier referred to as the American Century. Yet I remained committed to the idea that the US was not about to go the way of all other great powers in the past (including the former USSR) and decline (See my ‘Still the American Empire’. There were sound reasons for doing so.

Indeed, whatever challenges the US faced then and continues to face right now, we still need to remember (a) that its economy is still the biggest in the world; (b) that the dollar remains pre-eminent amongst global currencies; (c) that it has more allies than any other peer competitor (China can lay claim to only one – North Korea!); (d) that the US still spends something close to \$900million on defence; (e) that most Nobel prizes in the Stem subjects continue to be won in the US; (f) that Hollywood still dominates popular culture; and (h) that its top 4 companies by market capitalization are worth around \$8trillion, about the same as the German and Japanese economies combined. That said, the US by 2023 does seem to be at some inflection point.

The challenge posed by China is real. So too is the fact that both Russia and China are working closely together in an effort to build a new kind of non-western world order, one that has found a ready audience in the Global South. Of equal concern is what is happening in the US itself. The US may be immensely powerful. But how is it going to exercise that power effectively when it appears to be falling apart at home?

What lies ahead for the United States and its foreign policy? What impact could the 2024 elections have?

Never make a prediction – especially about the future! – and particularly about a system as fragmented as the United States. Much is going to depend in 2024 on what happens in Ukraine, and even more by what happens in the US’s relationship with China about which the Biden team appears to be divided between engagers and containers. Yet there is no hiding the fact that the upcoming presidentials are probably going to be as divisive as anything we saw in both 2020 and in 2016 – and they were divisive enough! There is certainly enormous concern on this side of the Atlantic – verging on panic – about Biden losing to Trump in November 2024. Indeed, if the indicted Trump were to win in 2024 (and there is no guarantee he won’t) then anything is possible! It will not be pretty either way.

What do you think about the ongoing divide in Trans-Atlantic cooperation, particularly the relationships

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between the US and the UK, Europe and the UK, and the EU and NATO?

Many years ago, I wrote a lengthy piece on why the transatlantic relationship was facing a crisis (See my 'Beyond the West: Terrors in Transatlantia'). It caused quite a stir, especially amongst those who had been brought up on the idea that the Europeans and the Americans formed a 'community'. In many ways both of us got something right: there will always be deep tensions in the relationship, as the Trump years later showed; on the other hand, the ties that unite Europe and the US are still significant. It's partly a function of history; it's got something to do with shared values; and it's partly to do with economics. It's also about perceived threats, and after a period of post-cold war drift there is a growing consensus on both sides of the Atlantic that the alliance faces a common challenge in the shape of China and Russia. Meanwhile, the UK and the US remain very close in terms of security. But there is little doubt that leaving the European Union has made the UK less of an asset for the United States.

Your forthcoming book, *Comrades?* highlights the strategic partnership between China and Russia. What is your current assessment of this camaraderie – a partnership described as 'a cooperation without limits'?

The book really flows from an article I published a few years back. ('Not just 'convenient': China and Russia's new strategic partnership in the age of geopolitics'). This argued that far from the partnership being merely 'convenient' – quite a common view at the time – it was shaping up into becoming something serious. I did not deny the two countries had different interests. But a combination of factors – opposition to the US, hostility to liberalism, regime preservation, and what I termed a shared 'Soviet DNA' – were, I believed, pushing them ever closer together. It is true that China has paid a reputational price in the West for backing Russia in the war. That is why it has been pushing for some kind of peace in Ukraine. But even its 'peace offensive' does not ask Russia to withdraw from Ukrainian territory. China also refuses to call what Russia is doing in Ukraine an invasion. It even repeats the official Russian line that the cause of the war was NATO expansion. At the same time, it directs the bulk of its attacks not against what Russia is doing in Ukraine but what the US is doing by supplying Ukraine with the arms to fight Russia. Xi and Putin have also 'met' more than 40 times since Xi became President ten years ago.

Meanwhile, as the war has gone on, trade between the two has gone up significantly. The two countries continue to hold significant military exercises together. And both talk quite openly of creating a multipolar world order in which the West and the US will be playing diminished roles. In other words, they remain what I referred to in a recent publication, the closest of partners (See 'Best and Bosom Friends; Putin, Xi and the Challenge to the West', LSE IDEAS).

How has the relationship between Russia and China impacted the ongoing conflict in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea? Could this embolden China's claim over Taiwan?

Formally speaking China neither approves of the original annexation of Crimea nor indeed of any attempt by any state to impinge on the sovereignty of another state. It also claims to uphold Ukrainian sovereignty. Yet given its long-term partnership with Russia going all the way back to the treaty the two countries signed in 2001, it appears to have put its principles on the back burner in favour of backing Russia and ensuring Putin survives. I also suspect (without being able to prove it) that having China at its back – recall the two signed a no limits agreement only three weeks before the war – meant that Putin felt encouraged to act on February 24th 2022.

Doubtless he believed, and no doubt told Beijing too, that it would be a short war and the diplomatic fall out limited. Neither assumption, as we know, has turned out to be true. Even so, Xi Jinping has not exited from the relationship and has shown no indication that he is about to do so any time soon. But Xi can hardly be upset that the balance within the relationship has tilted in Beijing's direction.

Whether what has happened in Ukraine has emboldened China when it comes to Taiwan is an open question. However, the failure by Russia to achieve its goals in Ukraine may have given Xi pause for thought. Significantly, there has been a spate of articles recently showing that a war across the Straits would not only be militarily problematic for China, but could easily precipitate a major economic crisis in China too.

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What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

1. Commit to your students.
2. Get published.
3. Remain collegial.
4. Engage in the wider profession.
5. Avoid all unnecessary meetings!