

Realism, Normativity and Professor Mearsheimer

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International relations or politics are a dynamic discipline within politics. It concentrates upon the understanding or explanation of conflict and power between nations or countries. It is of course highly relevant today with much warfare or threats thereof. One central theory is the so-called realism or neorealism. Its foremost representative today is Professor Mearsheimer. Professor John Mearsheimer has put several of his well-known lectures on YouTube. In these he spells out how he looks upon international politics today through a neorealist approach. Very much worth listening to, we must though question consistency in his message.

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Introduction

Professor Mearsheimer argues that *parsimony* is necessary for a good theory. Thus, he explains international politics with basically one generalisation. If explanation requires generalisation (Hempel, 1965), Mearsheimer trusts the following *lawlike* proposition:

(G) States have one overarching goal, namely security in anarchy.

Avoiding the fallacy of misplaced concreteness, this *lawlike* proposition focuses upon how key decisions are made in foreign policy. What, then, is security? By *entailment* from (G), one can deduce the key properties of the international system together with some geopolitical assumptions:

- Power competition;
- Balance of power;
- Regional hegemony;
- Global hegemon;
- Cooperation with like-minded, economic, or military.

Threat or Fear Thereof

Foreign policymakers look for security, both economic and political. Changes in the status quo are experienced as potentially threats that call for action, sometimes war. It so happens to be the case that the differences in size between various countries lead to competition among regional hegemonies, in Mearsheimer's terminology.

Threats to hegemony can be economic or military, which sets up zero sum games to be handled by different policies. In history we can identify the regional hegemonies, often by warfare, and for short periods a global hegemon. In the world today we have a bipolar situation with the US leading the OECD and China heading the former dictatorships of the proletariat. This is not the place where the geopolitics predicament will be discussed.

Suffice it to note that Mearsheimer's bipolar world is hardly determined by power and security alone, as the commitment to rule of law and the market economy loom large in this split of nations.

Moreover, Mearsheimer rejects completely US foreign policy the last 30 years. But if security is the guide salon (G), then what was the threat? Mearsheimer emphasizes too much the rational pursuit of security by "states" and fails to recognise opportunism, chance, and misunderstanding in foreign policymaking. Especially Bush junior created threats to other nations.

Warfare is often not rational choice. What is the war in the Ukraine about? If I had a chance to save so many young men from premature and despicable death or so many villages destroyed with their inhabitants, I would give up the Crimea. Would the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan have occurred without Rumsfeld? International politics is less about the intentions of states what is that?—than misinformation or opportunism of key players.

The Bush invasions resulted in catastrophic outcomes and they were illegal. The enlargement of NATO involved breaking promises made.

In reality, one finds several reasons for warfare. The distinction between security and *perceived* insecurity is thin.

Normativity

The international politics literature harbours different versions of the main theme of realism from Clausewitz to Mearsheimer. What they share is the rejection of international law and customs. Norms are not self-enforced. Actual behaviour is to be explained by reality.

However, the truth is that normativity has grown tremendously since 1945. So many areas have been regulated by international or regional organisations. Only war remains unregulated in the Kelsen theory. Commerce, finance, migration, the environment, including information and the High Seas have their bulk of norms.

The endemic difficulty with normativity is the enforcement problematic. E.g. will countries honour their Cc2 duties until 2030? A country has the right to war when its security is threatened. But the conduct of warfare is heavily regulated—to what avail? Thus, Israeli government faces several enquiries and litigation about the IDF and Gaza from the World Court and ICC.

Conclusion

Mearsheimer has come to set the tone of the realist analysis of the two wars confronting mankind. Employing his neorealist philosophy, he remains very negative to US foreign policy since 1990. The security threats are missing in policy on Iraq, Ukraine, and Afghanistan—contradictory to his axiom (G).

Yet, Mearsheimer becomes belligerent in the case of Taiwan—offensive realism. The US must *contain* the inexorable rise of China as Asian hegemon. But Taiwan is not a threat to China militarily. Its liberalism does matter, but not to Mearsheimer. His radical split between foreign and domestic policy is untenable. And (G) is hardly falsifiable with Popper's philosophy of science. A government may always adduce security threat as reason for policy.

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