

Mearsheimer's World— Offensive Realism and the Struggle for Security

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A Review Essay

John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of
Great Power Politics*. New York:
W.W. Norton, 2001.

More than fifty years have passed since Hans Morgenthau introduced “realism” as an approach to the study of international relations. Since then, the approach has withstood not only a steady assault from such external quarters as liberal institutionalism, the democratic peace school, and “constructivism” but also a marked divisive tendency. Splinter groups have emerged, each waving an identifying adjective to herald some new variant or emphasis. The first of these came in the late 1970s, when Kenneth Waltz’s “neorealism” marked a major split from Morgenthau’s traditional realism, which henceforth became known as “classical” realism.¹ Since then, especially during the last decade, new variants and new tags have proliferated. The field of international relations now has at least two varieties of “structural realism,”² probably three kinds of “offensive realism,”³

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1. Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979); and Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948 and later editions). Other traditional (classical) realist works are E.H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919–1939* (London: Macmillan, 1946); Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York: Scribner's, 1932); Nicholas Spykman, *America's Strategy in World Politics: The United States and the Balance of Power* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1942); and Arnold Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration: Essays on International Politics* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins, 1962).

2. The label “structural” is sometimes applied to Waltz’s theory, but the “English school,” led by Barry Buzan, has claimed that label for its modification of Waltz. See Buzan, Charles Jones, and Richard Little, *The Logic of Anarchy: Neorealism to Structural Realism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993). Waltz himself uses the two terms interchangeably.

3. Examples of offensive realism include John J. Mearsheimer, “Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War,” *International Security*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Summer 1990), pp. 5–57; Eric J. Labs, “Beyond Victory: Offensive Realism and the Expansion of War Aims,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (December 1997), pp. 1–49; Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); and Fareed Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America's World Role* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998).

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and several types of “defensive realism,”⁴ in addition to “neoclassical,” “contingent,” “specific,” and “generalist” realism.⁵ The debate among partisans of these differing views has been vigorous. It has also been helpful in clarifying—if not resolving—some of the issues involved. A prominent participant in these debates has been John Mearsheimer, under the banner of offensive realism. He now offers readers a book-length statement of his views, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*.⁶

This volume has been eagerly awaited by many international relations scholars and comes with strong recommendations from those who have read it. For example, Samuel Huntington declares on the dust jacket that it “ranks with, and in many respects supersedes, the works of Morgenthau and Waltz in the core canon of the realist literature on international politics.” I attempt in this essay to assess to what extent, and in what respects, this encomium may be justified. I compare offensive realism mainly to Waltz’s theory, because Mearsheimer himself casts Waltz as the leading defensive realist and his primary target. I conclude that the book is a major theoretical advance. It does not

4. Besides Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, other examples of defensive realism include Robert Jervis, “Cooperation under the Security Dilemma,” *World Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (January 1978), pp. 167–214; Sean M. Lynn-Jones, “Realism and America’s Rise: A Review Essay,” *International Security*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Fall 1998), pp. 157–183; Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991); Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984); Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: The Structure of Power and the Roots of War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999); and Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991). For surveys of the various branches of realism, see Stephen G. Brooks, “Dueling Realisms,” *International Organization*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (Summer 1997), pp. 445–477; Colin Elman, “Horses for Courses: Why Not Neorealist Theories of Foreign Policy?” *Security Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Autumn 1996), pp. 7–53; Sean M. Lynn-Jones and Steven E. Miller, “Preface,” in Michael E. Brown, Lynn-Jones, and Miller, eds., *The Perils of Anarchy: Contemporary Realism and International Security* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995); Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, “Security Seeking under Anarchy: Defensive Realism Revisited,” *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (Winter 2000/01), pp. 128–161; and Benjamin Frankel, “Restating the Realist Case: An Introduction,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Spring 1996), pp. xiv–xx. Jack Donnelly provides a trenchant critique in *Realism and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). It could be argued that there are two cross-cutting dichotomies: classical realism versus neorealism, and offensive realism versus defensive realism. From that perspective, Mearsheimer and Waltz are both neorealists, the former offensive, the latter defensive.

5. Gideon Rose coined the term “neoclassical realism” in “Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy,” *World Politics*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (October 1998), pp. 144–172. Charles L. Glaser calls himself a “contingent realist” in “Realists as Optimists: Cooperation as Self-Help,” *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Winter 1994/95), pp. 50–90. Richard Rosecrance proposes “specific” and “generalist” strands of realism in “Has Realism Become Cost-Benefit Analysis? A Review Essay,” *International Security*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (Fall 2001), pp. 132–155.

6. John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001). Subsequent references to this book appear parenthetically in the text.

supersede Waltz, but nicely complements him by introducing a theoretical rationale for revisionist states. This provides a foundation for merging offensive and defensive realism into a single theory. Mearsheimer also offers striking new insights into balance-of-power theory, the role of geography, and the debate over land power versus air and naval power. The theory is tested and illustrated over two centuries of history and projected two decades into the twenty-first century. These projections are provocative and pessimistic—but still plausible. The book's principal weakness is its overemphasis on power and security maximization as motivations of states' behavior.

This essay follows the organization of the book. It begins with a summary and critique of the core of offensive realism, then moves to a discussion of the historical evidence bearing on the theory. Next, Mearsheimer's ideas about balancing and buck-passing are criticized and related to broader concepts in alliance theory. After a brief look at his findings on the causes of war, the essay concludes with an analysis of his prescriptions for future U.S. foreign policy.

The Core Theory: Mearsheimer versus Waltz

Mearsheimer begins with the assertion that great powers “maximize their relative power” (p. 21). That puts him close to Morgenthau, who famously proclaimed a never-ending struggle for power among states, arising from an *animus dominandi*—that is, a natural human urge to dominate others.⁷ Mearsheimer, however, rejects this source of causation. There is a limitless power struggle, he avers, but what drives it is not an appetite for power in the human animal, but a search for security that is forced by the anarchic structure of the international system. When all states have capabilities for doing each other harm, each is driven to amass as much power as it can to be as secure as possible against attack. This assumption of a security motivation and structural causation, of course, places Mearsheimer closer to Waltz. Where Mearsheimer departs from Waltz is in his assertion that the search for power and security is insatiable, whereas Waltz says that it has limits. Thus he disagrees with Waltz on the question of “how much power states want.” Mearsheimer makes the point succinctly: “For defensive realists, the international structure provides states with little incentive to seek additional increments of power; instead it pushes them to maintain the existing balance of

7. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, chap. 1.

power. Preserving power, rather than increasing it, is the main goal of states. Offensive realists, on the other hand, believe that status quo powers are rarely found in world politics, because the international system creates powerful incentives for states to look for opportunities to gain power at the expense of rivals, and to take advantage of those situations when the benefits outweigh the costs. A state's ultimate goal is to be the hegemon in the system" (p. 21).

Waltz confirms the disagreement: "In anarchy, security is the highest end. Only if survival is assured can states safely seek such other goals as tranquility, profit and power. The first concern of states is not to maximize power but to maintain their positions in the system."⁸ Clearly, Waltz believes that "survival" (i.e., sufficient security) can be assured with power well short of the "hegemonic" amount postulated by Mearsheimer.

The notions of "hegemon" and "potential hegemon" are prominent in Mearsheimer's theory. Global hegemony is virtually impossible, except for a state that has acquired "clear-cut nuclear superiority," defined as "a capability to devastate its rivals without fear of retaliation" (p. 145). Barring that unlikely development, hegemony can only be regional. A hegemon is the only great power in its system. Thus, if a region contains more than one great power, there is no hegemon. The United States is the only regional hegemon in modern history, through its domination of the Western Hemisphere. Other states, such as Japan and Nazi Germany, have reached for that status but failed.

States that do achieve hegemony are still not satisfied; they will seek to prevent the rise of "peer competitors"—other hegemonies—in nearby regions that are accessible by land (pp. 41–42).⁹ In other words, they will try to maintain a balance of power between at least two great powers in such an adjoining region, so that the attention and energy of these powers will be absorbed in defending against each other.

A potential hegemon is the most powerful state in a regional system, but it is more than that. It is so powerful that it stands a good chance of dominating its region by overcoming its great power neighbors, if not all together, at least in sequence. There is a "marked gap" between the size of its economy and army and that of the second most powerful state in the system (p. 45). Potential

8. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 126.

9. The term "peer competitor" resonates with language found in a 1992 Department of Defense planning document that was repudiated or at least rewritten in response to criticism. See "Excerpts from the Pentagon's Plan: 'Prevent the Re-emergence of a New Rival,'" *New York Times*, March 8, 1992, p. A14.

hegemony always aspire to be hegemony, and they will not stop increasing their power until they succeed.

It is only fair to point out that Mearsheimer's vision seems less radical when one takes into account various qualifiers. Great powers try to expand only when opportunities arise. They will do so only when the benefits clearly exceed the risks and costs. They will desist from expansion when blocked and wait for a "more propitious moment" (p. 37). In a 1990 article, Mearsheimer stated that one reason hegemony was rare was that "costs of expansion usually outrun the benefits before domination is achieved."¹⁰

The term "expansion" appears to mean, although it is never explicitly stated, increased power through increased control of territory. Mearsheimer devotes considerable space to arguing, and demonstrating with historical data, that offensive action often succeeds and that conquest does or can "pay" economically and strategically. He does not emphasize that expansion may contribute (positively or negatively) to values other than power and security.

Mearsheimer's offensive realism seems to predict much more conflict and war than does Waltz's defensive realism. States are never satisfied; they keep reaching for more power, and these power urges seem bound to collide. Mearsheimer's states seem perilously close to Arnold Wolfers's "hysterical Caesars"—states that, "haunted by fear," pursue "the will-of-the-wisp of absolute security."¹¹ Waltz's states are less fearful, more accepting of risks, more oriented toward particular nonsecurity interests, and more willing to live with only a modest amount of security. Sensible statesmen seek only an "appropriate" amount of power, given their security needs, says Waltz.¹²

If his fundamental difference with Waltz is about the amount of security that states desire or require, as Mearsheimer suggests, we can put a finer point on it. Security might be defined crudely as the probability that one's core interests will not be challenged or violated over some reasonable time span. The amount of security actually "purchased" by an increment of power would then translate into an increase in that probability. But increments would be purchased only so long as their marginal security value exceeded their opportu-

10. In an earlier article, Mearsheimer stated that hegemony is rare because "the costs of expansion usually outrun the benefits before domination is achieved." Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future," p. 13, n. 15.

11. Arnold Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration: Essays on International Politics* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins Press, 1962), p. 84.

12. Kenneth N. Waltz, "The Origins of War in Neorealist Theory," in Robert I. Rotberg and Theodore K. Rabb, eds., *The Origin and Prevention of Major Wars* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 40.

nity costs. Waltz (or another defensive realist) might argue that at some point well short of hegemony, power/security accumulation runs into diminishing marginal returns, until costs begin to exceed benefits and security purchases fade to nothing. Mearsheimer denies that increments of security diminish in value at the margin; in fact, he asserts the opposite: A state with a marked power advantage over its rivals will behave more aggressively than one facing powerful opponents “because it has the capability as well as the incentive to do so” (p. 37). This seems to say that as a state accumulates power, its marginal costs of further accumulation decline and/or marginal benefits increase, so that future increments are subject to increasing returns. Waltz, on the other hand, declares that “states balance power rather than maximize it. States can seldom afford to make maximum power their goal. International politics is too serious a business for that.”¹³ In other words, after a state has balanced against a dangerous opponent and thereby achieved a satisfactory degree of security, there is no further need for power accumulation.

How these two theorists can reach such different conclusions is something of a puzzle. Waltz (and most other realists) would find little fault with Mearsheimer’s list of “bedrock assumptions”: The system is anarchic, great powers possess some offensive capabilities, no state can be certain of others’ intentions, survival is the primary goal, and actors are rational (pp. 30–31). From these assumptions, Mearsheimer deduces that great powers will fear each other and will constantly seek to alleviate this fear by maximizing their share of world power: “States are disposed to think offensively toward other states even though their ultimate motive is simply to survive. In short, great powers have aggressive intentions” (p. 34). But aggressiveness does not follow necessarily from Mearsheimer’s explicit assumptions. It follows implicitly from an unstated assumption: that great powers place a very high value on security, much higher than Waltz’s actors do. We might say that whereas Waltz imagines a world of “satisficers,” Mearsheimer sees only “maximizers.”

Mearsheimer suggests that the difference between them arises partly from the difficulty of estimating levels of security and security requirements. He challenges Waltz’s claim that a great power might feel secure with only an “appropriate” amount of power, short of dominating the system. This is “not persuasive,” says Mearsheimer, because of the difficulty of estimating a level of “appropriateness” and because what is a satisfactory security level today

13. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 127.

might not be sufficient in the future. Great powers recognize that the best way to ensure security is to “achieve hegemony now,” thereby eliminating any possibility of a future deficit (pp. 34–35). Thus Mearsheimer’s great powers require a surplus of power over “appropriateness” to cover uncertainties, possible miscalculation, and future surprises. It seems ironic that these two structural realists should differ most basically about a “unit-level” factor: that is, how much security do states desire?

THE SECURITY DILEMMA

A central concept in nearly all realist theory is that of the “security dilemma.” Mearsheimer quotes with approval John Herz’s original statement of the dilemma: “Striving to attain security from . . . attack, [states] are driven to acquire more and more power in order to escape the impact of the power of others. This, in turn, renders the others more insecure and compels them to prepare for the worst. Since none can ever feel entirely secure in such a world of competing units, power competition ensues and the vicious circle of security and power accumulation is on” (p. 36).¹⁴

This, says Mearsheimer, is “a synoptic statement of offensive realism.” However, this is correct only in a limited sense: The great powers in offensive realism indeed are interested primarily in security, and their security moves do threaten others, causing them to take countermeasures, as in the security dilemma. But here the similarity begins to fade. The security dilemma, in most formulations (including Herz’s), emphasizes how power and security competition can occur between states that want nothing more than to preserve the status quo.¹⁵ Although no one is actually aggressive, uncertainty about others’ intentions forces each to take protective measures that appear threatening to others. But there are no status quo powers in Mearsheimer’s world. All great powers are revisionist and “primed for offense” (p. 3). Mearsheimer does allow that states do not know each other’s intentions for sure, but he also says that they “are likely to recognize their own motives at play in the actions of other states” (p. 35). If all are revisionist and believe (correctly) that others are too, it is hard to see any “dilemma.” Each great power’s security measures present real threats to others, not merely hypothetical ones. Hence there is no

14. John H. Herz, “Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma,” *World Politics*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (January 1950), pp. 157–180.

15. The literature on the security dilemma is huge, but two leading sources are Jervis, “Cooperation under the Security Dilemma”; and Charles L. Glaser, “The Security Dilemma Revisited,” *World Politics*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (October 1997), pp. 171–201.

question of “unnecessary” competition being generated by the need to ensure against uncertain threats.

Moreover, security moves in the offensive realist scenario are moves of territorial expansion, which involve actually taking something from others, rather than merely preparing to do so, as with arms procurement or alliance formation. Because territorial expansion is itself predatory, it strongly implies future predatory intentions. Thus, even though the expanding state’s ultimate objective is “security,” its actual behavior on the way to achieving this objective may be virtually indistinguishable from pure aggrandizement. In this world, security needs are bound to be incompatible; not everyone can increase their “share of world power” at the same time. There is a lot of security competition but little security “dilemma.”

Mearsheimer draws from Herz’s analysis the “implication” that “the best way for a state to survive in anarchy is to take advantage of other states and gain power at their expense. The best defense is a good offense” (p. 36).¹⁶ He takes issue with “some defensive realists” who emphasize that offensive strategies are self-defeating, because they trigger balancing countermoves. “Given this understanding of the security dilemma,” he declares, “hardly any security competition should ensue among rational states, because it would be fruitless, maybe even counter-productive, to try to gain advantage over rival powers. Indeed, it is difficult to see why states operating in a world where aggressive behavior equals self-defeating behavior would face a ‘security dilemma.’ It would seem to make good sense for all states to forsake war and live in peace” (p. 417, n. 27). Mearsheimer could have pointed to the possible bad consequences of “living in peace” as a reason why security measures, even “self-defeating” ones, may be necessary. For example, inaction in the form of a failure to take deterrent measures may be exploited by a rival, at a possible cost far greater than the costs of action. The option of inaction is often omitted in discussions of the security dilemma, even though it is the “other horn” of the dilemma and usually essential to a full explanation of outcomes.

But Mearsheimer does not make this argument. Instead he contends that offensive military action is not, or need not be, “self-defeating.” This is simply

16. Mearsheimer does not explicitly relate the severity of the security dilemma to the offense-defense balance in military technology. He does assume, however, that great powers “inherently possess some offensive military capability” (p. 30), and he faults “some defensive realists” for exaggerating the superiority of the defense (p. 39). Also, his treatment of geographic factors implies a sensitivity to the offense-defense balance (chap. 4). For a comprehensive survey of the literature on this topic, see Sean M. Lynn-Jones, “Offense-Defense Theory and Its Critics,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (Summer 1995), pp. 660–695.

because conquest is often successful and profitable. In this way, he defends his theory against the charge that its actors are irrational in failing to anticipate the balancing process. That many of them (e.g., Nazi Germany) were eventually defeated does not show that they were irrational, he claims, but only that they took a rational “calculated risk” that happened to be unsuccessful. They could easily have been successful; indeed they came close. Balancing coalitions eventually formed, but these are “difficult to put together” (p. 212).

One reason why the security dilemma does not fit neatly into Mearsheimer's theory—or why it has to be bent out of shape to fit—is the linking of an inherently defensive goal—security and survival—with offensive behavior. In particular, it seems perverse to insist on discussing territorial expansion as a means to achieving security, rather than to something beyond security (e.g., national glory, honor, or perhaps economic enrichment). A corollary of this is the scant attention that Mearsheimer pays to various nonsecurity goals, such as advancing an ideology or seeking national unification. Mearsheimer's chief message about nonsecurity goals is that great powers pursue them only when they are not in conflict with power and security imperatives (p. 46). Many concrete “national interests” will, of course, involve some combination of security and nonsecurity values, just as strategies may require some mixture of offensive and defensive elements. In many cases, nonsecurity interests may be the more compelling. France, for example, was interested in the return of Alsace-Lorraine after 1871 largely for reasons other than the province's strategic or security value. Of course, bringing nonsecurity values into Mearsheimer's theory might weaken the theory by placing limits on power needs and diluting security motivations. But parsimony and logical elegance may need to be sacrificed in favor of greater “realism.”

STATUS QUO VERSUS REVISIONIST STATES

Waltz's theory, says Mearsheimer, suffers from a “status quo bias” (p. 20): It is entirely a theory about how defensively motivated states behave. Waltz probably would answer that his theory does admit the presence of revisionist states, even though their motivation, being generated at the “unit level,” is outside the purview of his theory. Moreover, he need not distinguish between revisionist and status quo powers to make his theory work; competition for power and security ensues even when all states seek only security.¹⁷ Although Waltz admits the possibility of revisionist states, he has virtually nothing to say about

17. Waltz, “The Origins of War in Neorealist Theory,” pp. 43–44.

what drives them; all he has to offer is words of caution: The “excessive accumulation of power” will be self-defeating, because it will merely trigger balancing behavior.¹⁸

Mearsheimer sets out to correct Waltz’s alleged status quo bias. But in doing so, he seems to overcorrect, although this impression may be largely due to his confrontational style. If Waltz’s theoretical world is populated entirely by status quo states, Mearsheimer’s contains only revisionist ones. All states, or at least all great powers, seek to maximize power (i.e., military strength) because every increment of power increases their chances of survival in an anarchic system. Therefore there are virtually no status quo powers.¹⁹ Only in the rare case when a state reaches the rank of hegemon does the drive for power relax and the state become satisfied with the status quo. There may be occasional lulls before then because of a lack of opportunity to expand, but the desire for power remains and will be reactivated when circumstances permit.

Mearsheimer does make an important theoretical contribution in “bringing the revisionist state back in,” thus satisfying Randall Schweller’s plea.²⁰ Mearsheimer and Schweller are correct that Waltzian neorealism is primarily a theory about how defensively oriented states behave in response to structural constraints. Mearsheimer enlarges the scope of neorealist theory by providing a theoretical rationale for the behavior of revisionist states, one that also locates causation in international system structure. Starting from this similarity, the two theories could work in tandem—the one chiefly explaining the security behavior of status quo powers, the other the behavior of revisionist states. A given state might be oriented offensively in some situations and defensively in others; the two theories then would alternate in explaining its behavior. The dynamics of the two models tend to interact. Balancing by status quo powers, for example, closes off avenues for expansion by revisionist states; buck-passing by status quo states may open up such opportunities. When offensive opportunities are blocked, aggressive states may not just “lie low” but actively participate in defensive balancing against their rivals. A balancing coalition may move beyond mere defeat of an aggressive state to offensive action de-

18. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

19. Mearsheimer notes an apparent contradiction in Morgenthau’s theory between a universal “lust for power” and the existence of status quo states (pp. 408–409). Barry Posen, a defensive realist, writes that status quo states are “the rule rather than the exception.” See Posen, *Sources of Military Doctrine*, p. 69.

20. Randall L. Schweller, “Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In,” *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Summer 1994), pp. 72–108. Schweller’s revisionist states are different from Mearsheimer’s, however, because they have nonsecurity as well as security goals.

signed to weaken it. There is already a good deal of overlap between these two realist theories and a potential for more.²¹ The overlap can be exploited to deal with mixed motives and situations.

The Core Theory: Historical Cases

Mearsheimer tests and demonstrates the empirical validity of his theory by examining six cases of great power behavior: Japan from 1868 to 1945; Germany from 1862 to 1945; the Soviet Union from 1917 to 1991; Italy from 1861 to 1943; Great Britain from 1792 to 1945; and the United States from 1800 to 1990. He seeks to show that “the history of great-power politics involves primarily the clashing of revisionist states” and that “the only status quo powers that appear in the story are regional hegemons.” The evidence must also show that great powers “do not practice self-denial when they have the wherewithal to shift the balance in their favor, and that the appetite for power does not decline once states have a lot of it” (pp. 168–169).

The cases of Japan, Germany, the Soviet Union, and Italy strongly support Mearsheimer's theory. These states were constantly alert for opportunities to expand and took advantage of them. Further, they became more aggressive the more power they accumulated. The primary motive in all four cases was increasing security. Their leaders “talked and thought” like offensive realists (p. 170). There were a few exceptions, but according to Mearsheimer, these are mostly explainable in the theory's terms. Thus instances of nonexpansion were largely the result of successful deterrence, rather than a disappearance of the motive to expand (p. 169). Germany between 1871 and 1900, for example, was a nonaggressive state, but this was because any further expansion beyond the unification of Germany would have triggered a great power war that Germany would lose. So, as the theory predicts, it accepted the status quo, lying low until 1903, by which time it had become a potential hegemon, possessing both more wealth and a more powerful army than any other European state. The aggressive policy of *Weltpolitik* soon followed. A reasonable question can be raised, especially in the case of Nazi Germany, as to whether these states were

21. A similar suggestion for integrating defensive and offensive realism is made by Lynn-Jones, in “Realism and America's Rise,” pp. 181–182. Jack Donnelly sees offensive realism and defensive realism not as competitors but as “different derivations from the realist hard core.” The greatest theoretical need, he declares, is a theory focused on motivation, one that can provide an account “of when states are likely to seek to improve and when they will seek to preserve their position.” See Donnelly, *Realism and International Relations*, pp. 64–65, 76.

driven chiefly by security aspirations or by other values, such as economic aggrandizement, prestige, or power as an end in itself. Moreover, it is not convincing that states that were temporarily nonaggressive, such as late nineteenth-century Germany, nevertheless entertained secret aggressive aims. Such an interpretation tends to make the theory nonfalsifiable because any state that desisted from power maximization could be said to be merely biding its time.

Mearsheimer's theory faces a much harder test, it would seem, in the two cases involving democratic powers—the United States and Great Britain. They pass the test, however, although on somewhat different grounds. **By 1900 the United States had established itself as a great power and hegemon in the Western Hemisphere and possessed the capability to expand into Europe and Asia. Yet it did not do so, in apparent contradiction of Mearsheimer's claim that great powers attempt to maximize power.** Nor did Great Britain aspire to hegemony in Europe during the peak of its power in the nineteenth century. Mearsheimer explains these anomalies in terms of **"the stopping power of water"**—large bodies of water, he claims, drastically limit the power-projection capability of armies. Thus the Atlantic Ocean not only protected the United States from Europe but also Europe from the United States; likewise the English Channel blocked British expansion in Europe. Mearsheimer marshals little theoretical or historical support for this thesis, other than to emphasize the difficulty of carrying out amphibious landings against a well-defended shoreline. The apparent counterexample of Japan's successful invasions is neutralized by citing the weakness of its continental opponents, Russia and China (p. 265). **But then one wonders whether the "stopping power" resides in the water or the strength of opponents—or simply a lack of interest in expansion.**

Having attained hegemonic status in its own region, the United States acted in other regions as offensive realism predicts: It intervened as an "offshore balancer" to prevent the rise of hegemons in other regions—notably Europe and Northeast Asia. No matter that the United States passed the buck to others in the years just prior to the two world wars. The theory predicts that regional hegemons do not intervene in neighboring regions until it is clear that local powers cannot contain their would-be hegemon. When intervention became necessary in Europe and Northeast Asia, the United States acted as Mearsheimer's theory predicts. Great Britain did likewise. Mearsheimer claims that the behavior of both Britain and the United States "corresponds with the predictions of offensive realism" (p. 264).

Perhaps the case studies would have been less vulnerable to a suspicion of selection bias if some other states, or other time periods, had been chosen. Japan, Germany, the Soviet Union, and Italy in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries are about as aggressive a collection of states as could be imagined. Mearsheimer pleads “reasons of space” to explain his decision not to include other European great powers, such as Austria, France, Prussia, and Russia before 1917, but says he is confident that their foreign policy histories “would not contradict—indeed, would support—the main tenets of offensive realism” (p. 465, n. 2).

Balancing and Passing the Buck: The Theory

Mearsheimer's offensive realist states are not on the offensive all the time. Occasionally they are faced with having to deter and contain a rival that seeks to gain power at their expense. In that defensive role, they have a choice between two strategies—balancing and buck-passing. Balancing means acting to preserve an existing distribution of power (e.g., by supporting a state that is challenged by a revisionist state). Buck-passing is to hold back and take no action, with the intent of shifting the burden of resistance onto an ally or some other state. The choice, Mearsheimer argues, will turn on the structure of the system and geography. There are three possible system structures: bipolar, balanced multipolar, and unbalanced multipolar.²² The bipolar system is uninteresting because buck-passing is impossible—there is no one to “catch” a buck passed by a superpower. Buck-passing is most attractive in a balanced multipolar system because, with roughly equal capabilities, each great power individually can hold off an aggressor, and is therefore capable of “accepting” the buck. In an unbalanced system, when one state is markedly more powerful than its neighbors (a potential hegemon), those neighbors are too weak to accept the buck, so everyone will have a strong common interest in balancing against the powerful state. But buck-passing occurs even in an unbalanced system and is the “clearly preferred” strategy, Mearsheimer concludes, based on his historical cases (p. 160).

The reasons buck-passing is preferred, he speculates, are threefold. First, it is cheap: The cost of fighting is borne by the ally and oneself takes a “free ride.”

22. The terms “balanced” and “unbalanced” power refer to the distribution of power—latent and actual military capabilities—between the great powers in a system, not the formation or nonformation of defensive coalitions.

Second, the aggressor and the buck-catcher may get involved in a long and debilitating war that leaves the buck-passer stronger than both. Third, if a state faces several adversaries, it may employ buck-passing to tackle them sequentially.

The chief drawback to passing the buck is, of course, that the designated buck-catcher might fail to resist the aggressor, or resist unsuccessfully, leaving the buck-passer in the field alone with the aggressor. Thus the Soviet Union found itself all alone with Germany in 1940, after France and Britain failed to catch the buck that the Soviet Union passed them in 1939 (p. 161). Mearsheimer does not emphasize what presumably is the central trade-off in choosing between balancing and buck-passing: maximization of deterrence at the cost of certain involvement if deterrence fails (balancing) versus less effective deterrence plus a greater chance of staying out of war if it occurs (buck-passing).

The geographical variables are chiefly whether the aggressor and the threatened states share a common border, and whether they are separated by water. When challenger and defender are contiguous on land, balancing will be favored because otherwise the challenger might easily overrun the defender. When they are not contiguous, and especially when they are separated by water, buck-passing will be frequent because there is a good chance the immediate defender can defend itself without aid (pp. 271–272).

In sum, balancing will be most strongly favored in a unbalanced multipolar system when the immediate protagonists are neighbors on land. Buck-passing will be the strategy of choice in a balanced system, especially when the defender is either insular or located at some distance from the challenger.

This subtheory of offensive realism is innovative and interesting in several ways. First, it posits two differently structured multipolar systems, whereas Waltz considers only one—implicitly a system of equal powers. Mearsheimer’s unbalanced multipolarity might be considered a model of the contemporary “unipolarity,” although he does not interpret it that way.

Second, his melding of geographical factors with comparative capabilities is a welcome improvement over other analyses that too often ignore the importance of geography. Mearsheimer devotes an entire chapter to this subject, emphasizing “the stopping power of water” and the superiority of land forces over naval and air power.

Third, Mearsheimer finds little empirical support or theoretical merit for “bandwagoning”—allying with rather than against a powerful state—which some theorists consider the opposite of balancing. Although minor states may

have no other choice, great powers rarely bandwagon. Mearsheimer gives a peculiar reason for this rarity: Bandwagoning, he says, entails shifting the distribution of power in the stronger ally's favor, which "violates the basic canon of offensive realism—that states maximize relative power" (p. 163). Bandwagoning means "conceding that [the] formidable new partner will gain a disproportionate share of the spoils they conquer together" (pp. 162–163). But it is hard to see how joining up with a more powerful state would necessarily entail a sacrifice in relative gains. Why not a proportionate sharing of the spoils? Or a disproportionate share to the joiner, who might have provided the last crucial increment of power to achieve victory? Indeed Waltz asserts a different reason for the infrequency of bandwagoning: "If states wished to maximize power, they would join the stronger side and we would see not balances forming but a world hegemony forged. This does not happen because balancing, not bandwagoning, is the behavior induced by the system. The first concern of states is not to maximize power, but to maintain their positions in the system."²³ Thus Mearsheimer and Waltz arrive at the same conclusion—that bandwagoning is a rare occurrence—but by using different assumptions about motivation: power maximizing versus power balancing. Of the two, Waltz's reasoning is the more plausible.

Balancing and Passing the Buck: The History

In five case studies, Mearsheimer shows that great powers tend to favor buck-passing over balancing. As predicted, buck-passing was most evident in the single case when the challenger—Bismarckian Prussia—was not yet a potential hegemon. France and Austria, in close sequence, misjudged that the other could defeat Prussia by itself, and so failed to ally to prevent Prussian victories in 1866 and 1870. Great Britain and Russia also stood aside, but they actually wanted a strengthened Prussia—in Britain's case, to balance against France and Russia; for Russia, to balance against Austria and France. So these two powers really balanced rather than passed the buck.

Balancing coalitions did form against aggressors in the other cases. Yet there were conspicuous instances of buck-passing as well. Clear-cut balancing occurred in the lead-up to World War I in Europe, between the Triple Alliance and the Triple Entente. Buck-passing was ruled out for France and Russia be-

23. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 126.

cause neither was strong enough by itself to stand up to Germany's superior military strength, and both were geographically vulnerable because of their shared borders with Germany. A factor in British balancing was Russia's defeat by Japan, which left France alone on the continent with Germany, too over-matched to "accept the buck." There was much buck-passing in Europe during the 1930s—between France and Great Britain, and between the Soviet Union and the Western powers. Germany was not a potential hegemon until 1939, so there was reason to hope that some other state could contain it. For Britain, that hope vanished with the German absorption of rump Czechoslovakia in March 1939; so it abruptly ceased passing the buck. Stalin persisted, and then was surprised when the French in 1940 failed to "catch" the buck he had passed to them.

The defensive goals of a regional hegemon in Mearsheimer's scheme boil down to preventing the rise of a peer competitor in adjoining regions, one that might threaten its regional hegemony. If one did appear, the outside hegemon would first try to pass the buck to the competitor's local neighbors. Only if that was unsuccessful would it engage in offshore balancing to reestablish a balance of power in the region. Offshore balancing might be described as a combination of buck-passing and balancing: Stay out (optimally behind a broad body of water); meanwhile build up one's military strength and intervene only when absolutely necessary to preserve a balance.

ALLIANCE POLITICS

One of Mearsheimer's great strengths is his ability to cut to the core of complex subjects. His balancing versus buck-passing choice certainly is at the center of alliance politics. He has not, however, presented anything close to a complete picture of alliance diplomacy. He does not consider that alliances can be a cost-effective substitute for military expansion. If security is the ultimate objective, alliances deserve equal billing with territorial conquest and armament as alternative or complementary means. Occasionally we get fascinating, perhaps inadvertent, glimpses of the bigger picture, usually in the case histories. For example, Mearsheimer suggests that great powers might want to balance "internally" while buck-passing externally, employing an arms buildup both to deter the aggressor from attacking and to hedge against the possibility of becoming the target of attack. Diplomatically, a buck-passer might want to maintain good relations with the potential aggressor, in the hope that this would divert the latter's belligerent attention to the intended "buck-catcher." Comments such as these are tantalizing and leave the reader hungering for further

development, even formalization,²⁴ of the larger subject of how relations with an adversary impinge on alliance relations. Much of Mearsheimer's analysis seems based on a mental image of three states—attacker, victim, and possible defender—but he has not attempted anything like a full treatment of the logic of the triad.²⁵

Mearsheimer barely makes contact with the “alliance security dilemma”—that is, the tension between fears of being abandoned or entrapped by an ally.²⁶ Reassuring an ally of one's support may reduce the fear of abandonment but increase the risk of entrapment, through the ally exploiting one's support to advance its own interests. Distancing oneself from the ally to avoid entrapment may precipitate its abandonment. Whereas the balancing versus buck-passing choice is about alliance strategies toward an adversary²⁷—resistance or nonresistance—the abandonment-entrapment dichotomy highlights the costs and risks of that choice for the alliance relationship itself. Balancing risks entrapment, and buck-passing risks abandonment. This alliance security dilemma may become intertwined with the traditional security dilemma between adversaries, discussed above, producing, through balancing, an “integrative/hostility spiral” of tighter alliance relations and more hostile adversarial interaction. This is the “chain gang” that dragged the European powers into war in 1914. Or an excess of buck-passing could produce a “dis-

24. A useful formalization of the choice between balancing, bandwagoning, and “waiting” is presented in Robert Powell, *In the Shadow of Power: States and Strategies in International Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999). Powell introduces additional variables such as the consequences of war for the distribution of power and benefits between allied fighters and “waiters.” He concludes that states should wait or bandwagon much more frequently than they balance. This conclusion is consistent with Mearsheimer's findings on buck-passing and balancing but contrary to his depreciation of bandwagoning. Perhaps Mearsheimer does not emphasize bandwagoning because he is analyzing strategies for great powers, not small states.

25. Classical treatments of this logic include Georg Simmel, “The Number of Members as Determining the Sociological Form of the Group,” *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (July 1902); and Theodore Caplow, *Two against One: Coalitions in Triads* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1968). An excellent recent effort, which draws on Simmel and Caplow, is Randall L. Schweller, *Deadly Imbalances* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997). See also Timothy Crawford, “Pivotal Deterrence,” book ms., forthcoming.

26. On abandonment and entrapment, see Michael Mandelbaum, *The Nuclear Revolution before and after Hiroshima* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), chap. 6; and Michael Mandelbaum, *The Fate of Nations: The Search for National Security in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), chap. 2. On the alliance security dilemma, see Glenn H. Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997), chap. 6.

27. Mearsheimer defines both balancing and buck-passing as strategies “to prevent aggressors from upsetting the balance of power” (p. 139). This seems to be an odd definition of buck-passing, which is, more accurately, a means of avoiding the costs of resisting an aggressor. Inadvertently or not, this language avoids a discussion of buck-passing as free riding in a collective goods situation.

integrative/conciliatory spiral” of looser alliance relations and appeasement between adversaries, as occurred between the Western powers and the Soviet Union in the 1930s.²⁸

The alliance security dilemma turns on several variables, but essentially on the level of dependence and firmness of commitment between allies. Low dependence and weak commitment are consistent with Mearsheimer’s balanced system and buck-passing strategies, while high dependence and firm commitment are characteristic of an unbalanced system and balancing strategies. Mearsheimer’s finding that states prefer buck-passing over balancing implies that they are more concerned about entrapment than about abandonment, although he does call attention to the possibility that buck-passing can “wreck the alliance” (p. 159).

Nor does Mearsheimer have much to say about conciliatory policies toward an adversary. Appeasement is “fanciful and dangerous” because, like bandwagoning, it “shifts the balance of power” in the aggressor’s favor and thus “contradicts the dictates of offensive realism” (pp. 163–164). Mearsheimer explicitly rejects a definition of appeasement as “a policy designed to reduce tensions with a dangerous adversary by eliminating the cause of conflict between them” (p. 463, n. 58). As in his definition of bandwagoning, this insistence on defining cooperation with an adversary as involving power sacrifice seems to reflect the author’s theoretical commitment to power maximization. He does allow for “special circumstances” in which a great power might concede power to another state without violating balance-of-power logic: making concessions to one so as to concentrate resources against another, or to buy time to mobilize resources internally (pp. 164–165). But these seem to be reluctant qualifications of a general bias toward a hard-line offensive stance. One can think of other ways in which conciliatory policies might be useful even to an expansionary state. For example, conciliatory tactics short of appeasement might appeal to an offensive-minded state as a means of discouraging the formation of balances against it, or of weakening opposing alliances. Diplomatic *détente* could be a useful policy during periods when a state’s power buildup has been frustrated by opposition. Mearsheimer’s brief treatment (five pages)

28. Thomas J. Christensen and Jack Snyder, “Chain Gangs and Passed Bucks: Predicting Alliance Patterns in Multipolarity,” *International Organization*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (Spring 1990), pp. 138–168. Christensen and Snyder attribute the differing pre-1914 and pre-1939 patterns to different beliefs about the inherent superiority of the offense or defense. However, although these beliefs may have played some role, I would argue that more fundamental determinants were alliance interdependence and commitment, as these matters were affected by tensions between adversaries.

on “creating world order” and “cooperation among states” stands in conspicuous contrast to Morgenthau’s two chapters on “diplomacy” and Waltz’s whole chapter on “management” of the system by the great powers.²⁹

The Causes of War

Mearsheimer also employs his three structural models in an assessment of the causes of war. Bipolarity is the most peaceful, unbalanced multipolarity the most prone to conflict and war, and balanced multipolarity somewhere in between. The two multipolar systems are more unstable (defining instability as proneness to war) than bipolar ones for three reasons: (1) they have more potential conflict dyads, (2) the likelihood of power imbalances is greater, including two states ganging up on one, and (3) there is greater potential for miscalculation. This reasoning is similar to that of Waltz and other realists. Mearsheimer’s claim that unbalanced multipolarity is the most unstable system is original, however. By definition, an unbalanced multipolar system contains a potential hegemon. Such a state will push further, toward regional hegemony, “because hegemony is the ultimate form of security” (p. 345), and because it has the capability to achieve supremacy. Other states become more fearful and will take greater risks in attempting to correct the imbalance. These balancing efforts, however, will be viewed as “encirclement” by the would-be hegemon, who may take further steps to advance its security, setting off a spiral of mutual fear (p. 345) that is likely to culminate in war.

Mearsheimer’s historical data strongly confirm this hypothesis. During 109 years of European history, war was going on 2.2 percent of the time in bipolarity, 18.3 percent of the time in balanced multipolarity, and 79.5 percent of the time in unbalanced multipolarity. Thus, according to Mearsheimer, “Whether a multipolar system contains a potential hegemon like Napoleonic France, Wilhelmine Germany, or Nazi Germany has a profound influence on the prospects for peace” (p. 359). One interesting point emerges from combining the data on war frequency and alliance strategies: The same system type that encouraged balancing over buck-passing—unbalanced multipolarity—produced the most wars. There could hardly be any stronger confirmation of what many realists have surmised: The balance-of-power process is not particularly con-

29. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, pp. 519–553; and Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, chap. 9.

ducive to peace. That hypothesis could be extended: War is especially likely when a power-maximizing state collides with the balancing process.

Looking Forward

At least until the shock of September 11, 2001, the belief was widespread that the end of the Cold War had transformed international politics from a largely competitive arena to one of cooperation. Thus the realist stock-in-trade—the inevitability of conflict and war in an anarchic system—seemed hopelessly out of date. Mearsheimer takes dead aim at this view, insisting that “realism will offer the most powerful explanations of international politics over the next century” (p. 361). First, he takes apart the main opposing arguments that predict a peaceful world—institutions, economic interdependence, the “democratic peace,” and nuclear weapons. These treatments are necessarily brief and essentially summarize arguments that he has made in previous articles. For example, he argues that international institutions are essentially irrelevant because they merely reflect state interests and policies and do not exert any independent effects on the struggle for power (pp. 363–364).³⁰

Focusing the tools of offensive realism on Europe and Northeast Asia, Mearsheimer foresees greater instability, perhaps war, in these regions over the next 20 years. The prediction is based on two central variables that are themselves linked (1) whether U.S. troops remain deployed in these regions, and (2) possible changes in regional power structures.

Mearsheimer shares the widespread belief that peace in these areas is currently being sustained by the “American pacifier,” the physical presence of U.S. troops.³¹ Much will depend, therefore, on whether the United States remains so engaged. But that will turn, he argues, on possible changes in the structure of power in each region, in particular, on whether a potential hegemon arises. If that does not occur, the United States eventually will withdraw its troops. The withdrawal would increase the potential for conflict, first by removing the “pacifier” and second by fostering change in the regional power structures.

30. On this theme, see John J. Mearsheimer, “The False Promise of International Institutions,” *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Winter 1994/95), pp. 5–50.

31. Josef Joffe, “Europe’s American Pacifier,” *Foreign Policy*, No. 54 (Spring 1984), pp. 64–82. See also Robert J. Art, “Why Western Europe Needs the United States and NATO,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 111, No. 1 (Spring 1996), pp. 1–39.

Should a potential hegemon appear in either region, creating an unbalanced multipolar system, the U.S. troops will either remain in place or return after they have been withdrawn. This will create an even more dangerous situation because the United States will face a powerful rival that is geared up for aggression and conquest in a system that is inherently the least stable of all. In short, either way, great power relations are likely to be less peaceful than they have been recently.

Mearsheimer comes down on the side of the first scenario—U.S. troops will probably come home sometime in the first two decades of this century. **Concretely, in Europe, he predicts that after the United States withdraws its troops, Germany will acquire nuclear weapons, thus transforming itself into a great power and a potential hegemon.** The United States would not redeploy its forces because the other European powers would be able to keep Germany from dominating Europe without U.S. help. Without the American pacifier, Europe would be subject to intense security competition, and possibly war, because the structure of its regional system would have been transformed to the most dangerous type—unbalanced multipolarity. Particularly dangerous would be security competition between Germany and Russia for control of central Europe.

Mearsheimer reserves his greatest fears, however, for Northeast Asia and China. He presents two scenarios: one in which China's economic growth slows down and Japan remains the wealthiest state in Asia, and another in which China continues its rapid growth and surpasses Japan. In the first case, neither country is a potential hegemon, so the United States brings its troops home. Japan is then forced to acquire a nuclear deterrent and to build up its conventional forces. The regional system then is the moderately stable one of balanced multipolarity among China, Japan, and Russia. There would be a dangerous element of instability, however, in the process of Japan acquiring a nuclear capability, which Russia and China would be tempted to preempt. And simply becoming a nuclear power would increase fears of Japan in the area, probably precipitating an intense security competition.

In the second Asian scenario, China surpasses Japan, and perhaps even the United States, and becomes a potential regional hegemon. The United States then retains its forces in Northeast Asia to balance China or returns if it has already withdrawn. The system is then one of unbalanced multipolarity with China driving toward full hegemony and the other powers, including the United States, attempting to encircle China. **Mearsheimer concludes with one of his few explicit pieces of policy advice for the United States: Shift from "en-**

gaging" China to containing it (i.e., do whatever can be done to slow China's growth).

In sum, the two gross variables in Mearsheimer's scheme—deployment of U.S. troops and changes in regional power structures—operate alternately as cause or consequence. The troops are likely to stay if a potential hegemon appears in either region; otherwise they will be withdrawn. But the withdrawal itself may cause changes in regional power structures, largely through the nuclearization of Germany or Japan and their reemergence as great powers. Obviously, a great deal of the causal weight in this logic rests on the deployment of U.S. forces. Mearsheimer seems certain that U.S. troops will come home from Europe before 2020, and only slightly less certain about the troops in Japan and Korea. In support, he cites evidence that the United States and its allies are "drifting apart" (p. 391), and that the allies are losing confidence in the reliability of the United States. Moreover, no potential hegemon is likely to arise in the near future, and even if one did appear, it would be containable by local powers. Hence the U.S. troops are likely to be brought home. The United States will revert to its traditional policy of offshore balancing—delaying intervention in Eurasian wars until absolutely necessary to restore a balance, thus minimizing war costs and being in position to dominate postwar arrangements.

But these arguments are not compelling. Theoretically, they do not take account of U.S. anticipation of what others might do in response to U.S. moves.³²

If the withdrawal of troops would lead to dangerous consequences, and the U.S. government understands that, the troops will not be withdrawn. Empirically, there have been no serious moves toward bringing them home. The allied governments, by most indications, want them to stay. If anything, U.S. commitments to allies have been strengthened and expanded. It is widely understood that the U.S. physical presence reassures the allies against potential threats from each other. What could bring about a change? The most obvious answer points to domestic politics: The American people may not tolerate the expense and risk of keeping these forces abroad once they fully realize that their original purpose is no longer relevant. But the knowledge (in public as well as elite opinion) that withdrawal would precipitate the nuclearization of Germany and Japan, and probably also unleash serious regional security conflicts, should be enough to keep them in place.

32. I am indebted to Robert Jervis for this point.

There is, however, a major wild card: how U.S. relations with its European and Asian allies will be affected by the "war on terror" and its fall-out. Possibly, the tendency in this campaign toward adopting unconventional military methods, as well as developing new forms of alliance and new allies, will reduce the apparent utility of quasi-permanent deployments of conventional forces. Or the geographical focus of U.S. military activity may shift, more than it already has, away from Europe and Northeast Asia toward areas more closely linked to terrorist and proliferation threats. These possibilities, it seems, tend to support Mearsheimer's predictions.³³

Conclusion

The Tragedy of Great Power Politics is a pessimistic book, even as realist books go. Of course there is nothing wrong with pessimism if it is based on empirical truth and solid logic. The trouble here is in the logic: Although it is coherent and without obvious inconsistency, it is sometimes pushed to extremes. Exhibit A in this respect is the claim that all great powers all the time are primarily concerned with maximizing power so as to maximize their security. Can it really be true that the world is condemned to a future of constant conflict and power struggles simply because of its anarchic political system and the desire of its units to survive? Are great powers really as ambitious, self-centered, and single-minded as this hypothesis implies? Granted that security seeking will be natural in such a system, is there any compelling reason why the search must persist à l'outrance until the searcher dominates its neighbors?³⁴

Mearsheimer's unremitting focus on power-security competition among great powers necessarily means that many aspects of international politics normally considered essential are either given short shrift or omitted entirely. Conversely, the struggle for power assumes a bloated role far beyond what might be considered "realistic." Most conspicuously slighted in the analysis are the nonsecurity interests of states, such as advancement of an ideology, na-

33. Mearsheimer repeatedly refers to the "911 problem," meaning the absence of any source of security besides "self-help" in the anarchic international system. Writing before September 11, 2001, he could not have predicted the alternative significance that this number would soon acquire. The two versions of the number may now serve as metaphors for two differing arenas of international politics: one between sovereign states and the other between transnational movements.

34. Arnold Wolfers would answer no to this question: "Depending on the circumstances, countries in this category [of seeking only self-preservation] may run the whole gamut from a frantic concern with the enhancement of power at one extreme to complete indifference to power at the other." Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration*, p. 97.

tional unification, or protection of human rights. There is no mention of transnational movements such as terrorism and religious and ethnic strife. The book slights norms, institutions, and most kinds of interstate cooperation. Domestic politics are entirely omitted. Some might argue that these are topics that Mearsheimer, as a realist, should not be required to address. That depends, however, on how much distortion has been introduced by omitting them. In my view, too much, unless the power-maximizing claim is considerably modified.

There are two salient ways of modifying this claim: via a marginal utility calculation or an ideal-type model. In the first, states weigh costs and risks against security and other benefits when they decide whether to attempt expansion. Some of the costs and risks, as well as some of the benefits, will normally be in nonsecurity coin. Some will be anticipations of costs that may be imposed by other actors in resistance. Some of the benefits may be reduced, as security goals are pared down to match the limits of anticipated power. These considerations and qualifications amount to approaching security decisions as problems in maximizing marginal utility. The original hypothesis is deflated to “great powers expand until marginal costs begin to exceed marginal benefits.” Such a hypothesis, obviously, is less extreme, more embracing, and more plausible—even if less parsimonious—than the original claim.³⁵

The ideal-type model would grant the original claim the status of “initial working hypothesis”; something not intended as a statement of empirical truth but as a benchmark from which deviations might be identified and measured. Few social scientists present their theories explicitly in this form, and Mearsheimer does not do so. What they do, and what Mearsheimer does, is to state the theory as a sufficient explanation of its subject matter, leaving it up to the reader to understand that it is really only a partial explanation (and to keep his grain of salt handy). The ideal-type model preserves the initial hypothesis intact, but only as a point of departure for more “realistic” estimates.

The seeming exaggerations in Mearsheimer’s theory make his historical cases crucial. The cases do show a high degree of congruence with the theory. Several great powers were expansionist on a big scale over a substantial part of their history. One notices, however, that all Eurasian revisionists, from Napoleon to Hitler to Tojo, were eventually blocked through the operation of the

35. Wolfers puts it well: “Policy-makers must decide whether a specific increment of security is worth the specific additional deprivations which its attainment through power requires.” *Ibid.* p. 91. For a similar formulation, see Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, p. 107.

balance of power. None reached the finish line in Mearsheimer's race. Only the United States, in the Western Hemisphere, became a hegemon, against weak opposition. Thus it would appear that balance of power trumps power maximization.

Such quibbles aside, this is an excellent book. It is a clear and forceful exposition of offensive realist theory. It enriches alliance theory, advances new insights into geography, and argues cogently for the superiority of land power over naval and air power. It does not supersede Waltz's broader and more moderate neorealist theory, although it employs many of the same assumptions. Rather it complements Waltz, chiefly by introducing a theoretical rationale for revisionist states. This creates a potential for integrating offensive and defensive realist theory. Perhaps it is time to end the proliferation of labels and theories in the realist camp and add up what we all have in common.

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