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Realism as tragedy

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

> In short, the real world remains a realist world.[1]

In 1948, Hans J. Morgenthau wrote his classic text, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, that was largely responsible for establishing realism as the prevailing theory in the field of International Relations (IR).[2] In 1979, Kenneth N. Waltz wrote an immensely influential book, *Theory of International Politics*, that resulted in a new structural version of realism – neorealism – becoming the dominant theory in IR.[3] John J. Mearsheimer, who is the R. Wendell Harrison Distinguished Service Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago, has written a profoundly important book that rightfully deserves a prominent place along with Morgenthau and Waltz in the canon of realist thought about international politics. Mearsheimer's clearly written book puts forth a new structural theory of realism that he terms offensive realism. This version of realism argues that the observable patterns of behaviour among all of the great powers throughout history, most notably their ubiquitous power-seeking, can be explained by the fact that they exist in a condition of anarchy in which there is no higher source of authority above them. While sharing many of the same basic assumptions with neorealism, offensive realism, as elucidated by Mearsheimer, provides a fundamentally different account of the essential dynamics of international politics than that which Waltz and his students have been offering for the last twenty years or so.

One of my aims in this review article is to clarify the nature of the break that Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism makes with Waltz and neorealism. The article unfolds in three steps. First, I provide a brief overview of some of the recent developments that have been taking place within the realist research programme. This preliminary step is necessary to establish an appropriate context to grasp Mearsheimer's contribution to the growing body of literature on realism. Second, I provide an overview of Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism and summarise some of the main claims that he presents in the book. Finally, I consider some of his

* I would like to thank Christopher Layne, John J. Mearsheimer, and an anonymous reviewer for their helpful comments and advice.

[1] John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), p. 361.

[2] Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948).

[3] Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: Random House, 1979).

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thoughts about the contemporary practice of international politics, especially the latest developments in American foreign policy. By Mearsheimer's own criteria a useful theory of international relations should be able to explain 'how great powers have behaved in the past and how they are likely to behave in the future'.[4] At first glance, one might surmise that the Bush Administration's aggressive and militaristic foreign policy is fully consistent with, and theoretically informed by, offensive realism. Yet the truth of the matter is that, like many of the renowned realist thinkers in the past, such as Morgenthau and George Kennan, Mearsheimer is sharply critical of the globalist and crusading direction that American foreign policy has taken since 11 September 2001.[5] I conclude by pointing to a number of controversies that emanate from Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism and his analysis of American foreign policy.

Realism after the Cold War

The unexpected peaceful conclusion of the Cold War competition between the United States and the Soviet Union was seen by many scholars as representing a serious problem for realist international theory.[6] The end of the Cold War was held to be particularly problematic for those like Waltz who wrote about the enduring stability of the post-World War II bi-polar order.[7] Some thought, or perhaps hoped, that the end of the Cold War would usher in a new period of international politics that did not correspond to the principles of realism.[8] Others believed that, as a result of the intellectual crisis generated by the inability of neorealist theory to explain the peaceful conclusion of the Cold War, realism, as a respectable academic theory of international relations, would finally be delegitimated and perhaps pronounced dead.[9]

To the chagrin of those who are critical of realism, this has not taken place. Rather, and quite remarkably, realist theory is more vibrant today than during some

[4] Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 11.

[5] For example, see George F. Kennan, *American Diplomacy, 1900–1950* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1951), Hans J. Morgenthau, *In Defense of the National Interest: A Critical Examination of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Knopf, 1951), and Hans J. Morgenthau, 'U.S. Misadventure in Vietnam', *Current History*, LIV (1968), pp. 29–34.

[6] See Charles W. Kegley Jr., 'The Neo-idealist Moment in International Studies: Realist Myths and the New International Realities', *International Studies Quarterly,* 37 (1993), pp. 131–46; John Lewis Gaddis, 'International Relations Theory and the End of the Cold War', *International Security,* 17 (1992/3), pp. 5–58; Richard Ned Lebow, 'The Long Peace, the End of the Cold War, and the Failure of Realism', *International Organization*, 48 (1994), pp. 249–77; and Rey Koslowski and Friedrich V. Kratochwil, 'Understanding Change in International Politics: The Soviet Empire's Demise and the International System', *International Organization,* 48 (1994), pp. 215–48.

[7] Kenneth N. Waltz, 'The Stability of a Bipolar World', *Daedalus*, 93 (1964), pp. 881–909.

[8] This view is most evident among proponents of the democratic peace. In particular, see Bruce Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace: Principles for a Post-Cold War World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 24.

[9] See Fareed Zakaria, 'Is Realism Finished?', *The National Interest,* 30 (1992/93), pp. 21–32; Ethan B. Kapstein, 'Is Realism Dead? The Domestic Sources of International Politics', *International Organization,* 49 (1995), pp. 751–74; and John A. Vasquez, 'The Realist Paradigm and Degenerative vs. Progressive Research Programs: An Appraisal of Neotraditional Research on Waltz's Balancing Proposition', *American Political Science Review,* 91 (1997), pp. 899–912.

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of the years of the Cold War. Instead of capitulating to its numerous critics, realists have been busy justifying the relevance of their theory to the post-Cold War world and, in the process, advanced some novel theoretical claims. Neorealists have sought to counter the charge that their structural theory was unable to explain the end of the Cold War and was of little relevance to the post-Cold War system.[10] Neorealism, proponents argue, was not damaged by the end of the Cold War and remains as relevant today as before. While it has become increasingly self-evident to many that there has been a shift in the number of great powers from two to one, the basic anarchical structure of international politics has not changed.[11] In Waltzian terminology, we have been experiencing changes in the international system, but not a change of the system itself.[12] Thus many neorealists expect the same basic patterns that have shaped international politics in the past, especially the tendency for states to engage in balance of power politics, to continue in the future.

While Waltz's structural realist research programme continues to attract its share of adherents, a number of other scholars have sought to move beyond the limiting confines of the parsimonious tenets of neorealism and have begun to incorporate a variety of unit level factors into their explanation of international politics. These thinkers, some of whom have been dubbed 'neoclassical realists', argue that, in order to explain state behaviour, it is necessary that forces operating at the individual and governmental level be included along with systemic variables.[13] For neoclassical realists, 'anarchy is a permissive condition rather than an independent causal force'.[14] One of the motivations for considering unit level forces is the desire to explain not only important international outcomes but also the foreign policies of particular states at specific points in time. Waltz has insisted that structural realism is purely a theory of international politics and not a theory of foreign policy. He argues that given the complexity surrounding the foreign policymaking process, it is impossible to construct a theory of foreign policy.[15]

Neoclassical realists, and Mearsheimer as well, disapprove of the analytical boundary that seemingly has been created between a theory of international politics

[10] Examples of this undertaking include William C. Wohlforth, 'Realism and the End of the Cold War', *International Security,* 19 (1994/95), pp. 3–41; Kenneth N. Waltz, 'Structural Realism after the Cold War', *International Security*, 25 (2000), pp. 5–41; and Randall L. Schweller and William C. Wohlforth, 'Power Test: Evaluating Realism in Response to the End of the Cold War', *Security Studies,* 9 (2000), pp. 60–107.

[11] For an assessment of how realists and others are responding to an international system with one sole superpower, see John G. Ikenberry (ed.), *America Unrivalled: The Future of the Balance of Power* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002) and Ethan B. Kapstein and Michael Mastanduno (eds.), *Unipolar Politics: Realism and State Strategies after the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

[12] Waltz, 'Structural Realism after the Cold War'.

[13] See Gideon Rose, 'Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy', *World Politics*, 51 (1998), pp. 144–72.

[14] Stephen Walt, 'The Enduring Relevance of the Realist Tradition', in Ira Katznelson and Helen V. Milner (eds.), *Political Science: The State of the Discipline III* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003), p. 211.

[15] See Kenneth N. Waltz, 'International Politics is Not Foreign Policy', *Security Studies,* 6 (1996), pp. 54–57. Other neorealists disagree and have sought to illustrate how neorealism can in fact provide a theory of foreign policy. See, for example, Colin Elman, 'Horses for Courses: Why Not Neorealist Theories of Foreign Policy?', *Security Studies,* 6 (1996), pp. 7–53 and James D. Fearon, 'Domestic Politics, Foreign Policy, and Theories of International Relations', in Nelson Polsby (ed.), *Annual Review of Political Science*, 1 (Palo Alto, CA: Annual Reviews, 1998).

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on the one hand, and a theory of foreign policy on the other. Unlike Mearsheimer, however, neoclassical realists have returned to some of the original insights provided by 'classical' realists, such as Thucydides, Machiavelli, Morgenthau, and Kissinger, to explain both international outcomes and foreign policy decisions. In doing so, they have reincorporated elements and insights from what has been termed the 'evil' school of realism.[16] Those who subscribe to the evil school emphasise 'the role of forces within people and states,' and focus 'on flaws in human nature and states'.[17] According to neoclassical realists, the behaviour of states cannot be determined solely on the basis of systemic factors. Instead, they argue that domestic political factors and individuals need to be included in the enterprise of developing a plausible theory of international politics. The lack of an overarching authority and the distribution of power in the international system are recognised to be important factors in explaining the actions of states, but by themselves, neoclassical realists argue that they are inadequate to account for much of their actual behaviour. This line of inquiry holds out a good deal of promise and is attracting additional followers.[18]

Another important motivation for opposing Waltz's maxim to steer clear of 'reductionist' theorising is discernible in the work of Randall Schweller. Schweller argues that by postulating that all states have a similar interest in security and thereby failing to consider the range of state interests, Waltzian neorealist theory is not only unable to explain state behaviour, but actually exhibits a profoundly *status quo* bias.[19] While conceding the importance of structural factors, Schweller argues that 'system structure neither determines specific outcomes nor dictates actions, and so it cannot tell us why a particular event occurred at a particular time'.[20] He reminds us that for realists such as Morgenthau, Wolfers, Kissinger, and Carr, calculating the motivations and interests of states was a crucial step in the process of accounting for both international outcomes and specific foreign policy actions. In particular, all of these thinkers were cognisant of the fact that the character of international politics was profoundly influenced by whether the great powers at certain points in history were either *status quo* or revisionist powers. By failing to engage in an analysis of the interests of particular states, and instead arguing that all states have a similar interest in maintaining their security, Schweller argues that neorealism basically

[16] The distinction between the realist schools of evil and tragedy is attributed to Arnold Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration: Essays on International Politics* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1962), pp. 83–4. For an updated account of this classification, see Michael Spirtas, 'A House Divided: Tragedy and Evil in Realist Theory', *Security Studies,* 5 (1996), pp. 385–423 and Karen Rasler and William R. Thompson, 'Malign Autocracies and Major Power Warfare: Evil, Tragedy, and International Relations Theory', *Security Studies,* 10 (2001), pp. 46–79.

[17] Spirtas, 'A House Divided', p. 395, 399.

[18] Representative examples include: William C. Wohlforth, *The Elusive Balance: Power and Perceptions During the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993); Thomas J. Christensen, *Useful Adversaries: Grand Strategy, Domestic Mobilization, and Sino-American Conflict 1947–1958* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996); Randall L. Schweller, *Deadly Imbalances: Tripolarity and Hitler's Strategy of World Conquest* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); and Fareed Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America's World Role* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).

[19] See Randall Schweller, 'Neorealism's Status-Quo Bias: What Security Dilemma?', *Security Studies*, 5 (1996), pp. 90–121.

[20] Schweller, *Deadly Imbalances*, p. 3.

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views the world from the perspective of a satisfied, *status quo* power. And without the presence of predatory, revisionist states, Schweller argues that it is not at all apparent, as Waltz maintains, that states would ever feel threatened or be bothered to engage in balancing behaviour.[21] He concludes that there is a great need for IR theorists to bring the 'interests of states back into the fold of realist theory'.[22]

Realism as tragedy

Instead of following the lead of those identified with the neoclassical school in their attempt to incorporate unit level variables, or elements of evil, to explain the behaviour of states, Mearsheimer's analysis of great power politics is unequivocally based on a structural account of the international system. His theory of offensive realism is firmly situated in the opposing tradition of tragedy where the condition of anarchy and the relative distribution of power are held responsible for the perpetual security competition that has plagued the great powers of the past and today.[23] Members of the tragedy school argue that the structure of the international system, not regime type or the personalities of statesmen, determines the behaviour of states. Mearsheimer admits that his 'theory pays little attention to individuals or domestic political considerations' and 'tends to treat states like black boxes or billiard balls'.[24] He explains that the environment that states inhabit is indeed tragic in that although no one intentionally designed it, there is no way to escape the behaviour that all states are compelled to follow, even when such behaviour has adverse consequences.

In the process of explicating offensive realism, Mearsheimer carefully describes this environment and identifies the resulting behaviour. He undertakes three specific tasks: first, the key components of offensive realism are specified, second, an attempt is made to show that the theory can adequately explain the international history of great-power politics from the late 1700s to the present, and third, offensive realism is employed to make a number of predictions about the character of international politics in the twenty-first century.

The environment that states inhabit, Mearsheimer argues, is responsible for the relentless cycle of violence that characterises great-power politics in the past and which, pessimistically, will continue far into the new millennium. He articulates five

[21] While Schweller does indeed bring the revisionist state back in, he does not conclude that all states have revisionist aims. Thus rather than endorsing offensive realism, Schwellwer embraces the neoclassical realist label. See Randall L. Schweller, 'US Democracy Promotion: Realist Reflections', in Michael Cox, G. John Ikenberry, and Takashi Inoguchi (eds.), *American Democracy Promotion: Issues, Strategies, and Impacts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 41–62, and Randall L. Schweller, 'The Progressiveness of Neoclassical Realism', in Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman (eds.), *Progress in International Relations Theory: Appraising the Field* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), pp. 311–47.

[22] Schweller, 'Neorealism's Status-Quo Bias: What Security Dilemma?', p. 121.

[23] Mearsheimer defends his theory's explicit focus on the great powers by arguing that they 'have the largest impact on what happens in international politics. The fortunes of all states – great powers and smaller powers alike – are determined primarily by the decisions and actions of those with the greatest capability' (p. 5). He defines a great power as a state that has 'sufficient military assets to put up a serious fight in an all-out conventional war against the most powerful state in the world' (p. 5).

[24] Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, pp. 10–11.

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basic assumptions about the international system: one, it is anarchic in that it lacks a central authority above states, two, all great powers possess some offensive military capability that can be used to hurt or destroy other states, three, states can never be certain about the intentions of other states, four, survival is the primary goal of states, and five, states are rational actors.[25] When taken together, Mearsheimer argues that these five assumptions help to explain why states are essentially offensive-minded and perpetually obsessed with augmenting their own power position relative to that of other states. At its core, offensive realism is a theory that seeks to account for the competition for power that Mearsheimer takes to be an axiomatic feature of international politics. A key question to ask, however, is whether a purely structural theory can do this without necessarily including assumptions about the motivations of individuals and governments. Mearsheimer strongly believes that it is possible to account for the behaviour of, and competition among, states solely in terms of situational factors and relative capabilities.[26]

After articulating these five assumptions about the international system, Mearsheimer identifies three general resulting patterns of behaviour. The first is fear; great powers, he argues, have good reasons to fear each other. The basis of this fear is two-fold: first, all great powers possess the means to inflict violence; and second, there is no mechanism or institution either to prevent the use of violence or for a state to turn to once it has been victimised. The pattern of fear is directly attributable to the structure of the international system or what Mearsheimer creatively refers to as the 'the "911" problem – the absence of a central authority to which a threatened state can turn for help'.[27] Mearsheimer does note that the level of fear is not a constant, but rather fluctuates depending on the capabilities and geographical location of rival states. Moreover, the level of fear is also a function of the overall distribution of power, bipolarity producing less fear than multipolarity, and whether power is distributed more or less evenly among the great powers. Mearsheimer finds that an unbalanced multipolar system containing a potential hegemon produces the maximum amount of fear.

The second general pattern of behaviour is one of self-help. Like Waltz, Mearsheimer argues that the basic principle of action in an anarchical setting is necessarily one of self-help. Without the '911' option, states must ultimately rely on themselves for ensuring their own survival. As is fairly well known, he greatly discounts the efficacy of international institutions.[28]

The third pattern, the one that brings us to the essence of offensive realism and that represents the fundamental break with Waltz, is power maximisation. According to Mearsheimer, 'apprehensive about the ultimate intentions of other states, and aware that they operate in a self-help system, states quickly understand that the best

[25] Ibid., pp. 30–31.

[26] This is obviously a significant point of contention, especially among historians and international relations theorists who are wedded to either the individual or domestic level of analysis. For a recent attempt to underline the importance of individuals, see Daniel L. Byman and Kenneth M. Pollack, 'Let Us Now Praise Great Men: Bringing the Statesman Back In', *International Security*, 25 (2001), pp. 107–146.

[27] Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics,* p. 32. 911 is the emergency telephone number used throughout most of the United States where police, fire, and paramedic assistance can be requested.

[28] See John J. Mearsheimer, 'The False Promise of International Institutions', *International Security*, 19 (1994/95), pp. 5–49.

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way to ensure their survival is to be the most powerful state in the system'.[29] Great powers, according to Mearsheimer, are primed for offence. They are continually searching for opportunities to gain power at the expense of other states. He identifies blackmail and war as the two main strategies states employ to acquire more power. Contrary to the view of many liberal thinkers, Mearsheimer argues that given the appropriate circumstances, such as when one state clearly has a marked power advantage over another state, war often does pay. The quest for power is unrelenting because not only are states never satisfied with their own power position, but they are also deeply concerned, as well as uncertain, about the capabilities of rival states. Prudence therefore dictates that states continually look for opportunities to maximise their relative share of world power. Mearsheimer explains that 'states that maximize relative power are concerned primarily with the distribution of material capabilities'.[30] In a zero-sum world, one state's gain is another's loss. The perpetual quest for more power is, according to Mearsheimer, structurally induced; it is not a function of either egoistic human nature or internal defects associated with specific types of regimes.

Like many other realists, Mearsheimer seeks to convey the notion that power is the main currency of international politics. Yet by expressing this belief, he becomes susceptible to the standard charge that there is a good deal of indeterminacy in the manner in which realists employ the concept of power. To forestall this criticism, Mearsheimer devotes a significant amount of attention to describing and explaining what he means by power.[31] He rejects the 'relational approach' to power whereby the analyst must demonstrate that actor A has caused a change in the behaviour of actor B, and instead endorses a materialist, 'elements of national power' approach.[32] According to this view, power is based on the specific material capabilities that a state possesses relative to that of other states. Not surprisingly, he argues that the most important capability of a state is its ability to wage war. Military power is the quintessence of state power. Mearsheimer explains that he defines 'power largely in military terms because offensive realism emphasises that force is the *ultima ratio* of international politics'.[33] Yet in Mearsheimer's view, there is a clear hierarchy of military power. Throughout the book, he displays an unmistakable preference for the superiority of land power. A state with the most powerful army is, according to Mearsheimer, *ipso facto* the most powerful state. As we shall see, his bias regarding the primacy of land power has important implications for the overall argument about the tragedy of great power politics.

In addition to military power, states also possess latent power. By latent power, Mearshimer 'refers to the socio-economic ingredients that go into building military

[29] Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics,* p. 33.
[30] Ibid., p. 36.
[31] In the Introduction, Mearsheimer announces that his book is organised around six questions dealing with power: (1) why do great powers want power?; (2) how much power do states want?; (3) what is power?; (4) what strategies do states pursue to gain power?; (5) what are the causes of war?; and (6) when do threatened great powers balance against a dangerous adversary and why do they attempt to pass the buck to another threatened state?, pp. 12–13.
[32] See David A. Baldwin, 'Power and International Relations', in Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse, and Beth A. Simmons (eds.), *Handbook of International Relations* (London: Sage, 2002), pp. 177–91.
[33] Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 56.

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power; it is largely based on a state's wealth and the overall size of its population'.[34] While acknowledging the importance of latent power and providing a way to measure it, Mearsheimer repeatedly emphasises the point that latent power is not equivalent to military power. The historical record indicates that states have had different levels of success in translating latent power to military power. Consequently, Mearsheimer argues that it is impossible to equate wealth with military might.

Based on the manner that he conceptualises power, along with his five assumptions about the international system, especially the assumption that all great powers possess some offensive military capability, Mearsheimer concludes that there are no *status quo* powers. All great powers have revisionist aims with the supreme goal being hegemony. Mearsheimer has thus managed to bring the revisionist state back in, but unlike Schweller, he does not deem it necessary to investigate until level variables to ascertain the source of a particular state's revisionist aims. Given the environment that states inhabit, they quickly recognise that security is largely a function of military power. In short, the more power a state has, the more secure it is. The best possible position to be in is 'king of the hill' – the sole hegemon. International politics, according to Mearsheimer, is one of perpetual security competition with the great powers struggling against each other to achieve a dominant position. It is a realm of activity where conquest frequently pays and where states are consequently primed for offence. Unless a state achieves the venerable position of global hegemon, which as I explain below, Mearsheimer finds to be virtually impossible, they remain unsatisfied with their position in the international system. Whenever the opportunity arises, a great power will seek to alter the existing distribution of power in their favour by amassing more power.

The international system that Mearsheimer describes is very different from the one that has become familiar to those who have read and studied Waltz. Although Waltz has been the most influential theorist of the 'tragedy school', persuasively indicating how the anarchical setting and the distribution of power profoundly shapes the behaviour of states, at the end of the day, his depiction of the international system is somewhat benign, especially when compared to Mearsheimer's account. Rather than the international system being hostile and unforgiving, Waltz maintains that states are able to achieve a degree of security under anarchy.[35] He also insists that conflict and war can often be avoided. How is it that Waltz can posit such a fundamentally different image than Mearsheimer when they are nevertheless both firmly rooted in the same tragedy school and share so many of the same basic assumptions? I want to suggest that the essential difference rests with one key assumption; for Mearsheimer the primary goal of all states is to be the most powerful state in the international system, while for Waltz, the primary goal of all states is security. These two different assumptions lead Mearsheimer and Waltz to offer contrasting views of the essential dynamics of international politics.

[34] Ibid., p. 55.

[35] One of the main fault lines in the debate between offensive and defensive realists revolves around the prevalence of conflict actually caused by the international system, and therefore, the types of state behaviour that the system encourages. See, for example, Benjamin Frankel, 'Restating the Realist Case: An Introduction', *Security Studies*, 5 (1996), pp. xiv–xx; Robert Jervis, 'Realism, Neoliberalism, and Cooperation: Understanding the Debate', *International Security*, 24 (1999), pp. 42–63; and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, 'Security Seeking under Anarchy', *International Security*, 25 (2000/01), pp. 128–61.

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While it might be possible to argue that the question of whether states are power- or security-maximising entities is really an issue of semantics, these two different assumptions about the motivations of states has become the basis of an important debate among structural realists.[36] The debate is cast in terms of an opposition between defensive realism, which has become generally synonymous with Waltz's version of structural realism, and offensive realism.[37] The essence of the debate hinges on the question of how much power a state actually desires, which, in turn, has implications for a host of other issues such as the prospects for international cooperation, the degree to which states balance or bandwagon, and debates about grand strategy.

In a significant passage, Waltz writes 'because power is a possibly useful means, sensible statesmen try to have an appropriate amount of it'. He adds, 'in crucial situations, however, the ultimate concern of states is not for power but for security'.[38] This means, for Waltz, that states will sometimes forgo acquiring additional amounts of power if is this is seen as jeopardising their security. The most important factor that Waltz provides for why a state might be disinclined to augment its power position is rooted in his central proposition that 'balances of power recurrently form'.[39] Aggressive and expansionist behaviour often, according to Waltz, proves to be counterproductive because it triggers a counterbalancing coalition. As a result of Waltz's belief that states are strongly inclined to balance against aggressive powers, they are, in Joseph Grieco's terms, 'defensive positionalists' and 'will only seek the minimum level of power that is needed to attain and to maintain their security and survival'.[40] As Schweller has noted, there does appear to be a *status quo* bias among defensive realists.

Another factor contributing to the *status quo* bias of defensive realism is the concept of the offence-defence balance.[41] While inspired by Waltz's structural realist theory, proponents of the offence-defence balance concept add a number of intervening variables such as geography, technology, and, most importantly, military doctrine, to make their case that conquest rarely pays and that security can be readily

[36] Fareed Zakaria, for example, writes: 'The urge to "constantly seek survival" will produce the same behavior as influence-maximizing, because anarchy and differential growth-rates ensure that "survival" is never achieved and the state is never allowed to relax its efforts'. See Fareed Zakaria, 'Realism and Domestic Politics: A Review Essay', in Michael E. Brown, Sean M. Lynn-Jones, and Steven E. Miller (eds.), *The Perils of Anarchy: Contemporary Realism and International Security* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), pp. 462–83.

[37] For a general introduction to the debate between offensive and defensive realism, see Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, 'Security Seeking under Anarchy', *International Security*, 25 (2000/01), pp. 128–61; Sean M. Lynn-Jones, 'Realism and America's Rise: A Review Essay', *International Security*, 23 (1998), pp. 157–82; Benjamin Frankel, 'The Reading List', *Security Studies,* 5 (1995), pp. 183–94 and Walt, 'The Enduring Relevance of the Realist Tradition'.

[38] 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* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 40.

[39] Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 128.

[40] Joseph M. Grieco, 'Realist International Theory and the Study of World Politics', in Michael W. Doyle and G. John Ikenberry (eds.), *New Thinking in International Relations Theory* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), p. 167.

[41] For a discussion of the offence defence balance, see Robert Jervis, 'Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma', *World Politics,* 30 (1978), pp. 167–214; Sean M. Lynn-Jones, 'Offense-Defense Theory and its Critics', *Security Studies,* 4 (1995), pp. 660–91; and Stephen Van Evera, 'Offense, Defense, and the Causes of War', *International Security,* 22 (1998), pp. 5–43.

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achieved under anarchy. Given the state of modern technology and weaponry, defensive realists argue that the offence-defence balance greatly favours the defence, which makes conquest difficult. With this understanding in mind, defensive realists argue that states can deliberately adopt a defensive military posture and signal their benign intentions to other states. The logic of the international system, according to defensive realists, compels states to adopt restrained, *status quo* behaviour. When exceptions to this general pattern of behaviour are detected, defensive realists typically attribute this to a variety of domestic pathologies.[42]

As I have indicated, there are, according to Mearsheimer, no *status quo* powers in the international system and this has nothing to do with domestic politics. The only exception to this would be a state that somehow achieved the ultimate position of global hegemon. By achieving global hegemony, which Mearsheimer defines as a 'state that is so powerful that it dominates all the other states in the system', a state would become a *status quo* power and discontinue its pursuit of power.[43] Yet Mearsheimer maintains that achieving global hegemony is a virtual impossibility. He finds that no state, despite Herculean efforts, has ever achieved this paramount goal. The underlying reason that he provides to explain why this goal remains elusive is what he refers to as 'the stopping power of water'. Mearsheimer's argument concerning the stopping power of water reflects his primacy of land-power bias. Large bodies of water, according to Mearsheimer, pose insurmountable obstacles to the ability of a great power's army to conquer and hold distant territories. Geography, in short, is the principal reason that Mearsheimer provides for why hegemony is an unattainable goal for what are, otherwise, relative power-maximising state actors. No amount of power appears to be sufficient to overcome the geographical impediments that result from the fact that many sovereign states are separated by large bodies of water.

While global hegemony is impossible, regional hegemony is not. Mearsheimer argues that great powers understand this and, therefore, set their sights on achieving a dominant position in their own geographical region. The history of international politics from 1792 until today, according to Mearsheimer, has basically been a continuous contest among competing great powers to be the top dog in their own geographical region. By his account, the only state in history ever to win this contest is the United States in the Western Hemisphere. Regional hegemons, however, cannot rest content because they must be concerned about the possibility of an aspiring great power achieving hegemony in their own geographical region. Mearsheimer argues that regional hegemons prefer not to have any peer competitors 'because they fear that a rival great power that dominates its own region will be an especially powerful foe that is essentially free to cause trouble in the fearful great power's backyard'.[44] Regional hegemons thus continue to have revisionist aims and actively seek to thwart the ambitions of aspiring hegemons in other regions of the world. When they can, regional hegemons prefer to 'pass the buck' and get others to check the potential hegemon. If this strategy is either not possible, such as when the system is bipolar and there is no one to pass the buck to, or proves to be ineffective,

[42] See Jack Snyder, *Myth of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).
[43] Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 40.
[44] Ibid., p. 41.

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a regional hegemon will do the balancing itself and ultimately fight wars in distant lands to preserve its unrivalled position.

In light of Mearsheimer's rather strong views on the 'stopping power of water', Christopher Layne has raised a number of critical points that question the apparent need of a regional hegemon to be involved in the power dynamics in other regions so as to prevent the emergence of a peer competitor. Layne asks, 'if geography – the stopping power of water – makes it impossible for any state to attain global hegemony, why should a regional hegemon lose a minute of sleep worrying about whether some other great power can attain hegemony in a distant region?'[45] Mearsheimer does provide an answer to this question, but Layne and other critics have not been persuaded by his argument.[46] Essentially, Mearsheimer argues that a rival hegemon would possess the capacity to upset the balance of power in another hegemon's region by assisting and aligning with an upstart state. He argues that both the distant hegemon and the upstart state would have valid reasons for collaborating with each other. If this collaboration proved successful, Mearsheimer concludes that water would lose much of its stopping power because the rival hegemon 'would not have to launch an amphibious attack across the sea, but could instead transport troops and supplies across the water to the friendly territory of its ally in the rival hegemon's backyard'.[47]

Layne raises two additional problems with the stopping power of water argument that are pertinent to the final section of this article. First, he insists that Mearsheimer conflates geography and military capabilities. Rather than water being the relevant variable, Layne insists that a state's military capability, specifically its ability to project power across large distances, is the crucial variable. Layne writes, 'capabilities, not liquid, determine whether water stops'.[48] Thus while water may be a formidable obstacle to a continental power that lacks a large and sophisticated navy, it is much less of an impediment to a country like the United States that possesses a formidable navy with significant power projection capabilities.

Second, Layne argues that the overriding logic of offensive realism dictates that great powers should strive for much more than regional hegemony; they are impelled to seek global hegemony. As I have indicated, the logic of offensive realism, as described by Mearsheimer, is that states seek to resolve their security dilemma by becoming the strongest power – the sole hegemon – of the international system. Rather than throwing up their arms and concluding that water poses too great a challenge to further expansion, which is essentially what defensive realists concede, a state guided by the principles of offensive realism should seek to develop the capabilities to overcome the 'stopping power of water'. Layne correctly points out that Mearsheimer's own description of the behaviour of regional hegemons reveals that their quest for security drives them 'to push the geopolitical envelope and

[45] Christopher Layne, 'The "Poster Child for Offensive Realism": America as a Global Hegemon', paper prepared for the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Boston, MA, 28 August – 1 September 2002, p. 12. A version of this paper will be published shortly in *Security Studies*.

[46] In addition to Layne, 'Poster Child for Offensive Realism', see Barry R. Posen, 'The Best Defense', *The National Interest,* 67 (2002), pp. 119–26.

[47] Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 142.

[48] Layne, 'Poster Child for Offensive Realism', p. 18.

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become a global hegemon'.[49] Regional hegemons cannot afford to be *status quo* powers because they must be vigilant to ensure that peer competitors do not arise. They do this by continuing to augment their own power position while seeking ways to keep potential rivals weak.

It thus appears that not only is there a debate between defensive and offensive realists, but also among offensive realists themselves. On the basis of Layne's understanding of offensive realism, great powers are impelled to seek global hegemony. Mearsheimer, on the other hand, argues that great powers only set their sights on attaining regional hegemony. Mearsheimer's reading of international history makes it appear as if all great powers, especially the United States, have understood, as well as acted on the basis of, the logic of his version of offensive realism. But is this really the case? An argument could be made that the real tragedy of great-power politics is that while global hegemony may indeed be an impossibility, this has not stopped states, including the United States, from attempting to achieve it. This, however, is not what Mearsheimer argues. The foundation of many of his comments on, and criticisms of, American foreign policy are directly related to his understanding of how a regional hegemon should act in an international system that operates according to the principles of offensive realism. But if the logic of offensive realism is not entirely correct, then some of the foreign policy prescriptions that Mearsheimer has offered might also be suspect.

Offensive realism and American foreign policy

Consistent with Mearsheimer's view that it is virtually impossible for any state to achieve global hegemony, he argues that the United States is one of the three great powers that comprise the current international system. Europe, according to Mearsheimer's criteria, remains bipolar with the United States and Russia being the two great powers, while he characterises Northeast Asia as a balanced multipolar system comprising China, Russia, and the United States. This assessment, while entirely consistent with Mearsheimer's theory, is certainly controversial in light of the growing consensus about American unipolarity.[50] Rather than a global hegemon, Mearsheimer insists that the United States continues only to be a regional hegemon and, contrary to the opinion of others, does not dominate the globe. While it is impossible to settle this controversy here, the empirical evidence does indicate that there is a growing gap between the capabilities of the United States and the rest of the world. Hence, one can ask the following question: if a 'great power is so much more powerful than the others, at what point does its regional hegemony shade into global hegemony?'[51]

As a regional hegemon, Mearsheimer argues that the United States has acted, and continues to act, as an offshore balancer with respect to Europe and Northeast Asia. This view is fully consistent with his theory of offensive realism. He explains that

[49] Ibid., p. 23.
[50] For a variety of different perspectives on US unipolarity, see Ikenberry (ed.), *America Unrivalled.*
[51] Layne, 'Poster Child for Offensive Realism', p. 21.

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'states that gain regional hegemony act as offshore balancers in other regions'.[52] In the chapter that chronicles the history of American foreign policy, Mearsheimer describes the United States' ruthless behaviour in the Western Hemisphere as being 'well-suited to be the poster child for offensive realism'.[53] Yet after achieving regional hegemony at the end of the nineteenth century, Mearsheimer argues that the United States has never contemplated or actively sought global hegemony. American foreign policy officials have apparently recognised the difficulties of projecting military forces across either the Atlantic or Pacific Ocean to conquer great powers in Europe and Asia. Mearsheimer argues that the historical evidence since 1900 indicates that the United States has only sent its forces to Europe and Asia when a potential hegemon arose that could not be contained by local powers. And once the potential hegemon was defeated, American forces came back home clearly indicating that the United States has eschewed global hegemony.

Does Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism aptly describe the history of American foreign policy? Has he interpreted the historical record correctly? These are impossible questions to answer here, but one thing is certain, his interpretation of the history of American foreign policy is certainly controversial. For example, to support his interpretation of the United States as an offshore balancer, Mearsheimer submits that the US was ready to leave Europe after World War II and had no hegemonic ambitions on the continent. While there are some historians that support this view, there are a great many who flatly reject the notion that the United States did not seek global hegemony after World War II.[54] Indeed a case can be made that the history of American foreign policy since the late 1800s has been a successful story of how to project power to the far reaches of the globe so as to overcome the 'stopping power of water' and achieve a position of global hegemony or primacy.[55] While Mearsheimer insists that hegemony is roughly equivalent to military dominance, it is important to point out that a variety of other scholars have conceptualised American hegemony in a much different manner.[56] Just as American imperialism did not necessitate direct colonial rule, American hegemony has not rested simply on military might.

[52] Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 237.

[53] Ibid., p. 238.

[54] Mearsheimer's analysis of post-World War II American foreign policy relies heavily on Marc Trachtenberg's *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945–1963* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999). Yet Trachtenberg's argument runs counter to that of a number of other prominent diplomatic historians such as Melvyn P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992) and Walter LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945–2000*, 9th edn. (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 2002).

[55] For example, see David Callahan, *Between Two Worlds: Realism, Idealism, and American Foreign Policy After the Cold War* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994) and James Chace and Caleb Carr, *America Invulnerable: The Quest for Absolute Security from 1812 to Star Wars* (New York: Summit Books, 1988).

[56] For a different view of hegemony, see Robert Cox, *Production, Power, and World Order: Social Forces in the Making of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987); Richard Ned Lebow and Robert Kelly, 'Thucydides and Hegemony: Athens and the United States', *Review of International Studies,* 27 (2001), pp. 593–609; and G. John Ikenberry, 'Liberal Hegemony and the Future of American Postwar Order', in T.V. Paul and John A. Hall (eds.), *International Order and the Future of World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 123–45.

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How well does Mearsheimer's theory explain the current and likely future foreign policy behaviour of the United States? This is a very interesting question, since in the beginning of the book he declares that a good theory is one that can explain the actual behaviour of a great power. As a structural theorist, Mearsheimer's analysis of contemporary American foreign policy rests very heavily on an assessment of the relative distribution of power in the international system and whether or not it is likely that a potential rival hegemon will emerge in either Europe or Asia. In the case of Europe, Mearsheimer makes a bold prediction that the United States will soon be bringing its troops home because there is no likely candidate for a regional hegemon on the continent. As an offshore balancer, the interests of the United States continue to be in preserving its pre-eminent position in the Western Hemisphere and ensuring that a rival hegemon does not emerge in either Europe or Northeast Asia. Interestingly, these are the same set of interests that Morgenthau attributed to the United States in his classic book *In Defense of the National Interest* (1951). Offshore balancers, Mearsheimer argues, do not serve the role of global sheriff. He argues that there is little evidence to suggest that the United States has been willing to commit troops to preserve the peace and speculates that in the absence of a competitor in Europe that cannot be balanced by local powers, the United States will shortly be leaving Europe.[57] Tragically, if this scenario does indeed unfold, Mearsheimer argues that Europe will experience a change from bipolarity to unbalanced multipolarity, which will result in a much more dangerous and insecure power structure.[58]

Mearsheimer's prediction that American forces will soon be leaving Europe has not yet come true and there are grounds for believing that it might never happen. NATO continues to grow and the United States, despite periodic grumbling, seems keen to play a dominant role in underwriting European security. His assertion that the United States is unwilling to commit troops to maintain the peace is, especially in light of recent events in Kosovo and Bosnia, also questionable. Mearsheimer admits that some of the key developments since the end of the Cold War have contradicted the predictions of offensive realism, but he argues that the 'brief history of the 1990s is not a good indicator of what the future holds for American military involvement in Europe and Northwest Asia'.[59] Rather he insists that the early years of the twenty-first century will be crucial especially in terms of whether a potential hegemon emerges in either region. Of foremost concern to Mearsheimer is the potential threat that China poses to the United States. The latent power of China suggests that it might soon become a potential hegemon in Northeast Asia. According to Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism, if this scenario were to materialise, the United States would face a formidable peer competitor. He concludes that it is in the United States national interest to curtail Chinese economic growth so as to prevent it from becoming a regional hegemon and argues that the Clinton Administrations' policy of liberal engagement was seriously misguided. His critique of Clinton's China policy is intriguing in that it reveals that a state is capable of ignoring the structural logic of the international system. Yet while it is possible for a liberal state such as the United States to behave in a manner that defies the

[57] See John J. Mearsheimer,'The Future of the American Pacifier', *Foreign Affairs,* 80 (2001), pp. 46–61.
[58] John J. Mearsheimer, 'Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War', *International Security*, 15 (1990).
[59] Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 392.

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logic of offensive realism, such behaviour can, and often does, produce tragic consequences.

Mearsheimer's admission that it is possible for a state's foreign policy behaviour to run counter to what the theory of offensive realism would expect should not in itself be viewed as a theoretical weakness. There is a long tradition of realist writers who have commented on the sharp disjuncture between the timeless principles of realism and the actual foreign policy behaviour of the United States. Much of Mearsheimer's most recent criticism of American foreign policy is based on the fact that the United States is increasingly failing to act as an offshore balancer. In what might otherwise seem perplexing to someone who is not familiar with the theory of offensive realism, Mearsheimer has been a vocal critic of both the military campaign in Afghanistan and the war with Iraq.[60] For Mearsheimer, offensive realism is not a licence for a state to exercise power ruthlessly in an attempt to establish a universal empire. This type of behaviour is not only inconsistent with the basic tenets of offensive realism, but it is also bound to fail. Against the current of much thinking since 11 September 2001, Mearsheimer argues that 'instead of building an empire – which will increase anti-American hatred and put US forces on the front lines around the world – the United States should seek to reduce its military footprint and use force sparingly'.[61] Like a large number of other self-identified realists, Mearsheimer argued that the most recent war with Iraq was not in the United States national interest. According to Mearsheimer, Iraq did not pose an imminent danger to the United States or other countries in the region, did not posses the capabilities to become a regional hegemon, and could have been contained for the indefinite future. President Bush's decision to go to war was both unnecessary and foolish.[62] Even regional hegemons like the United States have to exercise their power in a prudent manner otherwise they risk triggering a balancing coalition and squandering precious resources that are needed to secure vital interests in other areas of the world.

Mearsheimer has indeed written a great book that makes a significant contribution to realist theory. Like other books in the canon of realist thought, his theory will prove to be controversial and his findings will be subject to critique. Yet it is important to engage Mearsheimer on the basis of his theory of offensive realism and not on some type of caricature. One of the reasons why realism has remained relevant to the post-Cold War world is that it does illuminate many, but certainly not all, of the fundamental dynamics of international politics. Mearsheimer has written a book that does shed considerable light on the dynamics that have shaped great power politics in the past and which, he believes, will continue to shape international politics in the future. His book is one that no serious student of international politics can fail to ignore.

[60] See John J. Mearsheimer, 'Hearts and Minds', *The National Interest,* 69 (2002), pp. 13–16; John J. Mearsheimer, 'Guns Won't Win the Afghan War', *The New York Times*, 4 November 2001; John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, 'Keeping Saddam Hussein in a Box', *The New York Times*, 2 February 2003; and John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, 'An Unnecessary War', *Foreign Policy* (January/February 2003), pp. 51–9.

[61] Mearsheimer, 'Hearts and Minds', p. 15.

[62] See Mearsheimer and Walt, 'An Unnecessary War'.

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