Mearsheimer's Neorealist Predictions: The Haunting Specter of China as a Great Power

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With the publication of John Mearsheimer's much anticipated *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, Mearsheimer has inherited the mantle as the defender of realism in its most recent incarnation. Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics*, published in 1979, signaled the resurgence of realism in the form of neorealism, and initiated an intense debate between neorealism and what became known as neoliberal institutionalism.[1] *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* signals the beginning of a new round in this debate.

Neorealism and Its Critics

Waltz rejected much of classical realism which was deeply rooted in philosophical and historical arguments about states' pursuit of power and interest, arguments dating back to Thucydides and Thomas Hobbes. While accepting the basic assumptions of classical realism, Waltz adopted social

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[1]Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: Random House, 1979). A dialogue between Waltz and his challengers can be found in Robert O. Keohane, ed., *Neorealism and Its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

scientific arguments, familiar to micro economics, about anarchic systems and structure and their effects on state behavior. Waltz's contribution to international relations theory marked a watershed between normative theories of international politics, on the one hand, and theories based on fundamental social scientific methods of generalization, explanation, and prediction, on the other. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the central debate in international relations was between neorealism and its critics, primarily neoliberal institutionalists.[2]

While sharing the neorealist assumption that states are rational actors, neoliberals are not so narrowly concerned about relative power. Neoliberals focus attention on cooperation among states in their effort to achieve absolute gains, and emphasize the role of government and non-government institutions in facilitating cooperation among states based upon shared principles, norms, and agreed upon rules. In other words, while neorealists and neoliberals may agree that the basic nature of the international system is anarchic, they disagree on the basic motivations and behavior of states in such a system. In the 1990s, post-structural theories of international relations began to challenge the structural theories of neorealism and neoliberalism. These new theories, variously referred to as ideational or constructivist, assert that the positivist methodology of neoliberalism and neorealism focuses on the structure of the international system at the expense of the individuals or agents that make up the system. Theirs is an effort to bring the individual back into the picture—giving play to ideology, culture, perception, and misperception—in any explanation of state behavior and outcomes.[3]

Offensive Realism

Mearsheimer's theory of "offensive realism" outlined in *The Tragedy*

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[2]See, for instance, David A. Baldwin, ed., *Neorealism and Neoliberalism: The Contemporary Debate* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

[3]For example, see Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics," *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 391-425.

of Great Power Politics is a counterattack against not only neoliberal institutionalism, but also the post-structural critique of neorealism. He assumes that the ultimate aim of all states is to "gain a position of dominant power over others, because having dominant power is the best means to ensure one's own survival. Strength ensures safety, and the greatest strength is the greatest insurance of safety" (p. xi). This new incarnation of realism assumes that "great powers seek to maximize their share of world power" and "multipolar systems which contain an especially powerful state—in other words, a potential hegemon—are especially prone to war" (p. xiii). Mearsheimer makes the case for the validity of offensive realism by looking at great power relations over the past two centuries. Based upon this theoretical explanation of the past, Mearsheimer then offers a plausible prediction of the future. Contrary to both Kant's vision of perpetual peace as well as more contemporary democratic peace theories, Mearsheimer sees the coming decades as marked by both the struggle of great powers in an effort to enhance one's own power at the expense of lesser powers and, as the world becomes increasingly multipolar, a preponderance of war in the future.[4]

Mearsheimer challenges the optimism about peace in the twenty-first century that theories about the "end of history" predict.[5] Rather he argues that nothing has really changed since the end of the Cold War—U.S. troops are still deployed in Europe and Northeast Asia (and we can now add the Gulf); Europeans are still somewhat leery of Germany's growing power; and East Asian states are deeply apprehensive of Japan. The rise of China will disrupt the East Asian balance of power because when "China becomes an economic powerhouse it will almost certainly translate its economic might into military might and make a run at dominating Northeast Asia" (p. 4). Even if China becomes democratic, Mearsheimer argues, this will have "little effect on its behavior, because democracies care about

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[4]Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace*, ed. Lewis Beck (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1957). See also Bruce Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace: Principles for a Post-Cold War World* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993).

[5]Frances Fukuyama, "The End of History," *The National Interest*, Summer 1989.

security as much as non-democracies do, and hegemony is the best way for any state to guarantee its own survival" (p. 4). The United States, and other states in the region, will not stand by as China's attempts at domination increase. Therefore, during the twenty-first century, China and the United States are "destined to be adversaries as China's power grows" (p. 4). And, the likelihood of a "clash between China and the United States over Taiwan is hardly remote. This is not to say that such a war is likely, but the possibility reminds us that the threat of great-power war has not disappeared" (p. 2).

Future Rivalry in East Asia

The test of any good theory is not simply how well it explains the past, but how helpful it is in envisioning the future. In the final chapter, Mearsheimer turns his attention to "Great Power Politics in the Twenty-first Century." He concludes that in Northeast Asia there is significant potential for "intense security competition among the great powers that might lead to a major war" (p. 361). To bolster his conclusions, Mearsheimer lists several times when the United States went to the brink of war in the 1990s, including coming close to war with North Korea in 1994 to prevent North Korea from acquiring nuclear weapons, and in the Taiwan Strait in 1996 when the United States deployed two aircraft carriers to the region in order to deter China from a potential invasion of Taiwan. Clearly, the Taiwan issue and the current North Korean crisis demonstrate that the potential for war in the region has not disappeared. Mearsheimer surmises that if war in Korea begins and South Korea, backed by the United States, strikes north of the 38th parallel, China may again feel compelled to enter a second Korean war. The United States has also shown that it is unlikely to stand idly by while China intimidates Taiwan or if the PLA actually launches an invasion.

Mearsheimer agues that the worldview of Chinese leaders is deeply influenced by realpolitik. The Beijing political elite view both the United States and Japan as potential enemies, have a deep fear that Japan could

remilitarize, and believe that the U.S.-Japan security treaty is designed to contain China and its great power ambitions. Mearsheimer concludes that since the end of the Cold War, both U.S.-China relations and Sino-Japanese ties have significantly deteriorated because these three countries no longer share the Soviet Union as a common enemy and also because China is beginning to challenge U.S.-Japan leadership in East Asia.

Based upon his deeply pessimistic view of international relations, Mearsheimer criticizes liberal scholars and policymakers who support engaging China in an effort to integrate China into the global economic system, those who hope for a democratic transition as the antidote to the "China threat" that the realists see on the horizon. Even if China were democratic, he argues, history demonstrates that "rival democracies" do not have "benign intentions toward each other," but rather their behavior is "largely determined by balance-of-power considerations" (p. 368).

The theory is clearly outlined and applied to a fairly detailed analysis of the history of great power rivalry, including Japan, in the twentieth century. However, the cases Mearsheimer has selected raise questions. Both the pessimistic view of the world and gloomy predictions about the future of East Asia are rooted in Mearsheimer's offensive realist assumptions about great power behavior. Given that states with offensive military capabilities seek to enhance their own security at the expense of others, no state can be certain about another state's intentions, but must instead assume the worst—"fear, self-help, and power maximization" are the three general patterns of state behavior (p. 32). Mearsheimer has outlined a clear and compelling case for "offensive realism," but even "defensive realists" disagree with his core assumption that all states, when capable, will seek to dominate other states.[6] Liberal critics of realism argue that these pessimistic conclusions are only possible by ignoring other aspects of international relations, such as domestic politics and the role of international institutions in facilitating cooperation despite the anarchy of the international system.

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[6]Glenn H. Snyder, "Mearsheimer's World—Offensive Realism and the Struggle for Security," *International Security* 27, no. 1 (Summer 2002): 149-73.

The Limits of Offensive Realism

Mearsheimer's pessimistic views about Sino-American relations, or China-Taiwan relations, are based on his assumptions about the effects of an anarchic system on state behavior. However, his rigid systemic view blinds him to important changes in Chinese domestic politics and the importance of China's integration into major international organizations such as the United Nations, World Trade Organization (WTO), and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC)—developments often raised by neoliberals. Because the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) continued legitimacy is based primarily upon sustaining China's impressive economic growth, its domestic policy of economic reform and opening up determines its foreign policy—characterized as "seeking cooperation and avoiding trouble" with other great powers. China has therefore adopted an "America-comes-first" foreign policy and pursues a "policy of accommodation" with Washington.[7] This is clearly illustrated with a few dramatic examples. In 1996, China was careful to prevent the Taiwan Strait crisis from spinning out of control despite the direct challenge by the United States to China's sovereignty. Even after the United States bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in May 1999, the CCP leadership—despite significant popular outrage—carefully contained the anti-American protests and did not allow the crisis to interfere with economic and other key bilateral relations with the United States. The April 2001 mid-air collision between a U.S. spy plane and a Chinese fighter (that resulted in the death of the Chinese pilot) was quickly settled, with presidents Jiang Zemin (江澤民) and Groege W. Bush embracing strategic cooperation in the new war on terrorism very soon after. During an earlier period of time, any one of these incidents could have easily led to a Sino-American war. The rather muted Chinese response in all three cases shows, however, how China's domestic policy goals largely dictate China's foreign policy. Offensive

[7]Carol Lee Hamrin, "China's Political Succession," Institute for Global Engagement (October 23, 2002), available online at <http://www.globalengagement.org/issues/2002/10/china.htm>.

realism counters this optimistic assessment by pointing out that accommodation and peaceful cooperation may be possible at this time because China is not in a position to challenge U.S. domination, but in the future when China is more powerful, confrontation will be much more likely.

Even if China's worldview is based on realpolitik assumptions, China can still behave conservatively, simply trying to maintain its security and not seek to dominate its neighbors or challenge the United States. Neoclassical realists challenge offensive realist arguments that states always seek domination when militarily possible by pointing out that as China begins to feel it gains more from supporting—rather than challenging—the present world order, it switches from being a revisionist power to a status quo power.[8] China has a big stake in the emerging world order. China's status as a great power is in part guaranteed by its membership as one of the permanent five on the UN Security Council. China has not used its veto power to thwart U.S. policy, but rather seeks to accommodate the United States either by supporting key resolutions or at least abstaining. Despite domestic opposition and economic hardships caused by globalization, China views its membership in the WTO and leadership in APEC as tangible examples of its emergence as an important power in global economic relations and management.

Conservative Chinese nationalists argue that the best way to defend their country's national sovereignty and interests is to de-link with the United States, hook up with Asia, and join forces with Europe, including Russia, to oppose U.S. hegemony. Members of the PLA who have a heightened threat perception may support conservative nationalist views, but among the elite foreign policy leaders there is a consensus that the United States will remain the sole superpower for the foreseeable future and good relations with the United States are essential. Therefore, they place their hope for amicable Sino-American relations on the assumption that practical bilateral cooperation on international security, economics,

[8]Gideon Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy," *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (October 1998): 144-72.

and other global issues will ensure China's national interests.[9]

The Tragedy of Great Power Politics is a well written, carefully argued, and example-rich offensive realist manifesto. It is a must-read for anyone seeking a better understanding of the still dominant realist theories of international relations. Nevertheless, the limitations of offensive realism are evident because Mearsheimer does not take into account the moderating effects that globalization and the institutionalization of cooperation have on anarchy. Conflict and wars will continue to characterize the tragic nature of international relations, but a theory that offers a more nuanced analysis of international conflict and cooperation, domestic politics, and globalization is needed to strike a balance between the idyllic illusion of the "end of history" and the overly pessimistic view that states are destined to engage in an unending Hobbsian struggle for domination.

[9]Argument as also put forth in Hamrin, "China's Political Succession."