John J. Mearsheimer. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001, pp 555.

VAISHNAVI SINGH
Department of Political Science and International Relations, IIS, Jaipur

Introduction

John J. Mearsheimer, a leading political scientist and professor at the University of Chicago, presents a provocative theory that has sparked significant debate within the field of International Relations. Mearsheimer is one of the foremost followers of structural realism, and in this book, he establishes his own version of it, which he calls offensive realism. The original edition was published in 2001 and was later updated and revised in 2014. The book aims to explain why there has been a historically persistent conflict among great powers and why peace is only temporary. Mearsheimer's core argument is that the structure of the international system shapes how great powers interact, and, as no overarching authority exists in this structure, great powers are driven to maximise their own power, at the expense of others, leading to recurring competition and conflict. While this argument makes for a pessimistic interpretation of international politics, offering little hope for a peaceful world among the great powers, this position is articulated with much clarity. The purpose of this review is to discuss the main arguments of the book and to judge its strengths, weaknesses, and overall enduring value to any contemporary study contributing to the global order.

Core Thesis: Offensive Realism and the Tragedy

Mearsheimer's central argument rests on five assumptions:

1. The international system is anarchic (ultimately, there is no overarching institution with power above states).
2. States have offensive military capabilities.
3. States can never be sure about the intentions of other states.

4. States' primary goal is survival.
5. States are rational actors and can think strategically with respect to their security.

From these premises, Mearsheimer deduces that great powers must maximise their relative power, often through offensive strategies, because that presents the greatest likelihood of survival in an uncertain world. Mearsheimer calls this pursuit of power the "tragedy of great power politics" (p. 21). Even if states only want to survive, the best way to ensure survival is to accumulate power at the expense of other states, which leads, paradoxically, to competition and conflict. Each state's actions, such as defence expenditure, forming alliances, and competing for influence, are perceived as threats even when the motivations are defensive. These perceptions often lead to arms races, formation of rival blocs, and, at times, open conflict. Thus, competition is inherent in the structure of great-power politics, regardless of leaders' intentions.

Unlike defensive realists (e.g. Kenneth Waltz), who think states only seek enough power to survive,[1] Mearsheimer believes that states always strive for hegemony, whenever the opportunity is feasible or not. However, Mearsheimer argues that, compared to geography and logistics, global hegemony is impossible, so great powers pursue regional hegemony and will not allow other states to pursue it either. For example, the United States has sought dominance in the Western Hemisphere and has worked to prevent other powers from dominating Europe or East Asia.

Contemporary relevance

Mearsheimer bases his theory of offensive realism on an interpretation of contemporary power politics that emphasises systematic parallels to previous great-power competitions. He claims to see the same patterns, ranging from Napoleonic France and Imperial Germany to the Cold War rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union, now re-emerging. For example, in terms of the US–China competition, he interprets China's rapid economic and

[1] Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

military rise, as well as its attempts to increase its influence in the South China Sea and the Belt and Road Initiative, as a bid for regional hegemony.

Mearsheimer interprets the US responses—cooperative balancing through strengthened alliances with Australia–United Kingdom–United States security pact and Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, along with closer ties with Japan and India—as the type of balancing behaviour that offensive realism would expect from the United States. Similarly, in context of the Russia–North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) confrontation, Mearsheimer interprets the Ukraine war as a case of power-maximising behaviour, in which Russia is seeking to secure its sphere of influence and NATO is seeking to expand in order to preclude any one country from dominating Europe.

The increasing competition over hypersonic missiles, artificial intelligence, and cybersecurity among the great powers is also reminiscent of previous arms races, highlighting the structural power effects that tend towards increased relative power for all great powers. Mearsheimer simply concludes that cultural, ideological, or economic differences are less significant than systemic imperatives. Under these pressures, great powers (whether democratic or authoritarian) tend to behave similarly when survival and dominance are at stake.

Strengths of the Book

One of the book's greatest advantages is its clarity. Mearsheimer synthesises international politics into a logically consistent framework that is easy to understand. The assumptions and predictions of offensive realism are clear, and readers can follow the manner in which he carries out the logical process from premise to conclusion. The clear argument makes the book appealing even to those who are relatively new to theories pertaining to the field of International Relations.

The book is firmly rooted in history. Mearsheimer does not offer abstract theorising disconnected from empirical realities, but rather places his arguments in historical context with real-world examples. His account of the balance of power in Europe, the Cold War, and US foreign policy provides an empirical grounding for his theoretical claims.

Mearsheimer published his book when the majority temperament was one of optimism about the idea of a "liberal peace" after the Cold War. He provided a counter to this mentality, arguing instead that the great-power competition is alive and well irrespective of the cooperative claims of globalisation and democratic expansion. Derivative of which, he also raises scepticism about liberal institutionalism, which appears to have been foresighted as the world shifts toward a state of rising tensions.

Mearsheimer writes with clarity and conviction. He avoids jargon-heavy language, typical of many International Relations texts, making his work engaging not only for academics but also for policymakers, journalists, and general readers interested in global affairs.

Weaknesses and Critiques

A central critique is the deterministic tone of offensive realism. By emphasising structural constraints and the imperatives of survival, Mearsheimer downplays agency, ideas, and domestic politics. Critics argue that states do not behave aggressively in every instance—for example, post-war Germany and Japan adopted pacifism, which they maintained despite the material power they could have projected. The book also conveys a sense that war and conflict are inevitable outcomes, leaving little concession to diplomacy, norms, or institutional cooperation.

Mearsheimer considers great powers to be unitary, rational actors. However, the post-Cold War world has been identified with an increasing proliferation of influential non-state actors—multinational corporations, terrorist networks, and international institutions operating outside the traditional state structure—while states themselves still exhibit behaviour shaped by these dynamics. As states become increasingly intertwined and dependent on one another economically (globalisation) and encounter transnational challenges (like climate change), power politics, while crucially important, has become somewhat more complicated, if not outdated in considering International Relations, and is not given the attention it deserves in the book.

By discounting how conflict may be mitigated by regimes and norms, while also neglecting formation of states and their commitments to norms in

cooperation or competition, Mearsheimer understates the influence of their desire for legitimacy and resorting to violence for achieving their ends. For example, liberal and constructivist scholars address the ways in which international institutions, like the Responsibility to Protect, often constrain decision-making in ways that are meaningful.

Engaging with The Tragedy of Great Power Politics

For the readers of today, Mearsheimer's pessimism might feel out of touch, especially in our age, when modern claims of globalisation, economic interdependence, democratic institutionalisation, and international organisations are supposedly working towards reducing conflict. Mearsheimer takes on this very optimism of liberal institutionalism, to remind us that underlying all the trade agreements, summits, and peace agreements lies a far uglier logic of power politics that has never and perhaps will never, cease to exist. Regardless of whether one fully accepts or vehemently disagrees with his conclusions, the work remains an important reality check that international politics has not changed and the motivations to compete are still strong in the 21st century.

For students, academics, and professionals of International Relations, Mearsheimer's book is not merely a historical analysis of power relations, but is also an immaculate theoretical toolkit in which concepts like anarchy, the security dilemma, buck-passing, regional hegemony, and the balance of power are explained so lucidly that the reader can then use this theoretical vision or framework to analyse other theories of International Relations as well as most major historical and contemporary political events.

The book invokes one to ask questions like, do states always seek hegemony? Are there instances—like those of post-war Japan, or the European Union—in which states intentionally limit their ambitions of power? Is conflict unavoidable? Can certain structural pressures be ameliorated or delayed through international norms, diplomacy, or economic interdependence, or are our actions merely conspicuous respites in an ongoing struggle?

How do new, emergent phenomena coexist with the lens of offensive realism? Of course, cyberwarfare, artificial intelligence, and space militarisation are

newly identified arenas for competition, but they occur simultaneously with numerous transnational issues such as climate change and pandemics. Although transnational issues may entice states toward cooperation, they can also, through the lens of offensive realism, incite continued competition among states—such as competition around Arctic resources or vaccine technology.

These considerations elevate *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* beyond a theory, transforming it into an arena for theoretical and policy discussions, urging readers to connect classical power politics with today's complicated and entangled world. As such, the book does not just serve as an introduction to realism, but also as a platform for examining the contradictory assumptions of liberalism, constructivism, or critical theories, which offer alternative answers to Mearsheimer's pessimistic view. Mearsheimer's book might look like a warning to some readers and pure pessimism to many, but at its core lies a theoretical construct that prompts them to consider that, regardless of whether one subscribes to offensive realism or defensive, liberal institutionalism or constructivism, power politics, in both its best and worst manifestations, has always existed and perhaps the key to salvation lies in questioning and figuring out why states behave as they do in a world system and why creating normative changes to reach and maintain long–term peace is so challenging for an international community standing tall under the banner of global interdependence.

Conclusion

The *Tragedy of Great Power Politics* is a cornerstone book in International Relations and most explicitly presents an argument regarding structural conditions governing state actions. Theoretical lucidity, historical richness, and empirical precision make the book an invaluable resource for many ages to come. All the same, observers as well as scholars will rightly criticise Mearsheimer's determinism, the limited role of non-state actors, and the absence of dialogue with norms in his idea. However, regardless of whether one eventually falls in agreement or disagreement with Mearsheimer's claims, a reading and understanding of his arguments on international politics remains indispensable.

In an era in which the US-China competition is on the rise, Russia threatens the European order, and international institutions are stretched to their limits more than ever before, Mearsheimer's "*tragedy*" remains as relevant as ever and will undoubtedly continue to be an essential reading for scholars, policy-makers, and International Relations students, along with being a sombre reminder that power politics, rivalry, and the security dilemma will always exist as enduring features of international life—features that no amount of optimism, cooperation, institutional design, or normative aspiration can wholly erase.

References

Waltz, Kenneth N. *Theory of International Politics*. Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1979.