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Book Review: The Tragedy of Great Power Politics by John J. Mearsheimer

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

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ABSTRACT

This book review examines John J. Mearsheimer's The Tragedy of Great Power Politics, focusing on offensive realism and great-power competition. It evaluates the book's theoretical contributions, limitations, and relevance to contemporary U.S.–China strategic rivalry, particularly in the context of technological competition and international security.

Introduction

John J. Mearsheimer's The Tragedy of Great Power Politics (2001) is one of the most influential works in contemporary international relations theory. Drawing on the realist tradition, Mearsheimer develops the theory of offensive realism to explain why great powers compete for power and security in an anarchic international system. His central argument is that great powers are rarely satisfied with the existing distribution of power and continuously seek opportunities to maximize their relative capabilities. This book provides a systematic theoretical framework for understanding historical great-power rivalries and contemporary geopolitical competition. However, despite its theoretical contributions, the book raises important questions about the role of domestic politics, economic interdependence, and international institutions in shaping state behavior.

Summary of the Main Arguments

Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism is based on five assumptions about the international system. First, the international system is anarchic, meaning that no central authority exists above sovereign states. Second, great powers possess offensive military capabilities. Third, states can never be certain about the intentions of other states. Fourth, survival is the primary goal of states. Finally, states are rational actors that strategically pursue their objectives.

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Based on these assumptions, Mearsheimer argues that great powers have strong incentives to maximize their relative power. Unlike defensive realism, which suggests that states generally seek sufficient power to ensure their security, offensive realism emphasizes that states attempt to become regional hegemons whenever possible. According to Mearsheimer, achieving regional hegemony offers the most reliable guarantee of national survival.

The author supports his argument through historical examples, including the rise of Germany, Japan, and the United States. He argues that the United States successfully established regional hegemony in the Western Hemisphere while preventing other great powers from dominating Europe and Asia. Mearsheimer also emphasizes the importance of geography, particularly the difficulty of projecting military power across large bodies of water. Consequently, he considers global hegemony extremely difficult to achieve.

Critical Evaluation

One of the book's greatest strengths is its theoretical clarity. Mearsheimer constructs a coherent explanation of great-power behavior by connecting systemic anarchy with strategic competition. His approach offers a useful framework for analyzing why states may pursue military expansion even when their immediate security appears relatively stable.

Furthermore, the theory remains relevant to contemporary U.S.–China strategic competition. China's growing economic and military capabilities have created concerns about the regional balance of power in East Asia. From an offensive realist perspective, China's pursuit of greater regional influence and U.S. efforts to maintain its strategic position can be understood as predictable consequences of structural competition. In this respect, Mearsheimer's framework provides valuable insights into the security dilemmas associated with changing power distributions.

Nevertheless, offensive realism has several limitations.

First, the theory places excessive emphasis on military capabilities and material power. Although military strength remains important, contemporary international politics also involves economic interdependence, technological competition, and institutional influence. In particular, competition over semiconductors, artificial intelligence, and critical technologies demonstrates that national power cannot be fully understood through military capabilities alone. The increasing importance of techno-nationalism suggests that technological development and economic security should be integrated more systematically into explanations of great-power rivalry.

Second, Mearsheimer's state-centric approach pays insufficient attention to domestic political factors. Political institutions, nationalism, public opinion, and leadership perceptions can significantly influence foreign policy decisions. States facing similar international pressures may adopt different strategies because of their domestic political circumstances. Therefore, structural explanations alone may not adequately account for

variations in state behavior.

Third, the book tends to underestimate the potential influence of international institutions and economic cooperation. Liberal institutionalist scholars argue that institutions can reduce uncertainty, facilitate communication, and create incentives for cooperation. Although institutions cannot eliminate great-power competition, they may influence how competition develops and whether conflicts escalate. For example, international economic institutions and regional diplomatic mechanisms may provide opportunities for negotiation even during periods of intense geopolitical rivalry.

Another important limitation concerns the relationship between theoretical prediction and historical evidence. Mearsheimer's interpretation of historical cases is persuasive in many respects, but alternative explanations are also possible. Imperial expansion, for instance, may result not only from systemic incentives but also from domestic ideological commitments and economic interests. A more comprehensive analysis would consider how systemic pressures interact with these additional factors.

Conclusion

Overall, The Tragedy of Great Power Politics makes a significant contribution to international relations scholarship by offering a systematic and compelling explanation of great-power competition. Its principal strength lies in demonstrating how international anarchy generates persistent incentives for states to pursue power and influence.

However, its explanatory power is constrained by its limited consideration of domestic politics, international institutions, and technological interdependence. These factors have become increasingly important in understanding contemporary international relations, particularly the evolving U.S.–China rivalry.

Despite these limitations, Mearsheimer's work remains essential reading for students and scholars of international relations. Rather than providing a complete explanation of international politics, offensive realism should be understood as a powerful theoretical perspective that can be complemented by other approaches. The book's enduring significance lies in its ability to stimulate critical debate about the relationship between power, security, and international order.