Conclusion

Mearsheimer's book asks big questions and provides provocative answers, rich in historic context. The concerns raised above regarding the definition of great powers (and thus the universe of applicability for the theory) and the existence of some contradictory evidence should not detract from the utility of the book for scholars of international relations. Yet before we put his prescriptions regarding China into practice, we need to better understand both how to operationalize the theory and when other—non-structural realist—factors are likely to dominate in the real world.

Good History, Questionable Theory*

BERNARD D. COLE

Professor John Mearsheimer of the University of Chicago has written an important book on international relations theory that offers a sweeping explanation of the behavior of nations. He calls his theory "offensive realism," a construct based on his belief that great powers are the primary actors in international politics and that these powers always seek to maximize their share of world power, seek regional hegemony, aim to maximize the amount of the world's wealth they control, aim to dominate the balance of land power, and seek nuclear superiority over their rivals. He further theorizes that multipolar international systems which contain a particularly powerful state—in other words, a potential hegemon—are

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*This review reflects the views of the author and may not reflect those of the National War College or any other agency of the U.S. Government.

especially characterized by the use of military action as a primary instrument of statecraft, and that "the world is condemned to perpetual great-power competition."

Mearsheimer is not consistently convincing in application of these tenets. He explains the relative lack of land power development by Great Britain and the United States, for instance, by describing these two great powers as "offshore balancers." That is a useful concept, but weakens rather than strengthens the author's point about great nations always "dominating" the balance of land power. Especially intriguing, although consigned by this reviewer to the sophistry bin, is his statement that U.S. participation in World Wars I and II was motivated not by a desire to "make peace," but to "prevent a dangerous foe from achieving regional hegemony." In this same category is the author's argument that U.S. forces were stationed in Northeast Asia during the long Cold War not to "keep peace," but to "prevent the Soviet Union from dominating the region."

Also somewhat adrift is Mearsheimer's treatment of nuclear power. Few theorists[1] have offered a theory of nuclear weapons that has been useful to the policymaker going about his or her daily business, and Mearsheimer does not better his predecessors. He does, however, correctly note the importance of land power even in the nuclear age; he points out that all conflicts since Hiroshima have been resolved by troops on the ground. More questionable is his treatment of China, which has not, in fact, sought "nuclear superiority" over its rivals, if Russia and the United States fall into that category.

Mearsheimer proclaims his theory both "descriptive" and "prescriptive." He spends most of the book offering interesting descriptions of historical developments as support for his theory; his concluding chapter describes the likely future actions of the world's great powers as predicted by his theoretical construct. His analysis suffers, however, from a general

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[1]For instance, see Herman Kahn, *On Thermonuclear War* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1978); Henry A. Kissinger, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957); Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1977); and George Quester, *Nuclear Diplomacy: The First Twenty-Five Years* (Associated Faculty Press, 1970).

disregard for the way domestic events influence a nation's international policies and actions.

A prime example is his repeated description of Russia in 1914 as "reeling from its defeat" to Japan in 1904-1905; in fact, however, the effects of Russia's 1905 revolution had a far more significant effect on St. Petersburg's policy focus than did the military loss to Japan in a conflict in which the Russian army was only partially committed. That the Russian navy was almost completely destroyed during this war should have been used by Mearsheimer to buttress his very cogent argument that land power remains the major ingredient in a great power's military strength: despite losing its fleet, the Tsarist empire remained very much a great power well into World War I. The Russian army's advance westward in 1914 was a major reason for Berlin's decision to weaken the von Schlieffen plan's thrust into France and the resulting stalemate.

The author ascribes a nation's power to its military strength, underpinned by national wealth, which "itself is a good indicator of latent power." This nicely fits into China's repeatedly announced national goal of building a "rich country [and a] strong army" (富國強兵, *fuguo qiangbing*), a motto taken from nineteenth century Japan's Meiji Restoration, and one that accurately reflects Beijing's determination to develop national wealth as a foundation for building an already formidable military into an even stronger force. Moreover, China certainly fulfills Mearsheimer's emphasis on land power as the most important military element: the two million-plus strong People's Liberation Army (PLA) numbers approximately 1.5 million in the army, with approximately a quarter-million each in the air force and navy.

Mearsheimer is not at his best when discussing the international scene in Northeast Asia; his discussion of the area rests on questionable estimates of the relative national power of Japan, China, and Russia. The author repeatedly describes this region as dominated by Russia, China, and the United States. He apparently denigrates Japan as an economic power without the requisite military strength to qualify as a great power, yet in fact the Japanese air force and navy are by a significant degree the strongest in the region. Perhaps Mearsheimer disregards Tokyo's military strength be-

cause of its relatively weak land forces; while fitting in with his view of the dominance of land power, this argument does not satisfactorily account for Japan's position as an archipelago located in a geographically maritime region. A strong land force is simply not required by a Japan that does not have continental ambitions in Asia. He also significantly overrates Moscow's remaining military and economic power in Siberian Russia. The military forces in this area are a shadow of their former presence, the local population has declined significantly since 1990, and the economy is staggering.

An even more interesting facet of Mearsheimer's description of the Northeast Asian political situation is his refusal to categorize China as a possible future hegemon in the region.[2] Despite that repeated omission, the author concludes his book by describing China as "the key to understanding the future distribution of power in Northeast Asia," and as being a "future threat" that is "more powerful and dangerous than any of the potential hegemons that the United States confronted in the twentieth century." He uses this evaluation of the Chinese threat to describe the U.S. policy of "engagement" as "misguided."

Mearsheimer is certainly not an alarmist and he very accurately notes that U.S. foreign policy has been marked by disconnects between the rhetoric resulting from a moralistic framework on the one hand and the policies engendered by realism on the other. This observation is particularly applicable to the history of Sino-American relations, so heavily influenced by the unfulfilled and probably unrealistic aspirations of American religious missionaries and businessmen. The reader would benefit, however, from the author elucidating the policies America should adopt in Northeast Asia in order to reduce the potential Chinese threat; Mearsheimer's theory fails his standard as a prescriptive formula on many counts, being unable, for instance, to provide determinate answers to such questions as: Will Japan's economy (still the world's second largest)

[2]Mearsheimer's theory might be clearer if he provided a more useful definition of hegemony —defined on page 40 only as "domination of the system."

"recover" from its long-running malaise? Will China continue its development as Asia's dominant military and economic power? What effect will the diffusion of U.S. power given the multifaceted "war on terror" mean for the exercise of American power in Asia—already significantly affected by the focus on Iraq and resulting soft treatment of North Korea? Most importantly, how does "offensive realism" allow us to conclude that these nations will adopt policies otherwise indiscernible to American policy-makers?

In sum, John Mearsheimer has offered up a well-written (despite his curious use on several occasions of "for sure" as an introductory phrase) book that should be read by students and practitioners of U.S. national security policy. It will be less useful for China-watchers, however, since his theory of "offensive realism" apparently does not enable him to arrive at meaningful policy recommendations for Washington's future relations with Beijing.