John Mearsheimer's Theory of Offensive Realism and the Rise of China

Introduction

The rise of China has been met with mixed reactions. For optimists, the rise of China makes a world that has seen a long peace even less likely to see conflict. Others take a more cautious approach and argue that what the future holds cannot be predicted. China's rise may give lead to conflict or it may not. For pessimists, the rise of China is likely to or will inevitably cause instability and conflict. Just as Thucydides deemed the Peleponnesian War inevitable as Athens rose and the relative power of Sparta declined (Thucydides 1996, 163), so history will repeat itself as China rises and the relative power of the United States declines.

John Mearsheimer is one of these pessimists and arguably one of the most prominent skeptics of China's "peaceful rise" (referring to China's foreign policy which has sought to mitigate the "China Threat" school of thought). Underpinning his skepticism of China's peaceful rise is a compelling formulation of offensive realism. The aim of this essay is to examine whether Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism provides a logically coherent basis for the view that the rise of China will be unpeaceful. In answering this question, Mearsheimer's theory as presented in the *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, earlier writings (1990, 1995) and his specific writings on the topic of the rise of China (2005, 2006a, 2010) will be assessed.

The first chapter of this essay will present Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism and his application of the theory to the rise of China. This section will clarify the assumptions that underlies his theory and the conclusion that Mearsheimer claims those assumptions logically generate. What sets Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism apart from Kenneth Waltz's defensive realist theory will be explained. Intriguingly, both scholars start out with the same assumptions, yet reach vastly different conclusions. Mearsheimer concludes that states will *ceaselessly pursue power* while Waltz emphasizes how the balance-of-power constrains power maximizing behavior and makes states content *once they have enough power to be secure*. Mearsheimer's theory will then be applied to the rise of China and I will present his case for why China's rise will be unpeaceful.

The broader topic of analysis in the second chapter is whether Mearsheimer's theory is *internally coherent* and whether the *assumptions* of Mearsheimer's theory generates the *conclusion* that he claims they do. If his theory is internally inconsistent or if the conclusions do not logically follow from the assumptions, the theory will not provide good theoretical justifications for the view that China's rise will be unpeaceful. A theory that is internally incoherent and generates illogical hypotheses, creates a false view of the world (Walt 1999, 12).

Specifically, this essay will first argue that Mearsheimer exaggerates the fear that an uncertainty over China's intentions causes and that he underestimates ways by which such uncertainty can be mitigated (for instance, through costly signaling and by increasing the cost of conflict). *The assumption of uncertain intentions therefore does not, contrary to Mearsheimer's claims, make states assume that other states have the worst intentions*.

Second, the essay will argue that Mearsheimer fails to distinguish between *bidding for hegemony* and *being the hegemon*. Being a hegemon gives a state the most security it can hope for. Bids for hegemony are so risky and so

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rarely successful, however, that such bids do not make sense for rational, survival-minded states except under extraordinary circumstances. *Bids for hegemony therefore contradict Mearsheimer's assumption that states are rational and primarily concerned with their survival.*

Third, the case will be made that the only bidder for regional hegemony that has been successful, the United States, was successful for two extraordinary reasons: the lack of indigenous balancers and weak incentives for great powers with global projection powers (the European great powers) to contain the US. Short of being a model for the rise of China, as Mearsheimer claims, the US success story illustrates why it would irrational for China to try for hegemony. China shares a region with indigenous great powers (Russia, Japan and India) and shares the world with a state (the United States) that has the capability to project power across the world. A bid for dominance over Asia by "imitating Uncle Sam" (Mearsheimer 2010, 389) would therefore contradict the assumptions that China is rational and survival-minded.

The remainder of the second chapter goes towards explaining Mearsheimer's claims that fear and insecurity are bred by the uncertainty over whether a state's military might is meant for defensive or offensive purposes. This essay will argue that *such uncertainty is largely irrelevent for security-seeking states that have a credible nuclear deterrence* . This essay also explain that while past behaviour is nor a perfect indicator of future behavior *past behavior can be a good basis on which to calculate the probability that a state poses a threat to another state* . These two points, as well as the rest of the chapter, lead up to a critique that shows how *Mearsheimer's theory never shows how security-seeking states become aggressive in the first place* , contrary to Mearsheimer's claims. The conclusion will conclude with a concise argument built on the preceding content for why Mearsheimer's theory is not a logically coherent basis for the view that the rise of China will be unpeaceful.

CHAPTER ONE – Mearsheimer's Theory and the Rise of China

Mearsheimer's theory is built on five bedrock assumptions. The first assumption is that there is anarchy in the international system, which means that there is no hierarchically superior, coercive power that can guarantee limits on the behavior of states (Mearsheimer 2001, 30). Second, all great powers possess offensive military capabilities, which they are capable of using against other states (2001, 30-31). Third, states can never be certain that other states will refrain from using those offensive military capabilities (2001, 31). Fourth, states seek to to maintain their survival (their territorial integrity and domestic autonomy) above all other goals (2001, 31), as it is the means to all other ends (1990, 44). Fifth, states are rational actors, which means that they consider the immediate and long-term consequences of their actions, and think strategically about how to survive (2001, 31).

In an international system filled with such uncertainty regarding states' intentions, the nature of states' military capabilities and other states' assistance in a struggle against hostile states, Mearsheimer (2001, 31) argues that the best way for great powers to ensure their survival – a goal which is favored above all others – is to maximize power and pursue hegemony. The pursuit of regional and global hegemony among all great powers gives rise to constant security competition with the potential for war. This is the so-called "Tragedy of Great Power Politics": security-seeking states forced to engage in conflict to ensure their security.

Mearsheimer's offensive realist theory starts out with similar assumptions as Kenneth Waltz's defensive realist theory, but reaches dissimilar conclusions (see Waltz (1979, Ch. 6, especially 114-115) for the anarchy assumption; Waltz (1979, 105) for the capabilities assumption; Waltz (1979, 105) for the uncertain intentions assumption; Waltz (1979, 117) for the survival assumption; and Waltz (1986, 330) for the rationality assumption). A central conclusion reached by Waltz is that of a balance-of-power. The theory postulates that a recurrent pattern of balancing occurs wherein states ally with weaker states to balance stronger states (Waltz 1979, 117). This balancing should prevent states from pursuing hegemony as it would lead other states to join together against the bidder for hegemony (Waltz 1979, 126). Waltz (1989, 40) consequently argued that states were not power maximizers but rather security maximizers. Once states had enough power to be secure, they were content and would not pursue greater power (Waltz 1989, 40). After all, given the inevitability of a balance-of-power, states bidding for hegemony would provoke other states in the international system to join an encircling alliance against the rising power, compromising the bidder's security.

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Mearsheimer rejects this conclusion and argues instead that states can never truly be secure and that only through power maximization can states ensure their survival (Mearsheimer 2001, 61). Contrary to the defensive realist logic, there is no amount of power that a state can be content with (Mearsheimer 2001, 2). The reason why Mearsheimer rejects the inevitability of balance-of-power is due to the collective action problems involved in balancing. As states are wary of incurring the costs of challenging strong states by allying with weaker states, they will buck-pass (meaning that they let other states balance the threatening power) until their own security is in grave danger (Mearsheimer 2001, 39-40). Consider, for instance, the US reluctance to get fully involved in World War II until the attack on Pearl Harbor. The Axis threat, which could have arguably been nipped in the bud earlier, had by then grown so as to pose a serious threat to the United States. As with collective action problems in the economic sense, rational behavior on an individual basis (in this instance, the US letting European and Asian powers deal first with Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan) may lead to a collectively inefficient outcome (Olson 1965, 1-2). The tragedy that Mearsheimer speaks of, could therefore simply be called an inefficient outcome.

This means that aggressive states cannot be as easily curtailed as Waltz thinks. As balancing is an unreliable constraint on great power ambitions, there are lower disincentives to bidding for hegemony in Mearsheimer's world than in Waltz's. Given these lower disincentives and the threats that other states pose, the best way to ensure a great power's survival, Mearsheimer argues, is to pursue hegemony (Mearsheimer 2001, 61). While becoming hegemon is difficult, globally more so than regionally (Mearsheimer 2010, 387), Mearsheimer insists that power maximization is the best way to ensure states' survival (Mearsheimer 2001, 61).

The implications of the theory for the rise of China can easily be inferred and as long as Mearsheimer's assumptions apply, his conclusions should logically follow. While some would argue that his assumptions do not apply or are meaningless, whether they do is outside the scope of my specific enquiry. What this essay concerns itself with is whether these assumptions logically lead to the conclusion that the rise of China will be unpeaceful.

Mearsheimer writes at length about his theory's implications regarding the rise of China in the *Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (2001) but more specifically in subsequent writings (2005, 2006, 2010). Mearsheimer argues that that there is no way to accurately predict China's current or future intentions (Mearsheimer 2010, 382-383), that it is difficult to distinguish between China's defensive and offensive military capabilities (Mearsheimer 2010, 383-384), and that China's past peaceful behavior is an unreliable indicator of future behavior (Mearsheimer 2010, 384-385). These same points apply to the United States (Mearsheimer 2010, 385-387). Consequently, both states will react to this mutual uncertainty by assuming that the other has the worst intentions. In assuming the worst, both states, being rational, will attempt to amass power, which gives rise to a security competition with a potential for war (Mearsheimer 2010, 395-396). The rise of China can therefore not be peaceful. China will inevitably make a bid for regional hegemony while the US and most of China's neighbors attempt to contain China (Mearsheimer 2010, 382).

CHAPTER TWO – The Theory's Internal Coherence and Causal Logic

Uncertain Intentions

Mearsheimer's first major point against the peaceful rise of China argues that it cannot be known for sure what China's intentions are (Mearsheimer 2010, 382-383). Mearsheimer argues that "talk is cheap and leaders have been known to lie to foreign audiences" (Mearsheimer 2010, 383). While it is true that mere talk in international relations is untrustworthy, statements of intent can be made credible if the signaler incurs costs (Fearon 1994, 1995, 396-397; Kydd 1997). States are therefore capable of mitigating the uncertainty over their true intentions. For instance, Anwar Sadat incurred great costs to illustrate that Egypt was committed to peace when he visited Jerusalem in 1977. As Sadat's gesture towards Israel was not popular with the Egyptian public and as he would have been seen as incompetent if Israel had not responded in a reciprocal fashion, he was seen as having incurred domestic audience costs, putting his political career and perhaps even his life on the line to build confidence between the two states (Shamir and Shikaki 2010, 32).

Sadat's confidence-building measure preceded negotiations that ultimately led to a lasting peace between two states that had fought five wars since the end of World War II. Mearsheimer is entirely correct in arguing that there is no

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guarantee that a signal of intentions is correct. Sadat may have launched an attack after deceiving Israel to sign a peace agreement. However, doing so after incurring domestic audience costs in pursuing a peace agreement, as well as potentially suffering great international costs by reneging on an agreement would have made his actions risky, bordering on the mad.

Even though there is a *possibility* that a state may pose a threat to another state, the fact that states are rational (Mearsheimer 2001, 31), cost-benefit calculating units (Mearsheimer 2001, 21) should make them calculate the *probability* that a state poses a threat to another state. Mearsheimer essentially assumes that states always assume that other states have the worst intentions. The fact that "we have no way to know what [China's intentions] will be in the future" (2010, 383), does not, however, give us reason to assume that they will have the worst intentions. Uncertainty about China's intentions might make states fear China but how states deal with that fear cannot be predicted. States may react to that fear by increasing the costs of conflict for China and decreasing China's fear about other states' intentions. States' may, for instance, increase trade with China and incorporate China into international organizations, making it costly for China to sever those institutional and trade ties by launching wars. States may also, like Sadat, make costly signals to build confidence and decrease distrust.

Being the Hegemon vs. Bidding for Hegemony

Mearsheimer is entirely correct in stating that hegemony provides the most security. After all, Mearsheimer defines a hegemon as a "state that is so powerful that it dominates all the other states in the system. No other state has the military wherewithal to put up a serious fight against it" (Mearsheimer 2001, 40). Being able to dominate other states to get what you want and facing no serious military threats to one's survival is preferable to being an equal in an anarchical international system where your continued survival is at some level left to the whims of other states. However, it is important to distinguish between *bidding for hegemony* and *being the hegemon*.

"The central question for a great power mulling a bid for hegemony… is not 'If I was the hegemon, will I be more likely to survive?' It is, 'If I make a bid for hegemony, will I be more likely to survive?'" (Kirshner 2012, 61).

The flawed thinking that underlies Mearsheimer's argument is one that has been pervasive in the IR literature. Some scholars (Waltz 1959, 160; Mearsheimer 2001, 21) argue that states go to war when the expected utility of war is greater than the expected utility of not going to war (in effect, when the benefits exceed the costs). Such behavior would ultimately make states analogous to "compulsive gamblers" (Fearon 1995, 388) though, as they repeatedly put everything on the line until they inevitably lose it all. If we accept that a state has a 60% chance to succeed in each war it starts (which Mearsheimer (2001, 38) claims that the success rate for aggression is), the state may win a few wars in succession but once the state inevitably loses a war, it puts its survival at stake. So even if we accept Mearsheimer's quantitative analysis, going to war every time it is deemed beneficial undermines a state's survival in a way that defensive security-seeking behavior would not.

Mearsheimer's claim that offensive action succeeds in 60% of cases is, however, misleading as he only counts individual wars, even though they may be part of one bid for regional hegemony (Mearsheimer 2001, 39). For instance, Napoleonic France, Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan all appear to be success stories, as they won more wars than they lost. The glaring problem with this to any student of history is that once they lost, they were ultimately destroyed. Their territorial integrity and domestic autonomy, the essence of survival according to Mearsheimer (2001, 31), were lost.

In fact, of all the bidders for regional hegemony, there is only one successful state: the United States. Mearsheimer consequently admits that only one in five states have succeeded in bidding for regional hegemony and that while it "is not an impressive success rate… the American case illustrates that it is possible to achieve regional hegemony" (Mearsheimer 2001, 212-213). In earlier writings, the success rate is even more dire, as Mearsheimer (1990, 19) included not only Vilhelmine Germany, Napoleonic France, the United States, Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan (the five bidders for hegemony listed in Mearsheimer (2001)) but also the Habsburg Empire under Charles V, Spain under Philip II and France under Louis XIV. The success rate could therefore arguably be as poor as one in eight.

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The Poster Child for Offensive Realism

What does the the rise of the United States, the poster child for offensive realism, tell us about Mearsheimer's theory and its application to the rise of China? The US rise to regional hegemony (a position of dominance and military superiority in the Western hemisphere) is important to offensive realism (it is, after all, the case that shows that it is possible to achieve regional hegemony) and Mearsheimer repeatedly uses it as a model for what will China will do (2005, 2006a, 161-162; 2010, 389-390). However, there are clear limits to the comparison. Important factors are left out of Mearsheimer's telling of the US rise to regional hegemony. These factors illustrate why China cannot imitate Uncle Sam.

China's backyard simply does not look the same as the US did when it rose to regional hegemony. First, there were no credible indigenous balancers to the US in Northern America (native tribes, as well as future Mexican and Canadian states posed no credible threat to the US). Second, the European great powers lacked sufficient incentives to prevent US expansion. The European powers, consumed with power politics in Europe, prioritized power maximization at home over containment of the United States in the Western hemisphere. Colin Elman's (2004) examination of the Louisiana Purchase (1803), which doubled the territory of the US and gave the it an open path of expansion to the South and West, illustrates this. Due to complex geopolitical reasons, Louisiana had become a geopolitical burden for France (Elman 2004, 568-570). Consequently, its options were to hold onto Louisiana, sell the territory to the US, sell part of it to the US or sell it all to Spain (Elman 2004, 571). By holding onto Louisiana, France's position in the European distribution of capabilities would have worsened, as it would have likely encountered a UK-US alliance in a war over the territory (which would have drained France's resources), but it would have contained the US (Elman 2004, 572). Selling the territory to Spain or part of it to the US would have partly contained the US but only slightly improved France's position in the European distribution of capabilities (Elman 2004, 572-573). The option that France took was to sell the entire territory to the US at a hefty price, which significantly improved France's position in the Europe (as it lost a geopolitical burden and got paid handsomely for it) but did nothing whatsoever to contain the US (Elman 2004, 571-572).

The reason why the US became a hegemon is therefore not due to balancing inefficiencies as Mearsheimer argues but due to the absence of balancers in the region. The same should therefore not apply to China which has balancers in the region. In China's backyard there are currently two great powers (Russia and Japan), one emerging giant (India) and at least two militarily adept states (South Korea and Vietnam), as well as a foreign balancer (the United States) which has the capabilities to project military power across the world and provide military support to China's neighbors. Both Russia and India have nuclear weapons, and Japan and South Korea could likely develop them quickly if they needed to. In contrast to US expansion, it would be suicidal for China to make a bid for regional hegemony in such a neighborhood.

Aggression and Pre-emption

A second major point that Mearsheimer makes against a peaceful rise is that we cannot know for sure that China's military capabilities are meant solely for defensive purposes (Mearsheimer 2010, 383-384), which is an entirely legitimate point and one which I will not challenge. However, what Mearsheimer fails to note is that the nature of some of China's and other great powers' weapons, specifically nuclear weapons, should decrease the intensity of the insecurity created by others' offensive military capabilities (Jervis 1978, 205-209). After all, the possession of nuclear weapons deters external aggression and makes China safer. A doctrine of mutually assured destruction (MAD) effectively ensures that China cannot make a bid for hegemony. Russia, India and the US already have nuclear weapons, and South Korea and Japan are capable of developing them quickly. Any Chinese bid for hegemony and external aggression would make some states target their nuclear weapons on China while other states would start developing them. Similarly, a nuclear China deters any other state, even the sole hegemon, from compromising China's survival. Mutually assured destruction therefore alleviates the insecurity that China and its neighbors face as China's power grows. Credible nuclear deterrence renders uncertainty about the nature of other states' military capabilities irrelevant.

A third point that Mearsheimer makes against a peaceful rise is that past and current behavior cannot be a reliable

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indicator of future behavior, which makes China's peaceful behavior in recent decades irrelevant (Mearsheimer 2010, 384-385). Clearly, past behavior cannot be a *perfect indicator* of future behavior. However, given that states are rational, concerned with survival and power maximizers, it does not make sense that they should not use past behavior as a way to calculate the severity of the threat posed by another state's existence. After all, it would be foolhardy to argue that there are not varying degrees by which states consider each other threats and that these judgments are made partly as a result of past relations (Wendt 1995, 78-79).

Mearsheimer also pays no heed to the importance of showing consistency and reliability in international relations. Considering that China's peaceful behavior has given it strengthened relations across the world, membership in international organizations and beneficial treaties, it is flawed to suggest that past behavior is irrelevant. Erratic and hostile behavior does not attract friends. For China to start to engage in erratic expansionist behavior would compromise all that has been built up in recent decades.

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 play along. 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.

Preemptive American aggression does not make much sense either. First, due to the unlikelihood of a rational China bidding for regional hegemony (for reasons that I have outlined above). Second, because China, even as a regional hegemon, does not threaten American regional hegemony. Mearsheimer proposes that China will meddle in the US backyard which would compromise its status as regional hegemon. However, as Kirshner (2012, 65) notes, China could meddle in the US' backyard whether China is a regional hegemon or not. Even if China were to try to undermine the US' position as regional hegemon, hegemony (as defined by Mearsheimer) should be robust enough to cope with such attacks. Tang (2008, 461-462) also notes that neither the US nor China can engage in preemptive unilateral aggression without appearing unreliable and threatening, which loses them allies and carries heavy diplomatic costs. This precludes preemptive offensive action by either party.

For rational, security-seeking states that consider the costs and benefits and pursue the strategy most likely to ensure a state's survival, neither China nor the US in Mearsheimer's prediction actually appear to consider the costs and benefits and they do not appear to prioritize survival above all else. Like Waltz, Mearsheimer does not fully flesh out how his assumptions lead to the conclusion that states engage in aggressive behavior.

Mearsheimer only assumes that states are security-seekers. The conflicts that he concludes result from his assumptions are a tragedy in which security-seeking states are brought into conflict even though they do not want to. However, there is absolutely no reason why security-seeking states should resort to aggression as a consequence of there being anarchy in the international system and uncertainty regarding others states' intentions and capabilities. Just as how "the Waltzian train never gets out of the station" (Mearsheimer 2006c, 231), referring to Waltz's failure to assume that a threat needed to exist for balance-of-power to emerge (Schweller 1996, 91-92), the theory that was supposed to correct Waltz's flaws does not seem to do so either. While Mearsheimer (2001) is fairly ambiguous as to the relationship between aggression and his assumptions, Mearsheimer (2006b, 121-122) clears it up by explicitly stating that his theory "does not assume that states are aggressive" and that aggression is simply a logical consequence of his assumptions.

While anarchy leads to uncertainty about other's intentions and fear about one's survival, there is no reason why states should make the first hostile move even if there is an intense security dilemma. While anarchy means that there is nothing to prevent war, there is no cause for why a security-seeking state that fears other states' intentions and capabilities should resort to aggression. At no point is it clear that security-seeking states would always respond to the *possibility* of war by becoming aggressive. If anything, fear is more likely to result in a defensive response. As Jack Donnelly notes, "fear is an essentially defensive motive; the central aim is to preserve what one already has" rather than to act offensively and preemptively (Donnelly 2000, 44). Pashakhanlou's (2013, 207) examination of the psychology literature on fear confirms that individuals tend to respond to fear with defensive behavior. Aggression is

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not the logical consequence of fear that Mearsheimer claims it is.

Conclusion

If states were irrational, if leaders of states were less concerned about a state's survival than their own bank accounts or re-election prospects, if states were assumed to be aggressive or if power maximization was inherent in man's nature, one could understand the tendency to risk it all for hegemony. Rational, security-seeking states "not assumed to be aggressive" (Mearsheimer 2006b, 121-122) have no reason to engage in such bids, however.

Assuming that China is a rational, security-seeking actor, does the prospect of a bid for dominance in Asia seem likely to enhance its chances of survival, given the well-known historical precedent of such revisionist behavior? After all, only one in five states (or perhaps one in eight) have successfully bid for hegemony. That sole hegemon achieved hegemony under circumstances that do not apply at all to China today. A nascent United States found itself on a continent without any serious indigenous challengers and contained only by European powers that prioritized politics in Europe over US containment. China finds itself surrounded by regional and external balancers, some of which have nuclear weapons.

Given the unlikelihood that China will bid for hegemony and compromise its security, does the prospect of "strangling the Confucian baby in its cradle" (Kirshner 2012, 61) seem likely to enhance the US' survival? Since a rational, security-seeking China has no reason to pursue hegemony, it would not seem as if the US, being a rational, security-seeking state, would have any incentive to crush China or otherwise provoke it.

Ultimately, Mearsheimer's theory is internally incoherent, as the conclusions he draws contradict the assumptions he makes and, 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 unpeaceful. 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 since it fails to explain why in a logically coherent fashion, the theory is useless.

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