
This review evaluates some main points of John J. Mearsheimer’s book “The Tragedy of Great Power Politics”. With the presented book, Mearsheimer opened a new theory within realism paradigm, which is called offensive neo-realism, and analyses some core aspects of it. The intention of this review is not to take a stand among the paradigms, but criticizes some main points of offensive neo-realism with assumptions of author based on historical evidence and facts.

Great Powers as Main Actors

One of the proponents of neo-realism or structural realism is John Mearsheimer, who in his book, “The Tragedy of Great Power Politics”, founded the international relations theory of offensive realism. Offensive neo-realism of Mearsheimer is a synthesis of the classical realism of Hans Morgenthau and the defensive neo-realism of Kenneth Waltz. Morgenthau argues that states seek to gain more power because it is in their nature, but he agrees with Waltz idea that the reason why states do so lies in the structure of the international system rather than in the human lust for power. However, Mearsheimer is more pessimistic in analyzing the implications of state behavior in the anarchic international system. According to him, aggressive behavior is very common to great powers, which is a tool for their survival, because through gaining more power they can exist in the anarchic international system.

Thus, the main focus of the theory is great powers, as only these powers can shape the system immensely and affect its structure. However, one can argue that Bismarck’s Prussia in the 1860s was not a great power, [1] when it started the war against Austria, France and Denmark, shaking a balance of power as well as peace and stability in the international (European) system (Concert of Europe). In short, not only great powers are important actors who can influence the international system and change its character, but rarely, small powers also act aggressively in order to take a stake and change the ongoing processes in the international system for their benefit.

Therefore, Mearsheimer fails to explain how great powers are emerging, what the tendencies are that shifting the number of great powers in the system. Because offensive neo-realism theory of Mearsheimer will neglect domestic dynamics of states, as it sees states as black boxes or billiard balls, it will be unable to explain nationalism movements, industrialization and other factors that caused the unification of Germany under Prussian leadership by Bismarck and the emergence of a new great power in the European system in 1871.
Hegemons as Status Quo States

The theory also argues that there is not a status quo state in the international system, as all actors are revisionists, who compete for their security and make wars in the anarchic international structure in order to survive, which is actually kernel of the offensive neo-realism. As states are always uncertain about other states’ activities and power level, they are power maximizers until they achieve global hegemony. Only in this case, an actor can become a status quo state as it enjoys hegemony and there is no other dominant state to challenge its status. However, in my opinion a hegemon is also a revisionist state, but not a status quo state as Mearsheimer argues. The reasons for that can be specified in the following arguments:

Firstly, assessment of power is an impossible task. If we indicate the level of power with P, then one can not be sure if another state’s power level is 2 P or 3 P and so on. Moreover, because a hegemon does not know if 1 P or 2 P is enough to keep its hegemony in the international system, it is a power seeker in that status as well (a revisionist), even though it controls the international system.

Secondly, if we even consider a hegemon as a status quo state and its power seeking halted, one can not prevent the other states, who are revisionists and look to overthrow the prevailing hegemon and to be hegemons themselves, from seeking for power. Because, in the hegemonic system, one can not constrain other states from maximizing their power, a hegemon would not be relaxed and comfortable in the international system, but will seek for power in order not to let others catch up with it.

Security Competition and War

Mearsheimer argues that the international system is an anarchy where great powers fear each other and always compete for getting more power in order to guarantee its security. Thus, the main goal of each state is to maximize its share of world power, which means gaining power at the expense of other states. However, we can obviously see cooperation among the great powers in the prevailing anarchic states system. One example of this successful cooperation and interdependent system can be the European Union, where European great powers live in the stable peace system without any competition and war as Mearsheimer claims in his book. Thus, with offensive neo-realism Mearsheimer can not comprehensively explain today’s stable and peaceful interdependent international system or subsystems, where no wars and security competitions take place. Thus, it can be stressed that great powers are not always rivals, but also good partners to each other in the anarchic system. They can compete, as well as cooperate with each other, even though offensive neo-realism always sees it as security competition and war.

There could be periods of peace, since states may calculate that conflict, especially military conflict, is not the best means to achieve their goals at that time, but whenever there is a chance they will attack. But, if states are rational for Mearsheimer, but not crazy, he could take into consideration that today in the economic interdependent system, a war and conflict are very costly, rather than maintaining peace and stability. I think everybody will
agree that the EU is not a subsystem of the great powers, where they calculate conflict in order to attack in a proper time. Therefore, even though, this subsystem is anarchic, the regulations those bind the great powers are very strict there that prevent them from going to war.

Besides, Mearsheimer is very ambiguous while talking about security competition. He does not define security competition and how it takes place in the international system. Is it a real conflict and confrontation among the great powers or is it a “psychological” lust for being secure? Is it a real war among the great powers or is it the maintenance of national armies by the states in order to defend themselves in the moment of a threat occurs? As we can not define whether a tank is a defensive weapon, or offensive, or if a Kalashnikov is a defensive or an offensive weapon, neither can we define if national armies that contain these types of conventional weapons are for defensive or offensive purposes, nor if they are kept for competition or not? Shortly, we should define security competition itself. Is it a war, conflict or the maintenance of national armies?

**Power Concept**

The author is lacking the definition of a power concept, which causes ambiguity in understanding of his theory. What is power? He argues “power is a currency in international politics. It is the same as money in economics.” (pp. 11-12). Therefore, having a lot of money causes states to be powerful, or having good president causes to be powerful, or having a lot of weapons causes to be powerful? What is power for his theory?

The undefined term of power in Mearsheimer’s book causes unclarityness understanding the main actors of his book – great powers. Who are great powers? What should a state possess in order to be a great power? As the power concept is unclear in this book, the main actors of the book are also undefined.

I agree that he classifies the elements of power, like having a huge industrial sector, nuclear weapons, and electricity facilities and so on. But, still it does not solve the puzzle. If one state possesses a huge industry, but it has no any nuclear weapons is it still a great power? Even a state can possess two or three elements together, but can lack to possess nuclear weapons; can we in this nuclear age regard it as a great power? The North Korea possesses nuclear weapons, but not a huge industry and the other elements of power that Mearsheimer defines in his book, is it still a great power? I think all these questions demonstrate the loopholes of Mearsheimer’s theory that needs to be improved.

**Multipolar Systems vs. Bipolar Systems**

Mearsheimer argues that multipolar systems are more war-prone than are bipolar systems, and multipolar systems that contain especially powerful states-potential hegemons-are the most dangerous systems of all. He, as evidence, gives the Cold War period where the two great powers-the Soviet Union and the United States-did not fight each other and kept the bipolar system in peace and stability. They could deter each other each time when there was a threat for the security of the international system. I think it is not the bipolar system itself
that prevented these two great powers from going to war against each other, but their nuclear weapons that deterred them from fighting each other in the MAD (mutually assured destruction) system. Because, as is obvious, a nuclear war is a tragedy not only for the international system, but also for the great powers themselves as it can cause their mass destruction. Specifically, that was the reason why these two great powers did not fight each other.

Another argument can be based on today’s international system, which one can argue is either hegemonic, or “uni-multipolar”, [2] or “unipolar concert”. [3] In every system, that is totally different from bipolar, we can argue that we have more stability than the Cold War period, where many proxy wars were fought. (Therefore, I question whether the Cold War period was really stable, as Mearsheimer claims?). Thus, today’s international system has been structured in a way that going to war and the security competition has become more costly than it was before. Besides, today more than two great powers possess nuclear weapons, which makes them more available to potential hegemony, but still they do not fight each other in the current international system, because they are rational actors and are aware that going to war against each other may destroy them in this nuclear age.

Conclusion

In the following work the main concepts of offensive neo-realism are reviewed. I argue that not only great powers can change the destiny of the international system, but also small and medium powers. Besides, contrary to Mearsheimer, I argue that the international system is anarchy where cooperation and partnership among great powers are possible, in addition to security competition and war. The author of the book is not clear about the definitions of the concepts that he covers like power, a great power, and security competition, which causes difficulty in the understanding of the theory that he presents.

This review also concludes that hegemons are also revisionist states that continuously seek for power. In short, I do not accept the status quo state in the international system, which is anarchic and there is impossibility to assess power of other states.

The other issue that the presented work concerned is the nature of the international system. I argue, in contrast to Mearsheimer, that it was not the nature of the system that prevented states from fighting each other in the Cold War period, but their nuclear weapons. As rational actors the great powers understood that nuclear war could cause their mass destruction; therefore they did not go to war against each other, as it was brilliantly reflected in the Cuban Crisis in the 1960s. Moreover, in today’s system, where more than two nuclear countries exist and can fight each other for hegemony, do not fight because of the fear of nuclear war and destruction of states.

Bibliography:
