

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.

Asian Great-Power Politics and U.S. Policy: How "Realistic"?*

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John Mearsheimer's book is justly praised as a clear, logically-argued, and thought-provoking statement of "offensive realism," solidifying Mearsheimer's claim to the mantle of Kenneth Waltz as the dean of neorealist scholars.¹ Mearsheimer demonstrates his typically incisive analytical skills, which I first encountered as one of his graduate students at the University of Chicago. Furthermore, beyond laying out and supporting his theory of international politics, Mearsheimer assesses the current strategic landscape, including East Asia, in light of the principles derived from his reading of the history of great-power relations. He lives up to his own as-

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*The views expressed here are personal opinions of the author, and do not represent the official positions of the U.S. government, the Department of Defense, or the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies.

¹Waltz's most famous works are *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979) and *Man, the State and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959).

sertion that general theorizing should ultimately yield practical advice for policymakers.

Realism on Exotic Ground

Welcome though this project is, obstacles await Mearsheimer's attempt to apply realism to the Asia-Pacific region. To begin with, the history that informs Mearsheimer's conclusions is mostly Euro-American. Can an essentially Western theory successfully bridge the civilizational divide?

Japan may practice "mercantile realism" and may be "realistically" aware that its neighbors would be quick to balance against Japanese behavior they considered overly assertive.² Still, Japan's willingness to forego major power status and to maintain its dependency on the United States for its own defense appears patently inconsistent with the realist tenets that states in an anarchic system cannot trust each other and avoid leaving themselves vulnerable in vital areas. Japan could potentially make itself into a major regional power if it so chose. In this case Japan would be an "offshore" (and therefore less threatening) player like the United States, and a comparatively weak one because of its limited population. Yet Mearsheimer acknowledges (correctly) that Japan taking on such a role would increase security tensions because of "the deep-seated fear of Japan in Asia that is a legacy of its behavior between 1931 and 1945" (p. 399). At the same time, the stronger United States is perceived as non-threatening because Asians believe that "the United States has no appetite for conquest and domination outside of the Western Hemisphere" and because "offshore balancers do not provoke balancing coalitions against themselves" (p. 391). To explain the differences between perceptions of the United States and Japan, among other questions, it is clear we cannot be satisfied with understanding states merely as opaque billiard balls.

²Eric Heginbotham and Richard J. Samuels, "Mercantile Realism and Japanese Foreign Policy," *International Security* 22, no. 4 (Spring 1998): 171-203.

North Korea under the Kim Il Sung/Kim Jong Il regime clearly places *regime* security ahead of *state* security, even to the point of allowing deterioration of the fundamentals of national power: population and economic strength. Since realism is styled as an explanation of the behavior of major powers, realists contend that the behavior of a small country such as North Korea cannot count against the theory. Yet a hint of the same phenomenon is present in China's security policy. Few security analysts who have a solid understanding of China doubt that, if faced with the choice between acquiescing to formal Taiwanese independence and taking on the U.S. military, Beijing would opt for the latter—even if the Chinese leadership expected to lose a large proportion of their modern warships and combat aircraft. While weakening national security, a decision by the leaders in Beijing to defend national honor by putting up a good fight in defeat against a technologically-superior opponent would give them a chance of remaining in office, in contrast to the alternative choice. Indeed, there is a large literature on either side of the issue of whether or not China behaves according to realist principles.³

Perhaps the more valuable feature of Mearsheimer's book for analysts of Asian international politics is that it forces readers to think through several important policy issues. Two that I will comment on are U.S. troops in Asia and American policy toward China.

Bringing the Troops Home?

Mearsheimer distinguishes between two possible goals of U.S. military forces in Asia: preventing the outbreak of war and preventing another state from challenging for regional hegemony. Historically, he writes, "American armies were sent [to both Europe and Northeast Asia] to pre-

³Compare, for example, Thomas J. Christensen, "Chinese Realpolitik," *Foreign Affairs* 75, no. 5 (September-October 1996), with Alastair Iain Johnston, "International Structures and Chinese Foreign Policy," in *China and the World: Chinese Foreign Policy Faces the New Millennium*, ed. Samuel S. Kim, fourth edition (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1998).

vent the rise of peer competitors, not to maintain peace" (p. 389). Thus, he predicts that U.S. forces will soon pull out of their bases in Asia and come home if China (due to an economic slowdown) does not achieve the strength necessary to dominate the region. If China does emerge as a potential regional hegemon, American forces will stay in Asia.

Why, then, have U.S. forces stayed in Asia since the end of the Cold War, with the previously compelling Soviet threat gone and China yet to prove itself a potential hegemon? Mearsheimer's main reasons are "simple inertia" and that "too little time has passed." Thirteen years is plenty of time. More convincing reasons, I believe, are the lack of a constituency for bringing the troops home and suspicions about the future of China. Mearsheimer notes that "maintaining forces in . . . Northeast Asia since the 1990s has been relatively cheap and painless for the United States" (p. 390). The argument that America should not bear the cost of protecting Japan while the Japanese concentrated on beating Americans in the marketplace was briefly prominent in the late 1980s, but soon died down with the realization that Japan and South Korea pay a large proportion of the cost of hosting U.S. bases. Equally importantly, Americans accept the proposition that their Asia-based forces are not merely keeping the peace during the post-Cold War period. U.S. policymakers have specifically stated that an important purpose of deploying American military forces in East Asia is to "discourage the emergence of regional hegemony" and to avoid creating a "power vacuum" that one of the large Asia-Pacific states might be tempted to fill.⁴ To use Mearsheimer's terms, Washington intends to use the presence of U.S. forces in Asia not only to keep the peace but also to preclude

⁴The April 1996 "Report to the United States Congress by the Secretary of Defense" reads, "Forward deployed [U.S.] forces in the Pacific ensure a rapid and flexible worldwide crisis response capability, discourage the emergence of regional hegemony, and enhance our ability to influence a wide spectrum of important issues in the region" (available online at <http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/allied_contrib96/alov96_6.html>, accessed on January 15, 2003). Assistant Secretary of State Stanley Roth said in 2001, "I think the American view is that the forward deployment of U.S. troops in the region is stabilizing . . . and that the withdrawal of U.S. forces in totality from the region might well create a power vacuum that could lead to major shifts in the strategic equation in the region" (available online at <<http://usembassy.state.gov/seoul/www4476.html>>, accessed on January 15, 2003). Secretary of Defense William Cohen said in 2001, "We have 100,000 of our troops throughout the

a change in the international power structure.

This rationale is robust enough to sustain a policy of forward deployment for many years to come, barring an extraordinarily serious economic slump in both the United States and East Asia, even in the absence of a hegemonic challenger. This covers only the American side of the issue, however. Mearsheimer may turn out to be right about U.S. forces coming home from Asia, but for a different reason: assertive Korean and Japanese nationalism. Generational change, democratization, and mobilization based on deeply-held cultural, racial, and historical convictions in South Korea and Japan are combining to create strong host-nation movements for evicting U.S. bases. Mearsheimer focuses on the "pull," but the "push" factor will probably be far more significant in the near future.

I credit Mearsheimer for prodding readers to examine the assumption, often accepted uncritically, that the United States has a vital interest in keeping American forces in Asia. He makes a strong case for the alternative policy of entering a hypothetical Asian war at its later stages, preserving American choice and flexibility—disfavoring the current posture under which U.S. forces would be unavoidably involved in almost any significant military conflict in East Asia from the very beginning. His claim that the outbreak of major war in Northeast Asia would not inevitably harm American prosperity should be taken seriously. A relatively small percentage of U.S. wealth stems from foreign trade and investment, and most of that is tied to Europe, not Asia.

China as a Potential Hegemon

The PRC leadership has reiterated for over a decade that a stronger

Asia-Pacific region. . . . By virtue of the United States' presence throughout the Asia-Pacific region, we have created a stable environment. And if the United States were to leave tomorrow who would fill the vacuum? Would it be China, Japan, India, Pakistan? Nature abhors a vacuum, so does the geopolitical system. So there would be some contest for dominance in the region" (available online at <<http://usembassy.state.gov/islamabad/www01011202.html>>, accessed on January 15, 2003).

China "will never seek hegemony." Beijing claims that such behavior would be inconsistent with China's cultural background, commitment to a morally principled foreign policy, and sympathy for small countries. In Mearsheimer's view of world politics, such assurances must be dismissed as empty rhetoric. A China that sustained its present rate of economic growth until it surpassed Japan in wealth and became technologically advanced "would surely pursue regional hegemony," meaning that the PRC would "attempt to dominate Japan and Korea, as well as other regional actors." Furthermore, "We would also expect China to develop its own version of the Monroe Doctrine," demonstrating to the United States that "American interference in Asia is unacceptable" (p. 401). Chinese intentions to impose a regional hegemony unfavorable to both the United States and China's near neighbors would flow automatically from enhanced Chinese national capabilities.

Mearsheimer's view is a rebuttal to those who argue that if you treat China as a friend it will be your friend, but if you appear hostile you will make China your enemy. Engagement, he says, gives the game away. Tensions between a strong United States and a strong China would be inevitable even if America treated a developing China nicely. The heavy trade opportunities China gains as part of America's "engagement" posture only hasten China's emergence as a potential regional hegemon. Mearsheimer's brutally elegant logic yields the conclusion that the United States "has a profound interest in seeing Chinese economic growth slow considerably" (p. 402).

This of course horrifies many mainstream analysts in the West and appears to confirm the darkest fears of Chinese hard-liners about American intentions. One practical problem with Mearsheimer's approach is that few if any other countries would join the United States in an economic embargo of China. China would continue to grow anyway, while Americans would lose out on the economic opportunities of doing business with China. Thus Americans would likely pay a high cost without getting the anticipated benefit.

Mearsheimer, nonetheless, succeeds in highlighting the schizophrenia of recent U.S. policy toward China, which is a mixture of deterrence

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(for example, arms sales to help strengthen Taiwan) and restricted access (e.g., forbidding the transfer of certain types of U.S. technology to China) on the one hand and succor (tolerating a massive U.S. trade deficit with China) on the other. Mearsheimer's book challenges the "self-fulfilling prophecy" crowd to offer as strong a theoretical underpinning for their policy prescription as he does for his.

Although it represents only one of several variants of realism, Mearsheimer's book is commendable for the fullness of its articulation, from premises to policy choices, and for its geographic sweep. Structural realism remains a useful set of principles for understanding much of major power politics in East Asia. Like any general theory, however, it must be augmented by familiarity with domestic and regional political forces. In the case of East Asia, the real story is often found in the idiosyncratic details.