

# Mearsheimer's Realism and the Rise of China

Written by Laurence Vincent

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

## Mearsheimer's Realism and the Rise of China

<https://www.e-ir.info/2013/03/08/mearsheimers-realism-and-the-rise-of-china/>

LAURENCE VINCENT, MAR 8 2013

*To find out more about E-IR essay awards, click here.*

*"The pessimist complains about the wind; the optimist expects it to change; the realist adjusts the sails."*

- William Arthur Ward

Although biased and not intended to pertain to the contemporary definition of a Realist, this quote aptly characterises the self-perception of Realists, concerning their refusal of what they interpret as misguided ideology. The position of realism is a perspective of moderated cynicism, derived from reflection on the human condition and the history of international relations and the acknowledgement of the huge array of complications that present themselves to the actualisation of an ideological concept. Gilpin considered realism to be 'a political disposition and a set of assumptions about the world rather than a scientific theory' (Gilpin, 1984:290). However, the last three decades have seen realism evolve within political theory as normative academic standpoint, from which scholars can attempt to obviate the progress of liberal idealism. It has even acquired a capital 'R'. This change in syntax is significant because it represents the shift in Realism from a predilection for political pessimism, based on the assessment of human nature, to a recognized theoretical paradigm, with dedicated scholarly representation within academia. The original form of this metanarrative, Classical Realism, was primarily concerned with two factors of international politics. Firstly, the belief in 'eritheia' or selfishness, the concept that humankind have an inherent, mercenary, self-seeking nature, which manifests in actions leading to the best possible outcome for the actor. One of the founding Classical Realists Niccolo Machiavelli wrote that political actors must assume that 'all men are wicked and that they will always give vent to the malignity...when opportunity offers' (Burchill et al, 2009:32). Secondly, Realists emphasise the importance of nation-states, as the largest and most powerful unilateral actors within the global system, and apply human self-interest on a macro level to states. Reflecting on the human egocentrism within national politics, Realists believe competition has created a Zero-Sum basis for international relations where 'states compete for advantage and where security is sometimes precarious' (Walt, 2009).

Due to this level of competition, states are reluctant to give away any of their sovereignty to an international institution, creating what Realists refer to as an Anarchic system, one without international guidance or policing. The evolution of Realism that has occurred in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries is a result of redefined parameters proposed by Kenneth Waltz. This Neo or Structural Realism is concerned less with the political dispositions of international actors and more with the political structures that determine the actions of units; the only legitimate units for Waltz are Nation States, within the political system. These structures are defined by the ordering, or hierarchical relationships of units; the differentiation of functions within these units; and the distribution of capabilities (Burchill, 2009:36), which are determined by the relevant functions of the units.

In applying his systemic level of analysis to these structures, Waltz draws these conclusions: without international governance we cannot apply a hierarchical structure on a systemic level, therefore the international system must be anarchic; secondly, as sovereignty is the only requirement for Waltz's units, all units in the international system are functionally equal, negating unit level variation as an explanation of changes in the political structure. Therefore, it is necessarily capability variations (Waltz, 1979:96) that Neo-Realists attribute as the fundamental variable in understanding international political relations.

# Mearsheimer's Realism and the Rise of China

Written by Laurence Vincent

Mearsheimer proposes an 'Offensive' variant of Waltz's defensive Neo-Realism, proposing that states are concerned with the accumulation of relative power; therefore they will not be content with relative security from other states, but have a common desire to reach a position of global hegemony (Dunne, Schmidt, 2001:92-93), as this offers the only true security in an anarchic system. Mearsheimer argues that states will pursue any means to further their relative power, limited only by fear of a security compromise, echoing the sentiments of Thucydides, the founding father of classical Realism: 'The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must' (Strassler, 1996:352/5.89). Mearsheimer argues, however, that to project and sustain hegemonic power globally is a Sisyphean task, primarily due to the physical distances involved. Therefore the best outcome to which states can aspire is to become a regional hegemon (Mearsheimer, 2006:160). Mearsheimer's interpretation of a regional hegemon is a state that has extended the relative power gap between themselves and their geographical neighbours to the point where military confrontation would be rationally inconceivable (Mearsheimer, 2010:389).

In Structural Realism, the lack of hierarchy in the international system makes injudicious association with another unit, or 'Bandwagoning' (Waltz, 1979:126) a potential security risk, as future amity cannot be assured. Therefore it is more desirable to 'balance', whereby units attempt to mitigate the threat, by opposing a stronger or rising force (Burchill, 2009:37). Mearsheimer applies this theory in analysing a number of strategic process variables pertaining to Japan, Russia and India, including the relative benefits of alignment in terms of interest achievement, and the necessity of balancing the exponential growth of China. He proposes that, firstly, as the strongest existing and emergent powers in Asia, these states would be the primary focus for China to establish a military and economic capability gap with; and secondly, that there is a potential for a 'balance alliance' between these states (Mearsheimer, 2010:389), in order to curb Chinese dominance in the Asia-Pacific region, propagating a great power conflict.

Mearsheimer substantiates his conviction in the inevitability of a great state power conflict between China and an America with his interpretation of polarity variables. He supports the Classical Realist challenge to hegemonic stability theory, claiming that preponderant states create an imbalance of power distribution, giving them greater capabilities to win a war, which in turn reduces the effectiveness of deterrence and increases the likelihood of conflicts occurring (Mearsheimer, 2001:338). Mearsheimer argues that the security dilemmas of an anarchic system catalyse the actions of states who have established a relative power gap to exploit this advantage by exerting lateral pressure. The concept is that states adopt revisionist aspirations when their power accumulation is no longer proportional to their position in the political system, and adopt an essentially 'machtpolitik' stance to international relations. For Mearsheimer, China's exponential growth curve has a very limited potential for peaceful conclusion.

In his debate with Zbigniew Brzezinski, Mearsheimer states that contemporary interpretations of practical actions are largely irrelevant in predicting the possibility of a great power conflict involving China (Mearsheimer, 2005:5). He emphasises the need for Realist theory as the only predictive tool available which adequately balances our understanding of the human disposition with our history of social conflict. Applying the framework of Offensive Neo-Realism, Mearsheimer draws the conclusions that China's priorities will change with its capabilities; and when they become disproportionate to their position, the effect of their internal drivers, such as population growth and resource capabilities, will aggregate, and actualise themselves in forms of external behaviour.

Considering the aspirations of the Chinese government, such as the repatriation of Taiwan, Mearsheimer writes that they will most likely attempt to push America out of the Asian region, mirroring the events of the 'Monroe Doctrine,' and establish themselves as a regional hegemon in order to improve their chances of realising these desires (Mearsheimer, *ibid*), necessarily resulting in a conflict spiral in order to determine the state of power transition.

Due to the number of great powers currently occupying the political sphere and the relative power gap between them and the current dominant power America, Mearsheimer defines the current political climate as an unbalanced multipolar system, which is, for Neo-Realists, the most volatile structure, with an increased likelihood of violent confrontation within great power dyads (Mearsheimer, 2001:339). When you apply the Waltzian model of the international system, with nation-states as the only legitimate unit, Mearsheimer argues that the sheer number of dyadic relationships involved radically increases the potential for conflict. Mearsheimer points out that a multipolar system with five great powers in, has ten, Great-Great power dyads (Mearsheimer, *ibid*). Here Mearsheimer is applying factorial functions which have an exponential growth curve; I mention this to elucidate Mearsheimer's view

# Mearsheimer's Realism and the Rise of China

Written by Laurence Vincent

on the quantitative difficulties of managing international relations. With 196 politically active, if not officially recognised, countries in the world, there are 19110 potential power dyads between major and minor powers, generating a high probability of a conflict emerging. In addition to this, Mearsheimer cites asymmetric resource distribution as a driver of great power conflicts; in 'The Tragedy of Great Power Politics' he lists the statistical probability of even military distribution, in a multipolar system containing 4 great powers, to be less than 2 percent (Mearsheimer, 2001:341). For Mearsheimer, evaluating the historical constancy of political action in this context leads to one conclusion: that this discrepancy is unsustainable, and in seeking to rectify it, China will necessarily instigate a period of power transition. In the tradition of Classical Realism, he does not aim to predict the exact date in which China's lateral expansion will provoke a military response from America and a balancing coalition (Mearsheimer, 2010:383), but emphasises the high probability of this occurrence based on the historical evidence of great power transition. This emphasis on constancy is a cornerstone of Classical Realism, and Mearsheimer repeatedly employs it, arguably, to a fault.

In his *tete a tete* with Mearsheimer, Zbigniew Brzezinski points out the potential problems of a theory that does not account for flexibility in political decision making and dogmatically employs the same framework of interpretation (Brzezinski, 2005:1-2), regardless of the multitude of variables specific to each scenario. Similarly to Snyder's accusation of Waltz exercising 'Excessive Parsimony' (Snyder, 1996:167), Mearsheimer demonstrates a propensity in his writings on China, to attempt to formulate all his arguments in the form of *reductio ad absurdum*. He does this by applying a framework, devised by Waltz, which identifies the 'big, important and enduring patterns' in international politics (Waltz, 1979:70), and uses those historic trends to negate the possibility of a mentality change in contemporary politics in the past two centuries. However, it is questionably relevant to use the Monroe Doctrine as an empirical indicator of China's intentions (Mearsheimer, 2006:162), and ignore the plethora of mutual interests, institutions and social norms that have evolved since the formulation of such anti-imperial legislation in 19<sup>th</sup> century America.

For example, the assertion that institutions 'have no independent effect on state behaviour' (Mearsheimer, 1994/95:7), is particularly misleading in its inaccuracy if interpreted prescriptively. For example, considering that America and China both hold permanent seats on the UN Security Council, any preliminaries to a great power conflict can be expected to be fought there. The degree of hard power that the UN can exercise in a conflict situation is limited, but its real power is in the arena of legitimacy. In the eventuality of a great power conflict between America and China, such as the one Mearsheimer proposes as inevitable, an institution that can offer credibility and future legitimacy to actions will become increasingly valuable for the purpose of forming alliances and projecting the international image of being the 'just power' in the conflict. Similarly, if our predictions of the conflict must be based on historical patterns, applied two decades into the future, we should also account for possible developments in supranational institutions such as the EU. Although the political weight of the EU is a fraction of its relative economic position, through the last century it has been unique in the level of sovereignty devolved to its executive from its member states. Although politically impotent now, is it not conceivable that the EU will emerge from the next 20 years with a strong foreign policy position, capable of influencing potential events between America and China?

This may come across as tangential speculation, and it is, but challenging speculation is the basis of my criticism of Mearsheimer. I believe Mearsheimer has over-reached the mandate of Realism by trying to create an incredibly limited range of possibilities regarding the emergence of China as a global superpower, using only a framework of normative theory that was formulated by Waltz as an analysis tool of systemic trends. For example, consider Mearsheimer's interpretation of Chinese military development, 'Anyone looking to determine China's future intentions by observing its military is likely to conclude that Beijing is bent on aggression' (Mearsheimer, 2010:384). Even from a Realist perspective this is not necessarily true. With nine countries possessing nuclear powers, there is a multipolar distribution of the most destructive weapons ever created; but the ownership of these weapons is legitimized by the requirement for nuclear deterrence. From a Liberal perspective, China's military growth could be interpreted as a safeguard in itself, deterrence against aggressive action from another state, namely the US.

As Mearsheimer often states, where there is an imbalance of power, states seek to close that power gap to ensure their own security. It is not necessary, therefore, to conclude that China is 'bent on aggression' (Mearsheimer, *ibid*) by developing its military; potentially, China perceives a security threat due to the power gap between themselves

# Mearsheimer's Realism and the Rise of China

Written by Laurence Vincent

and the US, and seeks to reduce this gap by developing its own offensive capabilities as a form of military deterrence. Furthermore, America spends 4 ½ times more on its defence budget than China (The Economist, 2012) despite having a population 3 ½ times smaller, and although America's preoccupation with security is un-debatable, it would be pre-emptive to presume offensive intentions based solely on their defence spending as a percentage of GDP.

From a Neo-Liberal perspective, the level of complex economic interdependence between China, as a producer, and the Western world, as consumers, negates the likelihood of a great power conflict. Mearsheimer tries to refute this by using the example of Germany, who, despite a strongly growing economy, began a second war in 1939 (Mearsheimer, 2005:5); however the globalisation of international economies and the development of a free market has brought huge economic prosperity to China, without which they would not be in the position of power accumulation we see them in today. Considering this, the use of a six-decade old war, with actors still mired in the archaic mentalities of an empire building era, as a comparison for the contemporary political climate suggests asymmetric representation by Mearsheimer.

I believe this asymmetric representation to be symptomatic of the 'Excessive Parsimony' (Snyder, 1996:167) often exhibited by Realists. Mearsheimer attempts to reduce the factors influencing the development of an American-Chinese relationship, which are inestimable in their variety, to fit the limited parameters of his theory. He then uses absolutist terminology, such as 'China cannot rise peacefully' (Mearsheimer, 2005:2), to try and strong arm the legitimisation of his predictions, without giving appropriate attention to the potential of different outcomes. In this I believe he fails. Although Offensive Realism has merits in system-level theorizing and giving rough predictions of potential state actions, it lacks the ability to acknowledge a wider range of state influences than power maximisation. As a result, Mearsheimer can only supply one possible outcome of a global development scenario that has the potential to be influenced by incalculable factors, with equally incalculable potential outcomes.

## Bibliography

Burchill, S. et al (2009) *Theories of International Relations*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan

Dunne, T. and Schmidt, B.C. (2011) *The Globalization of World Politics*, New York, Oxford University Press

Gilpin, R.G. (1984) *The richness of the tradition of Political Realism*, International Organization Vol. 28, (2) MIT Press, pp. 287-304

Mearsheimer, J.J. and Brzezinski, Z. (2005) *Clash of the Titans*, Foreign Policy, pp.1-6

Mearsheimer, J.J. (1994/95) *The false promise of International Institutions*, International Security, 19.

- (2001) *The tragedy of great power politics*, London, Norton, pp. 334-359

- (2006) *China's Unpeaceful Rise*, Current History, 105, 690, pp.160-162

- (2009) *Reckless States and Realism*, International Relations, vol. 23(2) pp.241-256

- (2010) *The Gathering Storm: China's Challenge to US Power in Asia*, The Chinese Journal of International Politics, vol. 3, pp. 381-396

Snyder, G.H. (1997) *Alliance Politics*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, pp.166-169

Strassler, R.B. (1996) *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War*, New York, Touchstone

Walt, S. (2009) *REAL Realism* [online] Foreign Policy (Published August 27, 2009) Available at:

## **Mearsheimer's Realism and the Rise of China**

Written by Laurence Vincent

walt.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/08/23/real\_realism [Accessed on 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2012]

Waltz, K. (1979) *Theory of International politics*, Reading, Addison-Wesley

The Dragon's New Teeth, (2012) *The Economist*, available at: <http://www.economist.com/node/21552193>, [Accessed on 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2012]

—  
*Written by: Laurence Vincent*  
*Written for: Dr. Aida Abzhaparova*  
*Written at: University of the West of England, Bristol*  
*Date Written: January 2013*