

Mainstream Media Wasn't Good for US Foreign Policy in 2023

Major themes this year focused on feeding the Ukraine war, hyping the China threat, and avoiding context in Israel-Palestine

By [Ben Armbruster](#)

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American militarism has many authors. From lawmakers on Capitol Hill and policy makers in the executive branch to the defense industry and its army of lobbyists, many in Washington and beyond have an interest, whether political or financial (or both), in keeping the Pentagon's coffers overstuffed and the global U.S. military machine humming.

Unfortunately America's fourth estate doesn't do a very good job of keeping an overly militaristic U.S. foreign policy in check. On the contrary, it too is a key pillar that buttresses America's dependence on aggression abroad. Looking back at much of the mainstream media's national security coverage this past year — from Ukraine and Gaza to China and the military industrial complex — 2023, with few exceptions, was no different.

The War in Ukraine

Mainstream media failures in covering the war in Ukraine this year ranged from seeming to [downplay questions](#) about who blew up the Nord Stream pipeline and [ignoring key flashpoints](#) that could have expanded the conflict into a direct U.S. war with Russia.

But back in June, the New York Times' Paul Krugman provided a window into how many top journalists and pundits view U.S. foreign policy more broadly, and the war in Ukraine specifically: through the lens of American exceptionalism. Krugman used the D-Day

anniversary this year to lament that Americans and other Western democracies weren't sufficiently supportive of Ukraine's war against Russia, saying then that if the country's counteroffensive fails (which by now it has), "it will be a disaster not just for Ukraine but for the world."

As RS [noted](#) at the time, Krugman's argument "follows a problematic pattern among many in the media whose historical reference point will always be World War II and in turn believe the United States can apply that experience to any other world problem no matter how dissimilar or unrelated it is, or whether even a military solution is required." Of course there were many calling for a more diplomatic approach to ending the war then and the evidence six months later suggests they were right.

A month before Krugman's article, the Atlantic's Jeffrey Goldberg and Anne Applebaum published a lengthy article running along the same themes. The piece was based largely on an uncritical relay of an interview with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky that crescendos to a call for taking back Crimea — a maximalist military objective that most sober observers believe to be unachievable — and overthrowing Putin, all in the name of a global struggle between good and evil. Except, as QI's Anatol Lieven pointed out then, most of the rest of the world doesn't see it that way.

"It is not that people in these countries [approve](#) of the Russian invasion of Ukraine," Lieven [wrote](#) in RS. "It is that they do not perceive such a huge difference between the regional hegemonic ambitions and criminal actions of Russia and the global ones of the United States; and they are thoroughly sick of having their opinions and interests ignored by Washington in the name of an American moral superiority that actual U.S. policies in their parts of the world have repeatedly belied."

The China Boogeyman

This year kicked off with a turn-it-up-to-11 media [hyperventilation](#) about the infamous Chinese spy balloon that, according to the Pentagon at least, [turned out to never have spied](#). But the incident was indicative of how Washington and the mainstream media generally deal with U.S. policy toward China: freak out first and maybe — just maybe — ask questions later.

CBS's flagship news magazine 60 Minutes is a [primary offender](#) of this approach. Back in March, 60 Minutes ran a lengthy piece seemingly aimed at scaring Americans about the size of China's navy and about the U.S. is lagging behind — classic China threat inflation that is common in Washington. Except the navy officers 60 Minutes interviewed didn't see it that way, and neither did experts RS interviewed about the segment.

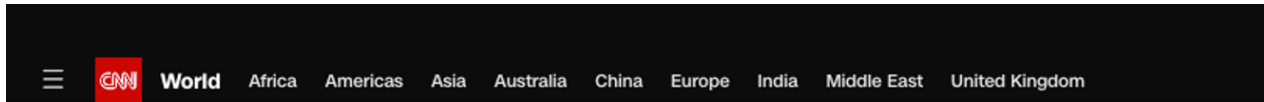
"The U.S. Navy appears to believe it's ready to take on China," RS [reported then](#), adding, "[b]ut lawmakers who stand to benefit from hyping the China threat don't. And that in a nutshell is the military-industrial-complex, or in this case, the military-industrial-congressional-media-complex."

Back in August, an NBC Nightly News segment perfectly illustrated how the mainstream media, perhaps inadvertently, builds public support for confrontation with China. The segment hyped a fairly routine, if even U.S. prompted, Russian and Chinese military exercise in international waters off the coast of Alaska. NBC News presented the event as a five-alarm fire. However, experts, and even the U.S. military, [didn't think it was that big of a](#)

[deal.](#)

The War in Gaza

If anything can represent how mainstream U.S. media has, for the most part, covered the tragic Hamas attack on Israel on October 7 and Israel's response, it's this headline from CNN on December 6:



Video shows man in military fatigues shooting mentally disabled Palestinian in West Bank

By Kareem Khadder and Celine Alkhalidi, CNN
3 minute read · Updated 12:30 AM EST, Wed December 6, 2023



Video shows mentally disabled Palestinian man shot in West Bank

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The “man in military fatigues” was of course an Israeli soldier, which CNN [later acknowledged](#). But the episode is emblematic of a general problem of mainstream media leaning in on [the Israeli narrative of the conflict](#), which prevents Americans more generally from getting a full understanding of the conflict, including not just legitimate Israeli claims but also Palestinian [concerns](#) about the occupation and the prospects of a future state. That in turn leads to the promotion of misguided notions like support for Palestinian rights [equaling support for Hamas](#).

Roots of the Problem

We also saw many instances this year of why, in part, an American exceptionalist view of U.S. foreign policy tends to guide mainstream U.S. media coverage. First, news outlets often publish essays and opinion pieces arguing for a more militaristic American posture by

writers who are funded by foreign governments or the defense industry. Most often — as was the case this year with the [Wall Street Journal](#), the [New York Times](#), and [Bloomberg](#), for example — those potential conflicts are not disclosed.

Second, there are other media outlets that are openly [underwritten](#) by titans of the defense industry. And once again this year, we saw the potential impacts of those investments. For example, one particular November article in Politico — whose foreign policy coverage is sponsored in part by Lockheed Martin — [uncritically relayed](#) baseless concerns from the Pentagon that it was running out of money, a notion that one military spending expert told RS “[doesn't hold water](#).”

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The examples above from this year are part of just a small sample of how mainstream media outlets generally cover U.S. foreign policy. There are exceptions of course but the incentives to feed the stream of militarism are far greater than the forces against it. Will 2024 be any different?

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Ben Armbruster is the Managing Editor of Responsible Statecraft. He has more than a decade of experience working at the intersection of politics, foreign policy, and media. Ben previously held senior editorial and management positions at Media Matters, ThinkProgress, ReThink Media, and Win Without War.

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