# The Limits of Teleology

**Richard Baum**

True to his theory of "offensive realism," John Mearsheimer assumes that as a rising power, China must inevitably seek "all the power" it can get, with "hegemony" as its "ultimate goal" (p. 22). By defining in advance the key objective of all states as the competition for power to ensure survival, he creates a teleology that is both powerful and persuasive. The categorical imperative for states in the international system, argues Mearsheimer, is the pursuit of power. The driver of this competition is the hegemonic impulse "to seek to dominate other states in the system" (p. 3). Well, maybe. And maybe not. At the very least, this ought to be an empirical question, rather than a definitional one; at the very most, Mearsheimer ought to take note of the existence of historical exceptions to his "iron law of hegemonic ambition." He might, for example, start with the case of post-WWII Japan, which shows that it is at least *possible* for an economic and technological powerhouse to opt out of the race for strategic military supremacy.

Of course, such exceptions cannot prove that China *won't* pursue first regional and then global dominion when and if it acquires the capacity to do so; nor can they prove that China and the United States *won't* wind up as hostile adversaries. The problem, however, is that Mearsheimer's logic cannot prove the opposite, either. While the systemic logic employed by Mearsheimer and his fellow realists has clearly exposed the flaws in the naive idealism of the neoliberal globalists whom they so roundly condemn, their antidote to the excessive optimism of the neoliberals is a simplistic form of Darwinian reductionism. States *will* seek to maximize power be-

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cause they *must* do so to survive in an anarchic, insecure world. Not bad as a preliminary hypothesis, perhaps, but pretty useless as a "one size fits all" explanation for the myriad, complex behaviors of real states in the real world.

"If China becomes an economic powerhouse," says Mearsheimer, "it will almost certainly translate its economic might into military might and make a run at dominating Northeast Asia. ... The result would be an intense security competition between China and its rivals. ... In short, China and the United States are destined to be adversaries as China's power grows" (p. 4). To avoid such an outcome, Mearsheimer urges the United States to "abandon its policy of constructive engagement" and "do what it can to slow the rise of China" (p. 402).

There are two parts to this argument, one rather compelling and the other more problematic. Most persuasive is the prediction that China will seek to translate its growing economic power into military strength. Japan's behavior to the contrary notwithstanding, this is a reasonable proposition—one which China's gradual military modernization over the past two decades tends to confirm. Also reasonable is the assumption that such an alteration in the relative power of China and the United States will tend to increase the probability of friction between the two. So far, so good. But here is where Mearsheimer and other realists miss an important point: values matter; economic interdependence matters; leadership matters. Just as the ongoing argument between "naturists" and "nurturists" in the behavioral sciences is ultimately unresolvable due to the complex, multi-layered interconnections between heredity and environment, so too the battle between neorealists and neoliberals is mooted by the fact that *both* competition and cooperation are normal, indeed virtually ubiquitous, aspects of international behavior.

In a 1974 address to the United Nations General Assembly, Deng Xiaoping (鄧小平) issued a remarkable challenge to the nations of the world: "China is not a superpower; nor will she ever seek to be one. What is a superpower? A superpower is an imperialist country which everywhere subjects other countries to its aggression ... and strives for world hegemony. ... If one day China should change her colour and turn into a

superpower, if she too should play the tyrant in the world..., the people of the world should ... expose it, oppose it, and work together with the Chinese people to overthrow it."[1] Now, Deng's assurances hardly prove that China will forever remain a benign presence in the international arena. For starters, it is gratuitous (and perhaps more than a little disingenuous) for a weak country to proclaim its aversion to bullying others when it clearly lacks the power to do so. On the other hand, the claim that China *will* seek to dominate others merely because it *might* one day acquire the capacity to do so requires a considerable stretch of logic.

I do not count myself among those who believe that how the United States treats China will decisively determine whether China becomes a cooperative power or a competitive one. There are both historical and structural forces at work in China (as well as within the international system) that are likely to prove equally if not more determinative of China's future behavior. In this respect, Mearsheimer is undoubtedly correct. But as in the case of the nature-nurture debate, China's international environment also clearly matters. Other things being equal, a more fully engaged, thriving, globally interactive China is likely to be a more benign, trustful China. This is no guarantor of future harmony and cooperation, of course. But unless the United States is prepared to preempt China's rise to regional and global power by military means—a step which Mearsheimer stops just short of advocating—there is little alternative to engaging, rather than enraging, the People's Republic of China.

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[1] *Peking Review*, April 19, 1974, 11.