

Investigating Mearsheimer's Offensive Realism and Asia: A Critical Appraisal

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Abstract

There had been constant efforts by nation-states to explain the States' behaviour and the complexities of the international political system. Realism and Liberalism emerged as notable theories to understand these complexities. Realism focused on power acquisition, Liberalism stressed economic development and cooperation. As the global political landscape became more complex during the cold war days as a result of the emergence of new states- different theories and ideas were marked obscure. The academic insights of neo-realism and new liberalism set new parameters to evaluate the state's behaviour during the cold war days. There were again more practical efforts in post-cold-wars days by the academic community of international relations to restudy the changing behaviour of states with a new lens of analysis. It paved the way for both offensive and defensive realism. This paper investigates. Mearsheimer's offensive realism as the offshoot of neorealism. It further develops a critical appraisal based on deductive research methodology to evaluate the reliability of this theoretical offshoot.

Keywords: (Offensive Realism, State Behaviour, expansionist, China, Balancing, US)

Investigating Mearsheimer's Offensive Realism: A Critical Appraisal

It is known today that the characteristics of the international system itself and the actors involved were laid out much earlier when Thucydides gave his account of the Peloponnesian War (Thucydides, 5th B.C/1920). Much before the formal functioning of nation-states, the relations among different ruling authorities were based on power. This continued even after the nation-state system was acknowledged. The will of the powerful and subservience of the weak was the highlight of any relations among states that were mostly the product of the understanding and choices of the rulers. This idea was at the heart of the realism approach, and it has been ruling the discourse of international relations. The end of the cold war marked new assumptions by making realism as obscure and Liberalism as the mere prevailing theoretical paradigm (Fukuyama, 1989).

John Mearsheimer put forward Offensive Realism at a time when Liberalism had gained momentum. Neorealism focused on the structure of the international system, unlike the original version of Classical Realism. However, there existed a divide in Neorealism as some scholars based their conclusions on the balance of power notion, emphasizing security, while others stressed the acquisition of power. The major approach was put forward by Kenneth Waltz in 1979, known as Defensive Realism (Waltz, 1979). Mearsheimer, who maintained the power quest notion, proposed a book-length explanation of his version of Neorealism which was called

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Offensive realism, and negated the liberal assumptions claiming the end of war and prevalence of peace. This theory gained considerable eminence as it used examples to support its claims.

This paper is composed to provide an overview of the theory of "Offensive Realism" as proposed by Prof. John Mearsheimer¹ in his seminal work "*The Tragedy of the Great Power Politics*." The paper elaborates on various intricacies present in the overall structure of this ¹ John J. Mearsheimer is an American political scientist. He is the R. Wendell Harison distinguished service professor at the University of Chicago. John Mearsheimer is famous for his controversial ideas and stern personality. A vocal opponent of the Iraq war of 2003, he was one of the few people who formed a group and collectively published an advert in the New York Times against Bush's decision. He was almost alone in opposing Ukraine's move to give up her nuclear weapons. His most controversial work concerns the alleged influence of interest groups over the U.S. policymakers in their actions in the Middle East, about which he wrote in his book "*The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy*". Of all of these great works, the most influential was and still is the proposal of the 'Offensive Realism' theory. neorealist theory and the counterarguments to Offensive Realism given by the proponents of various other theories. The text provides a comprehensive account of the theory and its critical analysis, marked by important examples that support its critique at different levels of analysis.

The hypothesis that this paper is built upon maintains that despite some strong points made by Offensive Realism, *there exist specific weaknesses in its theoretical framework and that it fails to explain certain important occurrences of contemporary international politics*. The document consists of three parts. First, it gives an overview of the main ideas of the theory and discusses counterarguments against the primary assumptions of offensive Realism. Second, it analyses the relevance of theory to contemporary international politics and investigates the impact and relation of theory with national security in South Asia.

I

Principally, Offensive Realism gives a rather disappointing picture of the international community of which exploitation, power race, and war are the major features. Unlike its parent theory of classical Realism, Neorealism itself and offensive Realism, to be specific, did not attribute the actions of these actors to human nature that was said to be selfish and power-thirsty (Hobbes, 1651/1996). It based its arguments on the anarchic nature of the international system. It reasons for the events in the backdrop of the absence of an international governing body over states, hence an anarchic system. It explains state behavior as governed by a lack of security. Mearsheimer, like other structural realists, does not take into account the cultural differences or the governing authorities of these states. He treats states like black boxes-all alike-except that some are more powerful than others. The theory holds that whoever runs a state and whatever the cultural differences among states are, the way they look at other states does not differ.

So, when anarchy was taken to be the cause of insecurity among state actors, Waltz, and his followers highlighted the need for security maximization by states. It was then that Mearsheimer intended to introduce to

the world the other side of the story. He maintained that not security, but power maximization was the aim of every state actor. He explained the events from history viewed through the lens of Offensive Realism. As he did so, he departed from the conservative notion that classical Realism took its basis from, that is, selfish and violent human nature. He explained how every state takes measures to rob other states of power and increase its own. Mearsheimer builds on the idea of John Herz (1950) about the existence of security dilemma and maintains that states have to resort to self-help which, according to him, in the case of great powers, is an offense. Contrary to the defensive realists' posture, Mearsheimer holds that the best offense is a good offense.

Nevertheless, there was criticism, and it gradually started to gain strength as important international events took place. The text that follows reflects Offensive Realism's understanding of the world and outlines its shortcomings in terms of the theoretical framework and context of the occurrences in the international arena.

The explanations for state behavior concerning other states are based on the five bedrock assumptions of this theory which are used to make conclusions. It holds that when these are examined together, linked to one another, it becomes possible to explain why states seek power. The first assumption is that great powers are the main actors in world politics, and they operate in an anarchic system. The second assumption holds that all states possess some offensive military capability. Each state, in other words, has the power to inflict some harm on its neighbor. Of course, that capability varies among states, and for any state, it can change over time. The third one maintains that states can never be certain about the intentions of other states. The discrimination between revisionists and status quo states is hard to make.

Unlike military capabilities, state intentions cannot be empirically calculated. The problem is that policy-makers sometimes lie about or conceal their true intentions. But even if one could determine another state's intentions today, there is no way to decide on its future intentions.

The fourth one holds that the primary goal of states is survival. States seek to maintain their territorial integrity and the autonomy of their domestic political order. The fifth and last assumption holds that states are rational actors, which implies that they are capable of coming up with sound strategies that maximize their prospects for survival. Because states operate with imperfect information in a complicated world, they sometimes make serious mistakes.

Mearsheimer uses these assumptions and furthers his discussion on how states behave. Amidst this, he uses historical examples, mainly from Europe. However, the key arguments of his book-length explanation of the theory have been criticized in the backdrop of contemporary international politics. Moreover, some flaws in the theoretical description of facts and examples he gave have also been highlighted.

First, the theory holds that power is relative and states seek to gain power at the expense of other states. This is the only way to feel secure in an uncertain world. By this, Mearsheimer holds that states, specifically

great powers, act aggressively. This can be translated into territorial gains by expansion and building up a formidable military that he describes as an essential element of power.

Furthermore, Mearsheimer's assumption that states act aggressively because they are not sure about others' intentions in an anarchic system can be countered by using Jack Donnelly's argument, which states that "fear is an essentially defensive motive; the central aim is to preserve what one already has (Donnelly, 2000)." Thus, even in an anarchic system where war is inevitable, going for aggressiveness and pre-emptive war is not a rational choice because fear induces defensive behavior rather than making states act offensively and pre-emptively and put on stake whatever is at hand.

This critique, however, can be refuted by Mearsheimer's argument that considers states rational enough to analyze the cost and benefit of going to war and only adopting the war choice when it is more beneficial than the other choice of not going to war. However, as Fearon points out, this classifies states as "compulsive gamblers" who would eventually lose everything by repeatedly risking their existence (Fearon, 1995). Mearsheimer strongly maintains that the acts of states are based on their calculation as rational actors. However, such a risk where states can lose it all is not rational.

Furthermore, one of the assumptions also states that the primary state goal is survival. If states indulge in this power gamble, their very survival would be at stake, which is irrational and compromises the primary state goal. Besides these, a point that can be borrowed from classical Realism is that since states are run by humans, even if it is in an anarchic structure, human psychology should have a role to play in the security dilemma. Examining the psychology literature on fear confirms that individuals tend to respond to fear with defensive behavior (Pashakhanlou, 2013). Whereas aggression is not the logical consequence of fear that Mearsheimer claims it is.

Going further on to his significant notion of uncertainty, Mearsheimer's claim seems to hold some weight when he says that mere statements in international relations cannot be relied upon as absolute truth on the speaker's end. However, it cannot be taken as a reasonable attitude to blindly pursue power while assuming that states can never be trusted and that there is always absolute uncertainty. Here, the notion Fearon (1994) put forward can be considered. According to him, the uncertainty about other states' intentions can be reduced if the state bidding for cooperation shows determination and intent. This can be understood by looking at Egypt's efforts for peace with Israel under Sadat.

Egypt and Israel had fought five wars since World War II. When Anwar Sadat visited Jerusalem in 1977, he went to tremendous lengths risking his career and even his life to demonstrate his commitment to peace because the lack of reciprocity from Israel would have left Sadat incompetent in front of the Egyptian public (Shamir and Shikaki, 2010).

Mearsheimer also relates this notion of uncertainty and aggressiveness with the rise of China. The foremost question is that if states are always uncertain, how can they be sure that China will project offensive capabilities as it rises? Moreover, even if states are concerned about China's behavior owing to the uncertainty of intentions, their reaction to such concerns is unpredictable. States can use ways such as raising the cost of conflict for China to suppress its aggressive behavior. States may even go into large volumes of trade with China and form other involvements that make it hard for China to consider aggression a reasonable option. States may also take confidence-building measures to decrease suspicion and conflict (Steinsson, 2014).

According to offensive Realism, there is a straightforward logic: the more powerful a state is compared to its competitors, the better its chances of survival in the anarchic world. To this, Mearsheimer maintains that states ultimately aim for hegemony while maintaining that global hegemony is impossible to achieve, so states gain regional hegemony.

He further says that the pursuit of regional hegemony among all great powers gives rise to perpetual security competition and increases the possibility of war and conflict. This is what he refers to as the Tragedy of Great Power Politics, where to ensure security, states ultimately have to go for conflict. However, that can be understood if the argument of classical Realism is considered, which renders states' behavior as the reflection of aggressive, selfish, and power-hungry human nature. On the other hand, if Mearsheimer's arguments are considered, which do not regard states as inherently aggressive and consider them rational, bidding for hegemony, going for conflict, and eventually putting survival at stake does not sound rational (Steinsson, 2014).

Moreover, critics have observed that Mearsheimer is correct in stating that hegemons are the most secure states. However, they argue that offensive Realism does not differentiate between the situation surrounding states that are hegemons and those that bid for hegemony. The United States is taken as a primary case study to demonstrate the relevancy and applicability of Offensive Realism. And thus, it is also related to China's bid for hegemony.

However, both are completely separate cases. First, unlike China, the U.S. did not have any native balancer in the region, neither in the form of native tribes nor in the form of Canada or Mexico. Second, European powers were more occupied with power maximization in their region than the containment of the United States in the western hemisphere. This can even be backed by writings of Collin Elman regarding the case of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 (Elman, 2004) when France had to forgo the territory, for she was more concerned with her relative power position in the European region. On the other hand, in the region where China would have to make a bid for hegemony, there are power giants like Russia, Japan, South Korea, India, and even a foreign power in the form of the United States. Among these, Russia, India, and the United States are nuclear powers, while Japan and South Korea have the potential to become one. This makes China's bid for hegemony a suicidal effort instead of one for survival (Steinsson, 2014).

The third point Mearsheimer made is regarding the irrelevancy of past and present behavior of the state when making assumptions about future behavior. By using this notion, he asserts that despite the current peaceful behavior of China, one can not be sure that it will not become belligerent in the future. However, this argument again falls short of capturing the ground realities because, in real global politics, states, along with domestic factors of other states, take into account their past behaviors and current policies (Wendt, 1995). It would be ridiculous to expect China to abandon her policies of cooperation and trade that have aided in multiplying her economic development, fostering relations with other states, and boosting her influence in world politics.

In the present time, North Korea serves as an example to some extent, at least. For China to start to engage in erratic expansionist behavior would compromise all that has been built up in recent decades. China, on the other hand, has invested a great deal in economic projects, for instance, the ones that cater to Asia and Europe in its OBOR initiative and the Maritime Silk Road. If the world community were to contain and isolate China, hostile Chinese behavior would make sense, as there would be no incentives for China to carry on. However, as the world has opened to China with open arms, which has allowed China to increase its power and security, one finds it hard to understand why China would take the first steps to break this up. Mearsheimer certainly does not provide an internally coherent, logical argument for why China would do so.

Defensive Realists also criticize offensive Realism by arguing that offensive realists misread the implications of the five primary assumptions of Structural Realism. Moreover, they contend that fear is not a systemic condition but rather a psychological unit-level variable. Thus, offensive realists' claim to explain conflict through purely systemic explanations falls short. There is also criticism of the level of analysis by Mearsheimer while explaining certain factors. Toft (2005) points to such flaws. The inclusion of the non-structural geographic variable to explain great power behavior shifts the theory's focal point of analysis from system-wide dynamics to regional ones. Moreover, he points to the theory's regional security analysis and argues that offensive Neorealism fails to clearly define what constitutes a region with "entities like Europe or North-East Asia (taken) for granted," leaving room for scholarly disapproval.

II

Mearsheimer has given a broad outlook on great power behavior leaving behind a precise explanation of incidences at the national and regional levels. Just as American behavior is not entirely explained by offensive Realism, the theory also ignores potential great power behavior. In the present era, India, which has soft power and potential for becoming a regional power, has not been taken into account. If China is the rising regional hegemon, it should essentially be aggressive toward India, which is the next great competitor. This fails to be proved. Similarly, India, though aggressive in terms of military build-up and violations of international law

regarding neighboring countries' sovereignty and borders, does not show expansionism toward either of its weaker neighbors.

The absence of inclination towards expansionism and war is also reflected by the national security policies of these countries that not only focus on preserving territorial independence and sovereignty but also take into account the assurance of economic development and social welfare that necessitates cooperation with regional small and big powers. However, when national security policies are influenced by offensive Realism, there is little room to consider the non-traditional aspect of national security that has become a significant discourse in both academic literature and policy papers.

In addition to that, the region where China and the USA are active rivals in the backdrop of many other states is also important to consider. This is the South China Sea, where China and USA have indulged in posing threats to each other over the territory that China makes claims to. Writers often state that there prevail strong chances of an armed conflict as the USA has a staunch stance and is using its allies (Japan, Vietnam) to build military opposition to China's claims. However, it is interesting to note that a conflict has not taken place, nor is any state in favor of one. At the ASEAN Summit 2017, Vietnam and the Philippines expressed their will to settle any disputes under the guidance of international law. This was in response to Trump's offer for "negotiation" over the issue with China. Moreover, China and South Korea have made their moves toward friendly ties, identifying common interests. Such a scenario is not explained by offensive Realism.

III

Conclusion

The preceding text offers detailed insight into critics' views when they challenge Offensive realism claims. A very brief description of how the three most prominent theories challenge offensive Realism can also be viewed in terms of the very foundation that offensive Realism relies upon, that is, power maximization. Firstly, defensive realists hold that since survival is the ultimate goal, states seek as much power as is required to make them secure *viz-a-viz* other powerful states. This implies the balance of threats logic. Aggressive India builds a military when it perceives an indirect threat from the Chinese growing latent power and, at times, rising military power (though not expansionist offensive).

Secondly, the liberalism-based challenge that offensive realism faces are that of the presence of multilateral institutions which cultivate cooperation and diplomatic resolution of disputes instead of war. The argument by Mearsheimer that selfish state interests and differences of interests render institutions void can be best challenged if combined with the other notion of Liberalism. This holds that trade bridges state together. Since the ultimate goal is survival, national interest cannot be put at stake so easily, and this is the very reason that makes open wars unlikely in today's era. After all, economic interests are supreme as economic strength is,

in Mearsheimer's words, states' latent power. The growing economic ties of China may be explained in this context. Lastly, the constructivist school of thought argues that *rationality* has a fixed meaning and the structure of international is what states make of it. This points to the same idea that finding diplomatic cues and economic interests can help maintain a better situation in the anarchic system than offensive Realism predicts.

Ultimately, Mearsheimer's theory is internally incoherent, as the conclusions he draws contradict the assumptions he makes at some points. Consequently, his assumptions cannot logically lead to the conclusion that states will bid for hegemony. Mearsheimer's theory of offensive Realism, therefore, does not provide a logically coherent basis for the view that the rise of China will be un-peaceful.

This is not to say that China's rise will turn out peacefully. Mearsheimer's theory may very well predict how the rise of China will turn out, but it fails to explain it in a logically coherent fashion. In some other cases, offensive Realism fails to explain certain incidents to a partial or complete extent. A detailed explanation of these has been presented in the earlier part of the essay. Specifically, about China's rise, even if the conclusion of its un-peaceful rise is true, the offensive Realism approach still fails to completely justify it. Because of the above, there lies a need to adopt an approach to suit the ground realities of international politics in the present era. This cannot be done by strictly following the predictions through a single theory. At present, there is a need to borrow some notions from classical Realism and then shape the conclusions in light of the structural approach. One can carefully adopt some notions that classical Realism gave, which include the potential for cooperation despite self-centered state behavior. This will help reason better for the international events as the world is not as tragic a place as Mearsheimer has so firmly maintained.

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