

The Theory and Application of Great Power Politics

PAUL H.B. GODWIN

As anyone familiar with his work would anticipate, Professor John Mearsheimer's long awaited treatise on "offensive realism" is both well written and pessimistic—as the title suggests. Students of Sino-American relations will read a particularly foreboding assessment in Mearsheimer's final chapter devoted to the future of great power politics. He concludes, "the most dangerous scenario the United States might face in the early twenty-first century is one in which China becomes a potential hegemon in Northeast Asia" (p. 401). This essay seeks first to walk through the logic of "great power politics" and then to show how Mearsheimer applies his theory to China and Northeast Asia.

The Theory of Offensive Realism

Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism is built around a series of propositions, all of which he seeks to verify by applying them to historical case studies. At its root, Mearsheimer's realism holds that the anarchic international system drives great powers to maximize their security by gaining more power at the expense of their rivals. He declares that "a state's ultimate objective is to be the hegemon in the system" (p. 21). Nonetheless,

PAUL H.B. GODWIN retired as professor of international affairs at the National War College, Washington, D.C. in the summer of 1998. His teaching and research specialties focus on Chinese defense and security policies. Professor Godwin's most recent publication is "China, America, and Missile Defense: Conflicting National Interests," *Current History* (September 2000, with Evan S. Medeiros). Professor Godwin is currently a consultant and serves as a non-resident scholar in the Atlantic Council's Asia-Pacific Program. He can be reached at <paugodwin@worldnet.att.net>.

he also deems it unlikely that any state will become the global hegemon. First, it is improbable that a state could hold such nuclear superiority as to be able to "devastate its rivals without fear of retaliation" (p. 145). Second, global hegemony requires power projection across an expanse of water onto the territory of a competing great power. Hegemony is therefore only plausible in a regional system. Mearsheimer stresses that for one critical reason even regional hegemony is rare: great powers seek dominance only when the benefits are perceived as being greater than the costs of aggression; if they assess the costs to be too high, they will wait for a more advantageous time (p. 27). In the modern era, Mearsheimer holds that the United States' preeminence in the Western Hemisphere is the sole example of a regional hegemon.

Mearsheimer argues that when states achieve regional hegemony they seek to prevent powers in other regions from achieving the same dominance out of concern that a distant regional hegemon would be "free to cause trouble in the fearful great power's backyard" (p. 42). Hence, a regional hegemon is a status quo power and will seek to prevent the rise of a *potential* hegemon in a distant region. A potential hegemon is a state with the capability to dominate a region by overpowering its great power neighbors. Consequently, regional hegemons favor a power structure where other regions contain two or more strong states. Such a structure promises that the regional powers will focus on each other rather than concentrate on distant regions. Where the regional states are unable to contain a potential hegemon, the distant hegemon will join them to ensure containment (p. 42).

"Buck-passing" and "balancing" are the strategies pursued to deter or contain a rival, and the choice is largely determined by geography and the structure of the international system. Buck-passing is a strategy where a state passes the responsibility of resistance to another state or ally. Balancing seeks to preserve a balance of power by supporting a state threatened by another power. In a balanced multipolar system, buck-passing is preferred because each state in the regional system is capable individually of resisting aggression. In an unbalanced multipolar system, balancing is the preferred strategy because no single state in the system is individually strong enough to resist aggression. In a bipolar system, there

can be no buck-passing by a great power because no other state has the strength to accept the buck.

Geography plays an important role in Mearsheimer's approach because of the differences between insular and continental states. A continental power having a border contiguous with an aggressor can quickly be overrun by a more powerful neighbor. This situation favors balancing. Where the threatened state is insular, the "stopping power of water" allows buck-passing because there is a good chance the defending state can protect itself without external assistance.

Insular great powers such as Britain and the United States are defined by Mearsheimer as "offshore balancers." Britain as an offshore balancer has committed forces to Europe only when a rival power threatened to dominate the continent. The United States has pursued the same core strategy toward both Europe and Asia, sending its own forces only when this was perceived as required. Both Britain and the United States preferred to let local powers contain or deter a potential hegemon—they pursued a buck-passing strategy shifting to a balancing only when it was deemed necessary.

Application to Northeast Asia

In applying these core principles to Northeast Asia, Mearsheimer concludes that the key to the future distribution of regional power is China's latent strength, not that of Russia and Japan. Although not currently a potential hegemon, if China's economy continues to grow at the rate it has over the past decade, the combination of population, wealth, and industrial and technological capabilities will grant Beijing the military strength required to seek regional hegemony. Mearsheimer's theory of great power politics predicts that a wealthy China will seek hegemony. Mearsheimer, however, does not assume China's economic growth and industrial modernization will necessarily be sustained—he notes that slow or no growth are possible alternative scenarios. Even if China's economy slows and Japan remains the wealthiest state in Northeast Asia, Japan still does not

have the population to become a potential hegemon. Furthermore, Japan is separated from continental Asia by an expanse of water, making its task of establishing regional hegemony even more demanding. Even if Russia should economically recover, it would still be unlikely to supplant Japan as the world's second largest economy. Even if this unlikely event should come about, Russia does not have the population required to build an army capable of conquering China. Moreover, Moscow's security concerns require Russia to divide its security focus between Europe and its southern flanks in addition to Northeast Asia. With such diverse security interests and a small population, Russia is also unlikely to become Asia's regional hegemon.

Should China emerge as the region's strongest state, Mearsheimer judges "it might be far more powerful and dangerous than any of the potential hegemonies the United States confronted in the twentieth century." Indeed, China would become a peer competitor and contest the United States for global supremacy (p. 401). This would come about not because Beijing had any evil intentions, but because Mearsheimer's interpretation of offensive realism holds that the quest for maximum security requires states to seek regional hegemony. Consequently, because of China's potential threat, Mearsheimer opposes the engagement policy pursued by the United States since the 1970s and looks to the Bush administration to reverse this misguided strategy in favor of constraining China's rise to power (p. 402). In essence, Mearsheimer's policy prescription is that the U.S. strategy must be to slow the transformation of China's latent power into capabilities Beijing can mobilize for military aggression.

Nonetheless, Mearsheimer's offensive realism also suggests a far less pessimistic assessment. First, he holds that states seek hegemony only when they perceive that the benefits outweigh the costs and risks involved. Longstanding regional alliances and access to bases in the area provide facilities for the forward-deployed forces that permit the United States to sustain a robust offshore balancing strategy. Despite Mearsheimer's misgivings, there are no signs that the United States plans to change this strategy. Should China's latent power be developed over the coming decades to the point it provides Beijing the capabilities for a bid to become

the region's hegemon, the PRC would have to confront a powerful adversary, i.e., the United States. Consequently, China could well deem the costs and risks of aggressive behavior to be too high and could therefore delay its possible challenge to American preeminence until a more propitious time. If China did choose to challenge the United States, Mearsheimer's own case studies suggest Beijing's aggression would likely fail. After all, Mearsheimer maintains that the single example of a regional hegemon in the modern era is U.S. dominance of the Western Hemisphere. As his case studies demonstrate, over the past two hundred years all other potential regional hegemons have failed in their quest. France, Germany, and Japan were all blocked from achieving hegemony by offshore balancers, and offshore balancing is the United States' core strategy in East Asia.

One has to conclude, therefore, that although Mearsheimer has completed a masterful contribution to realism, his assessment of Northeast Asia is too pessimistic. Mearsheimer's own case studies demonstrate that balancing defeats potential hegemons.
