

Real Hegemons Don't Pass the Buck

Shivaji Sondhi*

The Tragedy of Great Power Politics, by John J. Mearsheimer, W. W. Norton and Company (2001), 555 pages.

Politics among nations is different from politics within nations. Although the sharpness of this distinction needs immediate qualification to account for civil wars – a growth industry in the past half-century – it is an important insight into the political arrangements of *Homo Sapiens*. The technical formulation of this difference is that intra-state politics is *hierarchical* in that the state ultimately undertakes to settle disputes between individuals or institutions and so the latter can plan on a more or less orderly existence in which they can realize gains from co-operation. By contrast, the international state system is *anarchic* – the roughly 200 states on the planet have no one to watch over them, rather like Golding's children in *The Lord of the Flies*.

The reality of the last assertion is accepted by all students of world politics although its consequences are contested. Optimists, also called Liberals, going back to Immanuel Kant, have felt that a peaceful anarchy is possible provided some finite list of causes is addressed. Kant himself was the most clear-eyed of the lot and grand-fathered the “democratic peace” thesis which holds that liberal democracies don't go to war but his successors have included Marxists who have blamed capitalism, Wilsonians who placed their faith in self-determination and Noam Chomsky's Indian groupies who seem touchingly convinced that abolishing the United States will fix all of the world's problems.¹ Of these and like-minded folk, the democratic peace theorists are serious contenders and have actual facts on their side, more on which later.

Pessimists, who prefer to call themselves Realists, feel that anarchy is constitutive of global politics and that at the level of the strongest states in the international system (the “great powers”) little else counts than their inability to depend on anyone but themselves for their existence, and that in the absence of a world government not much will change. Realism has always had a bad press since it ignores any differences in the internal politics of the great powers which tends to go down badly with ordinary citizens of all countries who tend to be pretty sure that *their* country is motivated by excellent motives. It has had an even worse press in the West since the disappearance of the Soviet Union on Christmas day in 1991 with peace, democracy and free markets having settled in on nearly all of Europe including Russia as well as Central and South America, a long economic expansion and the seemingly unstoppable march of globalization, for instance in the explosive growth of the Internet. Not only did it seem that kindness among states was breaking out it appeared that the state itself was being outflanked by advances in technology favoring global citizenship. Even on the dark side of the ledger, the events of

* The author is an Associate Professor of Physics at Princeton University.

¹ Alas, about all we can be confident of is that such an outcome will cause Professor Chomsky's market value in India to drop precipitously.

September 11th have been cited as proof that non-state actors are a bigger threat to the security of most nations than other nations, at odds with Realist theory.² The times appear to call for theorists of international organizations, coalitions and regimes, not descendants of Carr and Morgenthau.

This has, unsurprisingly, not cut much ice with the descendants of Carr and Morgenthau. Last year Realism's reigning Paramacharya, Kenneth Waltz, argued vigorously in the pages of *International Security* (Volume 25 Number 1, pp 5-41), that it was alive and well, and this year his distinguished compatriot John Mearsheimer of the University of Chicago, has taken the argument, and much more, to a broader public in this lucidly written and tightly organized work of great scholarship. This context notwithstanding, the bulk of the book is concerned with detailing and documenting a realist variant, "offensive realism", as a theory of international politics and it is only in a concluding chapter that Mearsheimer comments directly on current trends.

Offensive Realism

Mearsheimer is a realist among realists – the kind to whom other realists presumably turn for reassurance when they start feeling that the world may not be such a bad place after all. At any rate, his account of the roots of great power politics is concrete, precise, unsentimental and about as quantified as you might imagine a theory of international politics could get. What is surprising is that he is then not immediately wrong and how well his ideas work over the long stretch of European, American and East Asian history that he examines.

He starts with anarchy in the state system and, like other realists, does not examine the internal dynamics of the states themselves – they are "black boxes". The great powers among them are defined recursively by requiring that they be capable of putting up a respectable fight against the strongest state in the international system. More colloquially, these are the big guys. Great powers are capable of harming each other even with relatively low levels of weaponry overall³ and certainly have been in a position to do so for centuries. While smaller states may depend on the great powers for their security, the great powers themselves have no one to call for help. If each great power could be *sure* that none of the other great powers would actually want to harm it, then it could relax and focus on co-operating with them. In practice that isn't feasible even in the absence of actual disputes for *intentions* are hard to gauge and military capabilities are real. So the great power is forced to start assessing threats to its security *without* making presumptions of benevolence and to start planning to deal with them.

At this point Mearsheimer parts company with Kenneth Waltz and other structural realists (whom he calls defensive realists) who are, in this regard, balance of power

² The book under review was finished before these events. However since it is plausible that the subsequent "war on terrorism" is a contemporary version of the belated crackdown on the Barbary pirates in the 19th century, in which enough great powers decided to co-operate on ending a common menace without any real transformation of the international system, its central argument isn't immediately affected.

³ "After all, for every neck, there are two hands to choke it." Page 31.

theorists. The latter would expect a given great power to gather an “appropriate” amount of power and rely on alliances to deter any stronger powers. Mearsheimer doesn’t see that this is the optimal strategy for any given state in a self-help system – why settle for the uncertainties of a multi-polar world if complete self-sufficiency is possible? Hence he predicts that any state will generally strive to maximize its share of world power, and whenever possible, strive for hegemony itself. Hence, *offensive* realism.

Wealth, Power, Land and Water

This fundamental assertion is supplemented by Mearsheimer’s quantification of power, one of the more striking features of this book, and a theory of its limits. Mearsheimer avoids defining power as the capacity to influence the behavior of others, since that has no predictive content that distinguishes cause from effect. Instead he focuses on military power and latent power, the latter being the capacity to generate military power. He measures latent power by GNP when possible and by proxies (energy and steel production) when not. As he notes this has its problems, but it does have the advantage of taking account of both population and economic sophistication that are the twin foundations of military power.

His theory of the limits of power starts from his insistence that even today land power is primary. Douhet and Mahan notwithstanding, armies win great power wars and even most wars between great powers and smaller fish, although airpower can and does play an effective support role. To this he adds the conclusion, drawn from his analysis of amphibious landings to date, that starting land wars across a large body of water is really difficult - which he terms the “stopping power of water”. Putting these together leads to the conclusion that on a planet with percolating oceans but non-percolating land, only *regional* hegemony is possible which is then what great powers are likely to seek. The likely unachievable exceptional case is if a great power achieves nuclear hegemony in which case it will *ipso facto* achieve global hegemony as well.

Does it work?

Sadly, this core complex of ideas does a really good job over large stretches of modern history. Napoleonic France made a bid for European hegemony when it was in a position to take a shot at it even though you and I might have guessed that marching to Moscow might not have been a priority for people sitting in Paris. Mearsheimer’s examination of the histories of Japan, Germany, the Soviet Union and Italy documents a record of repeated and relentless expansion *in their immediate geographical proximity* from the second half of the 19th century till the end of the Second World War. During this period Germany made two bids for European hegemony and Japan made one for Asian hegemony. With the end of the war and the defeat of the other three only the Soviet Union remained a great power in the new, bipolar architecture of the international system. It then proceeded to expand in Eastern Europe and in the Far East and then into Afghanistan in 1979 before failing spectacularly and disintegrating in 1991. The United States did best of all, expanding from an enclave on the Eastern seaboard of North America to a continental power that has excluded all other great powers from the entire

western hemisphere – the only instance of *successful* regional hegemony in history. You see the power of the realist case that the nature of the internal political arrangements of the state seems hardly to matter as far as its desire for expansion are concerned – although there is perhaps the lesson that a democracy is more suited to carrying it out successfully, an insight more or less due already to Machiavelli!

That the United States came to a halt in the Americas around 1900, Mearsheimer attributes to water as he does the otherwise striking anomaly that Britain failed to conquer Europe despite possessing nearly 70% of Europe's total industrial might between 1840 and 1860. The first seems reasonable but I must confess the second seemed to me not terribly convincing even within Mearsheimer's terms of reference. The English Channel is no Atlantic Ocean and could not have deterred Britain from translating its power advantage into actual physical control of the continent if it had so wished. It seems to me more plausible that it worked in reverse – it provided a *powerful* Britain with a moat that made it especially secure and kept it from starting down the offensive realist computation in the first place. Indeed, the behavior of the United States is likely better explained in that fashion as well. Regardless, in both cases the states concerned felt able to function as “offshore balancers” in which they confined themselves to making sure that no other power achieved regional hegemony, in Europe for both Britain and the US and in Asia for the US, and thereby enough power to seriously threaten their security. (Incidentally, one problem with crediting the stopping power of water too much is that it would leave little incentive for either the US or Britain to play such a balancing role.)

The history that fits uneasily into the theory at this point is the behavior of Japan. It is an island nation and yet sought expansion on the closest continent. Mearsheimer credits the relative weakness of Asian states and Russia's engagement on its western frontier for permitting this outcome and that seems reasonable. It does go against the revisionist version I offered above since this should have allowed Japan to feel even more secure. Either way, I was unable to quite fit the history of the three “island” powers into a crisp narrative as I went through the book. This is probably a sign that other ingredients are lurking beyond the margins. Certainly one feature of the period under review is colonial expansion in distant continents, missing from the book, which did not form part of campaigns for regional hegemony although it did fit the desire to maximize economic power and even military power as in the case of the British Indian Army. Exactly where Japanese expansion in Asia fell between “normal” and colonial expansion is probably important for a consistent offensive realist account of the island powers.

Incidentally, something that *does* fit well into offensive realism is the nuclear competition between the superpowers in the second half of the twentieth century, driven precisely by the sorts of calculations of gaining security via an absolute advantage that it predicts are endemic to state behavior.

Structure and Survival

The concluding set of ideas in Mearsheimer's edifice concern the strategies states follow in an offensive realist universe and how those interact with the structure of the system to

produce war or maintain peace. A state that can, will seek to expand its hegemony. Threatened states will either balance against it or seek to pass the buck (“buck-pass”) to another state if they can do so. The choice in turn depends on the architecture of the state system. If it is bipolar, no buck-passing is feasible and the system is stable even though characterized by a security competition between the two powers as in the good old days of the cold war. If it is multi-polar, then buck-passing is an option. Mearsheimer argues that this makes multi-polar systems less stable – there is more room for miscalculation. He also argues that multi-polar systems with a potential hegemon – a state with the wherewithal to dominate all others, are maximally unstable. Europeans whose history includes the Napoleonic wars and the two major wars involving Germany will concur. They may, however, draw scant comfort from learning that Germany could have made a bid for hegemony in 1905 with likely greater success than in 1914 (it had just passed Britain in industrial output and Japan has just knocked Russia out of the European balance of power) and that its failure in 1941 to defeat the Soviet Union was a failure in translating latent power into actual weapons rather than overreaching as a matter of principle (despite enjoying an economic power advantage of at least 2:1 throughout the war, Germany produced only half as many tanks as the Soviet Union).

Europe, Germany and Democratic Peace

A popular account of the Cold War in the West is that the last great totalitarian tyranny of the 20th century was vanquished by a coalition of European liberal democracies under the leadership of the US thus bringing ideological history to an end. While the first part of the statement is surely true, to Mearsheimer and other realists this is an epiphenomenon masking the reality that the US kept the Soviet Union from achieving regional hegemony in Europe or Asia in order to prevent it from becoming a really serious competitor to it. Consequently, with the Soviet Union having collapsed the logic of US engagement around the world is now greatly diminished and its troops posted in Europe and Asia are due home. The expansion of NATO since 1991 Mearsheimer suspects is a combination of inertia with regards to Russia or the “pacifier” logic of keeping the Europeans from fretting about each other perhaps most pithily summarized in the old formula that the purpose of NATO was “to keep the Americans in, the Russians out and the Germans down.” He predicts that this will not last – a Russian resurgence being unlikely for a while to come, the US will likely abandon its European commitment in the decade ahead. At this point, Germany will instantly become a potential hegemon. It already has a 6.6:1 advantage in wealth over Russia today, greater even than it enjoyed in 1913, *and* a larger conventional army (516,500 versus 348,000) and technologically can acquire nuclear weapons any time it wishes to.

Exactly where this leads may be the natural experiment that discriminates between Realism and its most serious liberal competitor, democratic peace theory. The latter holds that democracies don’t go to war against each other and that fundamental proposition *also* has impressive empirical support, if not as an absolute claim.⁴ If the latter is on the

⁴ To pick just one counterexample, Nawaz Sharif’s Pakistan was certainly formally a democracy at the time of Kargil.

mark and Russia deepens its democracy, we will see a peaceful Europe despite American withdrawal. If not, watch for heightened suspicion of Germany everywhere in Europe and a German acquisition of nuclear weapons.

It does seem to me that there is a third possibility, which lies in between these two extremes. There are two great experiments in multi-ethnic integration over the past half century, India and the European Union. In the Indian case colonial rule instigated a cultural area into transforming itself (modulo the Partition) into a modern nation-state whose nationalism has gradually strengthened, even as its institutions exhibit the weakness and inwardness characteristic of its multi-ethnic composition (“India as Austria-Hungary”). Europe, having escaped colonization by China, is undergoing a slower integrative process, which is leading to even weaker federal institutions. Nevertheless, the European Union is a potential India in the making and a scenario in which it will balance Russia would seem not completely farfetched. Such an evolution of an aggregated identity would be a partial triumph of democratic peacemaking in the odd fashion that it would enable a hierarchical security structure to emerge for a selected set of states.

China as Germany?

In Asia, China is clearly the huge variable. For the first time in modern history there is a state that is engaged in rapid economic growth, which has a significantly larger population than the United States. As a matter of principle this makes China a potential Asian hegemon, and one, which would be extremely difficult for the US to contain as it could surpass the US in power. As a matter of practice, China’s economy is still only a quarter of Japan’s even without factoring in its relative technological backwardness. So from the point of view of the US, China isn’t really a potential Asian hegemon at this point and probably not even a real threat across the Taiwan straits. If China’s economic growth slows then any prospect of it overpowering all of its neighbors in East Asia will fade and Mearsheimer expects the US to bring its troops home and leave the task of balancing China, Japan and Russia to themselves. Should Chinese economic growth not slow, the US will have its work cut out for it and Asia will develop its own “German problem”. For these reasons Mearsheimer recommends that the US should change tack and work to slow Chinese economic growth instead of encouraging it as it has in recent years.

Lessons for Nehruvian States

A popular account (in India) of Indian international behavior holds that the Nehruvian idealism of its policies has been frustrated by a cruel world. It seems useful to ask a) if the Indian state has really been more Nehruvian than realist and b) if the realist vantage point suggests important corrections to the current course of Indian foreign and security policies. (Liberal vantage points would suggest others, probably most compellingly with regards to future arrangements within the subcontinent itself.)

A fully realist state will attempt to maximize economic power and military power. Evidently, Nehruvian India has not done that over its history as a modern state. To get past the simplifying assumptions of perfect rationality among states, Realism needs, as Waltz has explicitly noted, a theory of the state much as economics needs a theory of the firm and there are certainly explanations for India's behavior. That said, the subcontinent has some degree of autonomy ("the stopping power of mountains") and one can ask how well realists ideas explain Indian behavior.

Clearly, the Indian state has sought subcontinental hegemony. The termination of the independent existence of the princely states, especially the bid for Kashmir backed up by force, the desire to enforce the formal British borders against China, the operations to annex Goa and Sikkim, the dismemberment of Pakistan and the creation of a weak Bangladesh, the limits placed on Sri Lankan, Nepalese and Bhutanese behavior are all fine things for an aspiring hegemon to engage in. India's failures have arisen from a failure to comprehend the world *beyond* the subcontinent: the failure to contest Tibet's fate with China and then to contest China's support for Pakistan which has enabled Pakistan to defy Indian hegemony by going nuclear, and even take the battle to India over the last two decades of insurgencies in Punjab and Kashmir. All in all it has failed to really try and balance China but has otherwise done fine by the offensive realist canon. All of this is not to say that India is not a better state than its neighbors in its treatment of its citizens, and that in each case there weren't good reasons that seem compelling to an Indian, but that a realist account of its behavior certainly works well.

Table 1 A "Mearsheimer Table" for India, China and Pakistan

	1980	1990	2000
India	183 (43%)	317 (44%)	474 (29%)
China	216 (51%)	363 (50%)	1077 (67%)
Pakistan	24 (6%)	40 (6%)	62 (4%)

(The figure above are GDP in US\$ billions converted at the rate of exchange)

The failure to balance China has already extracted a terrible price in terms of the likely vanishing of Tibet as even a recognizable cultural area contiguous to India, the pain that Pakistan has inflicted on India and the consequent need to live with a balance of nuclear terror with that country. Unfortunately, this may get worse if India's self-destructive economic policies that have allowed China to gain a 2:1 advantage in economic power since rough parity even as late as 1990, do not come to an end. At the moment of writing India is trying mightily to pass the buck to the United States – in trying to get it to constrain Pakistan's support of terrorist entities and its hostility to India more generally, but while the narrower (anti-terrorist) agenda should succeed, any broader progress seems questionable with such an approach. Bluntly, it appears unlikely that a Pax Americana with an Indian junior partner will descend on the subcontinent anytime soon. Essentially there isn't a major US interest in the subcontinent beyond counter-terrorism at this point and it doesn't really need India enough for other tasks to undertake an enterprise of that magnitude. That then leaves India with the choice of actively balancing Chinese power and crafting a benign hegemony that Pakistan can accept, inevitably with American help,

or submitting to a Pax Sinica with China's substantial chorus in India playing a mediating role.

In this context the Vajpayee government's actions in testing nuclear weapons, making more noises about China, reaching out to the United States, resuming dealing with Myanmar's military junta, and attempting to reach out to Pakistan and implicitly detach it from China make eminent realist sense. They would therefore have appeared attractive to *any* government at this time although Jyoti Basu would probably have found it a bit harder to describe the United States as India's natural ally without working in a reference to Cuba's moral splendor. That Vajpayee has had trouble getting his party to see sense over Pakistan is a corresponding blindness of the right.

Realism suggests that balancing China's growing power is *the* challenge to the Indian state at this time. In this task it would help greatly if India's decision-making elite could see the challenge clearly. I can think of no better way of improving their eyesight, than for Mearsheimer's book to be made compulsory reading for anyone passing within ten miles of South Block.