The Price of Parsimony: Power and Its Limits in John Mearsheimer's *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*

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The Tragedy of Great Power Politics is a book that both suffers and benefits from its timing. At a moment when the world is obsessed with a war on terrorism and the role of shadowy non-state actors like Al-Qaeda, John Mearsheimer's focus on great power politics seems oddly anachronistic. Yet at the same time, his straightforward explication of power politics is in tune with the Bush administration's approach to foreign policy. Assertive unilateralism and a disdain for international institutions, treaties, and norms fit well, if not perfectly, with Mearsheimer's expectations of great power behavior.

A Bold Realist Voice

The book's greatest contribution is its precise delineation of a theory of offensive realism. Realists believe that self-interest and the pursuit of power are permanent features of international politics. Mearsheimer, following Kenneth Waltz, argues that in an anarchical international system,

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fear drives great powers to maximize their relative power.[1] Unlike Waltz, however, Mearsheimer asserts that there is no limit to states' hunger for power. While Waltz and other "defensive realists" believe states will settle for enough power to assure their own security, Mearsheimer argues the goal of every great power is to achieve hegemony. In Mearsheimer's world there are no status quo powers. Unlike Joseph Nye, he does not believe American preponderance creates paradoxes.[2] Power is good and more power is simply better.

Mearsheimer is careful to define his key terms (e.g., great power, regional hegemony, and power) and skillfully makes his case by weaving a clearly articulated theory with detailed historical cases from 1792 to the end of the Cold War. His fundamental assumption is that the distribution of power within the international system is what decisively shapes the behavior of states—not form of government, domestic politics, ideology, or leadership at the unit level.

After reading innumerable articles calling for synthesizing realism with other theoretical approaches,[3] students of international relations (including Mearsheimer's sternest critics) should be pleased to see such a bold, unapologetic description of realism and its consequences. Lest these be unclear, the book concludes with a chapter looking toward the future, applying the tenets of offensive realism to great power relations in Europe and Northeast Asia in the twenty-first century.

What then does *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* foresee for U.S.-China relations? Mearsheimer begins by arguing that Northeast Asia is currently a "balanced multipolar system" in which China, Russia, and the United States are the great powers (p. 381). None has the markings of a re-

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[1]Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

[2]Joseph S. Nye, *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go It Alone* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[3]See Andrew Moravcsik and Jeffrey Legro, "Is Anyone Still a Realist?" *International Security* 24, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 5-55; and John Vasquez, "The Realist Paradigm and Degenerative vs. Progressive Research Programs: An Appraisal of Neotraditional Research on Waltz's Balancing Proposition," *American Political Science Review* 91, no. 4 (December 1997): 899-912.

gional hegemon, he says. Realists usually believe these multipolar systems are unstable, but for Mearsheimer the fact that the United States acts as an offshore balancer and that all three great powers have nuclear weapons works as a force for stability.

It is not immediately apparent, however, why "multipolar" Asia is any different from what Mearsheimer calls "bipolar" Europe (in his view divided between the United States and Russia). Realists like Robert Ross make a persuasive case that East Asia is also effectively bipolar, with the United States sharing regional hegemony with China.[4] Ross and others argue that the collapse of the Soviet Union has seen China expand its influence in former Soviet-aligned states and across Southeast Asia.[5] Russian military power in the Far East and North Pacific is weak and getting weaker, and its population and wealth are similarly limited.

Scenario One: China Down, the United States Out?

Nonetheless, based on his analysis of the present distribution of power, Mearsheimer anticipates two future scenarios for the region. The first is one in which China's rate of economic growth slows down, Japan remains the wealthiest state in Northeast Asia, and neither China nor Japan becomes a regional hegemon. Without an Asian rival to contain, the United States—Mearsheimer believes—would withdraw its military forces. This move would lead Japan to acquire nuclear weapons, greatly expand its army, and take the place of the United States as a great power in Northeast Asia. Dramatic stuff indeed, yet Mearsheimer believes this would "not change the basic structure of power" in the region (p. 399). Japan would simply fill the vacuum created by the absence of the United States. War would be no more or less likely than it is today.

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[4]Robert S. Ross, "Bipolarity and Balancing in East Asia" (Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Boston, August 29-September 1, 2002).

[5]Ibid., 2-3.

Yet while he does not see any change in the regional balance of power, Mearsheimer concedes "substituting Japan for the United States would increase the likelihood of instability in Northeast Asia" (p. 399). Acquiring nuclear weapons is a process "fraught with dangers," he warns (curiously cautious words from a man who once enthusiastically argued for an independent Ukrainian deterrent[6]). The historical legacy of Japan's past aggressions in Asia would fan fears and lead to intensified security competition in the region. Having just played down the prospects of war, Mearsheimer admits that China and Russia could be tempted to use force in order to prevent a nuclear Japan.

This analysis raises a number of questions. First, from a theoretical perspective it seems troubling that there is such a fundamental disjuncture between the distribution of power and the conditions of stability or instability in Northeast Asia. If Japan's replacement of the United States would not change the basic structure of power, yet would cause instability and risk great power war, what does this say about the explanatory utility of an ontology based entirely on power? Non-materialist factors such as the memory of Japanese aggression in the region appear to be crucial determinants of future inter-state relations, yet factors of identity and "discourse" are dismissed as naive and irrelevant in the book's theoretical sections (pp. 368-69). An exclusive focus on the distribution of power at the expense of shared democratic norms and cooperative institutions likewise leads Mearsheimer to the surprising conclusion that the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Europe would be more destabilizing and more likely to cause conflict than the withdrawal of troops from Northeast Asia (p. 385).

Second, from a policy perspective, Mearsheimer does not make a convincing case why any U.S. administration would go against the well-established bipartisan support for keeping American troops in the region. Stationing American forces in Japan costs the American taxpayer nothing. U.S. troops are still welcomed by most regional governments. Why would

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[6]John J. Mearsheimer, "The Case for a Ukrainian Nuclear Deterrent," *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (Summer 1993): 50-66.

any administration want to bring these forces back home if the result was a nuclear-armed Japan (with obvious consequences for nuclear proliferation elsewhere) and waves of insecurity throughout the region? To be sure, an American withdrawal from Northeast Asia is not impossible to imagine, yet the cause is more likely to be nationalistic domestic politics in Asia rather than the absence of a potential regional hegemon. Recent demonstrations in Seoul against U.S. forces stationed in South Korea point to this non-systemic level variable as a factor that could undermine regional alliance relations. Unfortunately, as a good structural realist, Mearsheimer ignores these unit level phenomena. He prefers the path of parsimony, trying to explain a lot with a little, even when this approach appears to lead him up a blind alley.

Scenario Two: Preempting the Coming Clash with China

Mearsheimer's second scenario is one in which China continues to grow, eventually surpassing Japan and becoming a potential rival to the United States. This, he predicts, would lead Washington to keep its troops in Asia in order to contain China—or even to return them if the troops had already been withdrawn. Mearsheimer does not take Chinese growth for granted, but clearly thinks this second scenario is more likely. His (quite controversial) policy recommendations, therefore, are for U.S. policymakers to abandon their "misguided" strategies of engagement and instead to work to "slow the rise" of Chinese power (p. 402).

Whatever one thinks of strategies of engagement, identifying China as a threat and working to undermine its economic development is guaranteed to increase enmity. Even if the strategy were successful in denying China regional hegemony over East Asia, the cost to the United States could still be enormous. A bitter, resentful China that felt it had been denied its historical destiny could surely still damage U.S interests, for example, by supporting terrorist groups or facilitating nuclear or missile proliferation. An impoverished China might collapse into anarchy. Moreover, as Mearsheimer cannot yet be sure that China will become a regional

hegemon, pursuing his policy now risks creating an enemy unnecessarily.

Rather than rushing to embrace what would be an irrevocable strategy, an alternative approach would be to continue to engage Beijing; this would include working to embed it in the international community, socializing it to adopt international norms, and encouraging it to pursue political pluralism at home—while at the same time keeping a careful watch on its ambitions. Mearsheimer dismisses engagement as optimistic and naive because he rejects liberal assumptions about increased prosperity leading to greater political freedom. He does not believe that relations between democracies are any different to those between democracies and authoritarian states, and he implies that even a future democratic China that attained regional hegemony would present a threat to the United States (p. 402). Perhaps, but many readers will not dismiss the evidence of the democratic peace as quickly as he does.

Finally, the book's application of offensive realism to Northeast Asia is notable for its lack of discussion about Taiwan. The island is alluded to only briefly, in the context of a Chinese missile buildup (pp. 374-75) and as a possible cause of war between the United States and China (p. 389). While conflict across the Taiwan Strait is the most likely scenario for a war between Beijing and Washington, Mearsheimer offers no guidance for how Washington should structure its future relations with Taipei. Nor does offensive realism seem to offer much help. Does American self-interest mean it should drop its security guarantee rather than risk war with nuclear-armed China, or does undermining the rise of Chinese power demand that Taiwan's enormous wealth be kept out of Beijing's hands? Surely factors other than the distribution of power—like the fact that Taiwan is a robust democracy—would have a decisive influence on American decision making? Unfortunately, these pressing policy questions remain matters for speculation.

The Tragedy of Great Power Politics is a clear and forceful statement of the realist worldview. Its analysis of Sino-American relations offers a healthy corrective for anyone laboring under the illusion that the current period of cooperation in the war on terrorism will last forever. There are major challenges in the bilateral relationship that remain to be resolved,

and there is still the potential for conflict. Despite these difficulties, Mearsheimer's analysis is too narrow and his conclusions too pessimistic. By focusing exclusively on power and discounting the way in which other variables decisively shape state behavior and interaction, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* offers at best a very limited guide to future Sino-American relations.