

# Thoughts on Mearsheimer's "Offensive Realism"

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**Abstract:** *Mearsheimer, a representative of offensive realism, argues that "security competition will re-emerge in post-Cold War Europe and Asia, and that international institutions cannot maintain peace." This is a hypothesis about the relationship between systemic polarity and world peace, which, in contrast to reality, has some problems with the internal logic of the theory. After analysis, Mearsheimer's assumptions about the position of the state, the choice of the state's target behavior, and the prediction of China's rise and behavior are unconvincing, both in terms of inherent problems of theoretical logical conformity and external inconsistencies with the facts; the problems of Mearsheimer's theory can provide us with insights: focus on thinking about theoretical doctrines, and better look at international relations with a critical eye different theoretical schools.*

**Keywords:** *Mearsheimer; offensive realism; rational agents; Existence needs*

## 1. Introduction

Mearsheimer, a leading figure in offensive realism, argued that "security competition will re-emerge in post-Cold War Europe and Asia, and that international institutions cannot keep the peace", an important complement to Kenneth Waltz's neo-realism. It is clear from his reasoning that his perception of the state and the inferences he draws about its behaviour are at odds with the diplomatic choices of states in reality, and that the logic of his basic assertions is not self-consistent. It is therefore important that we maintain a clear understanding and rational judgement of this theory.

## 2. Review

Mearsheimer is a leading scholar of international relations theory and is known for his offensive realism. The literature on Mearsheimer's reflections and analyses of offensive realism has also proliferated. Li Yongcheng's 'Post-Cold War US International Leadership Strategy: Liberal Hegemony and Its Limits' and 'Trump's Inheritance and Adjustment of US Liberal Hegemony', Wang Guangtao's 'The Illusion and Paradox of Liberal Hegemony', Huang Qixuan's 'The Origins and Dangers of the Grand International Social Project' and Li Zhuo's 'Why "Liberal Hegemony" Several articles focus on Mearsheimer's liberal hegemony, and analyse or discuss liberal hegemony from different dimensions in response to Mearsheimer's new work "The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Reality"; among them, "Trump's Liberal Hegemony and the Paradox of Trump's Inheritance and Adjustment of American Liberal Hegemony" is an article that uses a combination of facts and reasons to analyse the inherent liberal hegemony of the American state by combining the American foreign policy tendencies presented in Mearsheimer's book with the foreign policy under Trump, with no focus on offensive realism. In addition, Wang Xiangyang's "Sino-US Cyberspace Relations in the Context of Offensive Realism" is an analysis of Sino-US cyberspace relations in the context of offensive realism, in which offensive realism is used as an analytical tool or a means to explore Sino-US cyberspace relations. Chen Xiaoqian's 'Examining the US Compromise Policy towards Japan in the Context of Offensive Realism' examines the US compromise policy towards Japan from the perspective of offensive realism, provides a brief review of the US policy towards Japan over a long period of time, and also reflects on the nature of China-US-Japan relations at this stage. All three are characterized by a view of offensive realism as a tool and a lack of research on the theory of offensive realism itself. Que Tianshu's *The Tragedy of Offensive Realism and its Way Out* focuses on the theory of offensive realism itself, introduces *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* and uses the reality of China-US relations to contrast Mearsheimer's offensive realism, highlighting the limitations and shortcomings of his theory and aiming to provide policy recommendations for the further development of China-US relations. Policy recommendations. Robert Kaplan's "Will "Offensive Realism" Guide America's Future? Reviews Mearsheimer's view of offensive realism, combining grounded assumptions and argumentative

reasoning in a way that is useful, while the author applies the theory of offensive realism to the analysis of US foreign policy orientation, combining theory with practice. Wu Jinping and Tan Xiaoxiao's *An Analysis of Mearsheimer's Theory of Offensive Realism*, and Jiang Lan and Wang Linjing's *An Analysis of Offensive Realism*, analyse offensive realism in terms of the realistic background, basic content, theoretical characteristics and inherent flawed nature of offensive theory. Pan Hongtao's *A Critique of Offensive Realism*, Pan Hongtao and Qu Wenzhong's *A Brief Analysis of Offensive Realism* provides a comprehensive overview and a systematic, in-depth critique of the theory of offensive realism; and argues that although it has many flaws and shortcomings, as a new development of realism, several of its insights are still worthy of reference. Wang Xiaobo and Zhu Shilong's *The Dilemma of Offensive Realist Theory*, and Xu Jia's *The Tragedy of Offensive Realism* both highlight the limitations of offensive realism and critique its inherent theoretical logic and views that are inconsistent with reality; Zhao Kejin's *The Theoretical Logic of Offensive Realism and Its Critique* uses a scientific approach to assess Mearsheimer's offensive realism and critique its "China threat theory"; it has important implications for the study of offensive realism itself.

Through data collection and collation, it can be found that scholars at home and abroad think about, question and criticise Mearsheimer and his offensive realism mainly with several characteristics: (1) combining offensive realism with the foreign policy reality of the state to serve the state's diplomatic choices. (2) An analysis of the structural logic of the book *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* through the foundational assertion of offensive realism that permeates Mearsheimer's theory asks.3. Focusing on the theory of offensive reality itself, the analysis of the theory itself is explored.

This paper focuses on the contradictions and shortcomings of Mearsheimer's thesis, starting from the inconsistency between Mearsheimer's assumptions about systemic polarity and reality, and analyzing the layers of the theory's foundational assumptions, in order to further provoke thoughts on neo-realism, and thus to take a better critical view of different theoretical schools in international relations.

### 3. Offensive realism

Realism, a highly influential school of thought in the disciplinary field of international relations. Was not a wise guide for international relations in the 1930s, interdependence did not give rise to peace and cooperation; the League of Nations appeared helpless in the face of doctrinal power politics triggered by the totalitarian authorities in Germany, Italy and Japan. Thus, international relations scholarship began to use the classic realist language of Thucydides, Machiavelli and Hobbes, a grammar and vocabulary centered on power.<sup>[1]</sup>Realist theory, which dominated during the Cold War, portrayed international affairs as a power struggle between egoistic states, and its general pessimism about the prospects of eliminating conflicts and wars. Realism has evolved and been linked to the context of the times, gradually increasing its appropriateness to the times and the state. From traditional realism represented by Morgenthau to neo-realism represented by Waltz, realism is constantly adapting and updating. Building on Waltz's argument that a bipolar system is more stable than a multilevel system, Mearsheimer argues that "the collapse of the bipolar Cold War order and the creation of a multipolar Europe would not only create a very unsatisfactory transformation, i.e., drag Europe back to the painful old path of anarchy and instability, but even have the effect of bringing back international conflicts, crises and possible wars."<sup>[2]</sup>He believes that the bipolar pattern tends to be more stable and peaceful than the multipolar pattern. Based on this, Mearsheimer introduces neorealism by analyzing three main aspects, why does the state want power? How much power is enough? What leads to war between great powers? The rest of the argument revolves around the three questions. Why do states want power? Mearsheimer argues that the structure or architecture of the international system forces states to pursue power: in the absence of an overriding higher power in the international community, each state begins to compete with each other and to pursue power in order to survive and protect itself. Offensive realists believe that states should always look for opportunities to gain more power, that maximizing power is the ultimate goal of states, and that hegemony is the best way to guarantee the survival of states; defensive realists believe that it is enough for states to pursue the right amount of power, that it is foolish to pursue hegemony, and that a balance should be maintained between great states and great powers. Mearsheimer belongs to the offensive realists and advocates that the state pursues maximum power. Finally, he also suggests that the factors leading to war between great powers include the polarity of the system, the power of balance, and the transfer of power. It also uses the rise of China as an example to discuss the state's pursuit of power and the impact of such a pursuit process on the international community.

It should be noted that since the end of the Cold War, Mearsheimer's arguments appear to have been confirmed by facts in some areas and seem to have been disproved by events in others. His hypothesis seems to have been confirmed by the conflicts and wars that broke out in the former Yugoslavia as well as in the former Soviet Union. In those places, the bipolar system could no longer impose peace because that system had been replaced by a multipolar system that was prone to conflict and instability.<sup>[4]</sup> However, these places are located outside the core zone of Central Europe, which is the area to which the neo-realist arguments about instability in the post-Cold War era apply most. Since the end of the 1950s, the European Union has demonstrated a peaceful and prosperous international relationship between the great and small European countries. This fact, if not negated, has at least tested the neorealist assumption that bipolarity produces stability and multipolarity provokes instability. Is Mearsheimer's assumption of systemic polarity then valid? Is there still a contradiction in the offensive realist theory he advocates? Therefore, in response to Mearsheimer's account, after analysis, this paper focuses on the following three aspects.

#### **4. Questioning several aspects of Mearsheimer's offensive realism**

##### ***4.1. The State as a rational actor?***

In a realist perspective, the state, as the subject of the international community, is the centre of the international system; it will choose the way that is best for itself to maximise its own interests, will choose its own position in the international community after a cost-benefit analysis, will pursue survival and power in an international community without a unified central authority, will try to overcome the "anarchy", and will even strive to find some means of peaceful coexistence for the sake of the survival of humanity as a whole, regardless of the effectiveness with which these means are exercised. In short, the state is a rational actor that will be driven by a dominant ideology, a policy orientation that seeks to survive while maximising benefits and understands cost-benefit analysis. The state is seen as a unified entity with specific, assignable goals, and states in the international community make decisions based on a set of self-interested priorities and a strategic cost-benefit analysis of possible options, responses and outcomes.

In Mearsheimer's thesis, five assumptions are summarised with regard to neorealism. Firstly, that the great powers are the main players in world politics and that they operate in an anarchist system. This at the same time indicates the nature of the international community and its members, whose main activities are centred on sovereign states; the anarchic nature of the international system does not indicate that it is chaotic and disorderly; the international system is still ordered, only without final arbitration; sovereign states are not only concerned with their own development at home, but also with active participation in international affairs and with the development of world politics. Secondly, all states in the international community have some offensive military capability. This means that states have the ability and capacity to defend themselves or to attack others; that is, military means exist and are present in the process of state interaction, and that there are situations in which the international community resorts to force to solve problems. Thirdly, Mearsheimer also argues that a state can never be sure of the intentions of other states, especially the future intentions of that state. In the international community, two countries that are evenly matched will, in the long run, aim to maintain a balance of power between them, because in an international game it is always more dangerous for the first country to lower its posture or reveal its strength. This is, of course, what happens when states are afraid of each other and have little trust in each other, in line with the anxiety and fear that realists claim states are prone to. The state's ability to disguise its true intentions or the actions it is prepared to take, combined with the fact that the policy guidelines of some states change according to the personal wishes and preferences of their leaders, makes it difficult to ascertain the state's intentions. Fourthly, the main objective of the state is survival, i.e. the ultimate goal of the state's existence is to maintain its territorial integrity and the autonomy of its internal political order. The state puts survival first and focuses on the length of its existence in the international community, and all activities and actions undertaken by the state are aimed at maintaining the state's survival and preventing it from being persecuted and threatened by other states. Fifth, the state is a rational actor. As mentioned earlier, the state is able to propose rational strategies to maximise its own survival prospects.

A closer examination of Mearsheimer's five assumptions reveals a number of problems. Mearsheimer sees the state as a rational actor, believing that it can sustain itself through rational strategic choices by virtue of its analysis of the situation; but then, later on, Mearsheimer assumes that the state can never be sure of the intentions of other states, is always distrustful of other states, and

therefore remains wary and fearful at all times. Here, there is a contradiction between the state as a rational actor and the assumption that the state's intentions are unknowable. According to Mearsheimer's logical reasoning, the state can use all techniques and means for its own survival, choose the most beneficial way to participate in the international community, and will proceed to other activities in the best interest of the state. What is 'rationality'? The state does not act impulsively, it can find the best path for its development in a situation of bilateral balance of power. However, the state is not able to ascertain the intentions of another state, i.e. it lacks the ability to speculate on what a state will do at the moment of encounter with another state, based on historical habits, policy preferences and realities. Is a state that lacks such a capacity still a rational actor?

Again, Mearsheimer sees the state as a rational actor, but such a rational actor has a very important and urgent 'need to survive'. In other words, the rational state uses all its capabilities to maximise the 'survival' of the state. Whether large or small, states in the international community fear that their fate is in the hands of other states, and therefore their first priority is survival, and they must always attach great importance to their ability to survive. Clearly, there is also a contradiction between rational actors and the need for survival. A rational state has the ability to assess its own development status, its overall national strength and other factors, and therefore, by analysing the situation at home and abroad, the state can adjust its goals and positioning at the right time, and can change its domestic policy direction in line with the development of the situation, and does not consider "survival" as its ultimate goal, or the 'need to survive' as strong as it has always been.

Finally, economic development is an important factor to promote the development and interdependence of all countries. As globalization intensifies, no country can stay aloof from the situation. The connections between countries in all aspects will make them pay more attention to maintaining the bond of mutual benefit and win-win. How, then, according to Mearsheimer's theory, could sovereign states, as rational actors capable of recognising the usefulness of existing mutually beneficial win-win relationships for world peace and nation-building, be bent on ignoring such existing economic ties for the sake of self-preservation, engaging in a security race between states, creating a security dilemma for the international community, and repeatedly playing out the tragedy of great power politics? In the view of this paper, there is a problem between these causal logics. It thus begs the question, are states really rational actors?

#### ***4.2. Is survival the first need of the country?***

According to the realist thesis, the existing sovereign states exist with "survival" as their first need. In other words, from the very beginning of their existence, states, large or small, have had survival as their goal, and have participated in all the activities of the international community in order to maintain their existence. The internal optimisation of the state and the external advancement of the state are all in the service of the state's 'survival needs'. This stance and choice of strategy stems from the old Hobbesian tradition of realism that 'the state of nature is a war of every man against every man'. Fear, anxiety and the pursuit of power drive states towards the path of self-preservation. In such a society there is pessimism, fear among people, survival for all and self-preservation for all, cooperation is difficult to achieve and war is imminent. Countries are very concerned with their own survival in order not to be wiped out by others. This is what Mearsheimer calls the realist orientation of the state in international society, where survival is the main goal of the state. But there are some doubts about such an assumption.

First of all, Mearsheimer's thesis can be said to treat the countries in the international system as a black box, that is, the theory assumes that all countries in the international system have "survival" as their main goal. On the one hand, it completely ignores the differences between countries, i.e. it does not take into account the differences between countries in terms of their political systems, national strength, domestic situation, military capabilities, economic status, cultural heritage, social policies, national identity, etc. It treats countries as identical in size, strength and weakness, shape and level, without seeing the individual differences caused by their different histories and cultures, values, behavioural choices and strategic orientation. Such an assumption lacks a horizontal type of comparison. On the other hand, it ignores the dynamic element in the process of national development, i.e. the level of development and national strength that corresponds to the different periods of national development should change in line with national objectives as a reference, i.e. national objectives should change in line with the changes in the national context at different stages of the country's development. Survival should be the goal of a country at the beginning of its existence to maintain the stability of the regime, but not a consistent goal. Without a clear goal, the country will gradually deviate from its original trajectory, and a series of "complications" will arise, such as the development

of the concept does not correspond to the state of social development, the economic development is slow, and social problems become prominent. Such a hypothesis lacks a vertical comparison.

Again, survival as the main goal of the state is itself doubtful. In the history of human development and progress, survival is generally regarded as the first stage of the goal, and after this first stage is achieved, there are more far-reaching and valuable goals that build on it, such as rapid economic development, catching up with developed countries, increasing comprehensive national power, a more diversified pattern of diplomatic development, and so on. Such a choice of historical development and national needs is in line with the laws of evolution, both as a reflection of the evolution of the development of the individuals who make up the nation and as a requirement for the evolution of the country. Just as a person to achieve their own survival needs, then put forward the pursuit of spiritual aspects, is a natural logic and law. It is therefore not very reasonable to consider survival as a primary goal in itself, it only applies to an anarchic international environment composed of fearful, restless and anxious individuals in the pen of the realists.

Finally, Mearsheimer suggests that the structure of the international system compels states to pursue power, and that the pursuit of power is aimed at self-preservation and survival. In other words, survival is the goal, power is the means, and to have power is to ensure survival. In the pursuit of power, Mearsheimer takes an offensive realist stance, arguing for the maximisation of power by the state and the pursuit of hegemony. In his view, if a state has the advantage of maximising power over another state, then that state will have an overwhelming advantage over other states in every respect; having maximum power will lead to absolute security, and having hegemony will lead to stability in the long run. However, it is important to note that maximising power is not the only means of gaining security. In the context of realism, "The maximization of power brings absolute security" suggests that: firstly, that the acquisition of maximum power is achievable and, secondly, that such maximum power also provides stability and guarantees the security of a state. But in reality, does a state with maximum power really exist? Many nations are committed to the pursuit of maximum power, but in the process, they are hindered by numerous obstacles from their own and other nations, leading to confrontations, conflicts and even wars. The confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union and the outbreak of the Cold War are examples of how the pursuit of power can lead to conflict and war, so maximising power is difficult to achieve. Today's society is more suited to pluralistic development and inclusion, a society in which multiple nations coexist in harmony, a society in which hegemony is difficult to achieve. Moreover, the maximisation of power is not the only means of ensuring security; a state's confirmation of its own security can more often be achieved by enhancing its national power, international status, international cooperation, etc.

#### 4.3. "China threat theory"?

Realists emphasise the state's desire for power, arguing that in an anarchic international system, the state would intensify its quest for power, for security. In discussing the state's quest for power, Mearsheimer cites China as an example, arguing that China's growing power poses a certain threat to its neighbours and the world, or the 'China threat theory'. He argues that China's continued development, especially its rapid economic growth, will be accompanied by a desire for power, and that China will increase its pursuit of power and compete with the US for security, thus creating two camps, China and the US.<sup>[3]</sup> Mearsheimer also introduced the concept of 'regional hegemony', a realistic observation that suggests that there are certain obstacles to the pursuit of global hegemony as states strive to grow and develop, and that the ideal state for any great power is to be the only regional hegemon in the world, with the most powerful states trying to establish hegemony in their regions. The best way to survive is to be as strong as possible relative to potential rivals.<sup>[6]</sup> In 2002, for example, the Bush administration released its National Security Strategy, which argued that the US was now the most powerful country in the world and planned to maintain this lofty position, and would therefore do its utmost to contain other powers from controlling Asia or Europe. China, on the other hand, would seek to maximise the gap between itself and its neighbours and remain so powerful, i.e. it would try to become the regional hegemon in Asia; the US would do all it could to stop China, determined to remain the world's only regional hegemon; and China's rise would be contained by the US and its neighbours.

There are a number of problems with such an inference. Firstly, Mearsheimer has an inherently American mindset, i.e. America first, and in his view, the US is rightfully the most powerful country in the world and the regional hegemon in North America. The United States' containment of the rising China is necessary for the maintenance of security and stability in the Asia-Pacific region because, in its view, the rise of China will inevitably cause unrest in neighbouring countries and regions and pose a threat to other countries.

Secondly, according to Mearsheimer's logic, international mechanisms are influenced by subjective positions and views.<sup>[5]</sup> Since Mearsheimer concludes that China's rise is not peaceful and will pose a threat to the neighbouring countries, the US will contain China and will do its utmost to ensure security and stability in the Asia-Pacific region, which may reflect, from one side, that international organisations and international institutions in the Asia-Pacific region do not or rarely play their proper role, which is, of course, an inference formed in Mearsheimer's context, that is, according to Mearsheimer's logic that US intervention in the Asia-Pacific region offers the possibility of the failure of the international mechanisms in place in the Asia-Pacific region, aptly reflects the impact of Mearsheimer's subjective position on international mechanisms.

Finally, "international politics is a dirty and dangerous business, and when an ambitious hegemony emerges in Eurasia, no amount of goodwill can mitigate the fierce security competition".<sup>[7]</sup> which is why Mearsheimer argues that China cannot achieve a peaceful rise. In the process of development, China has been committed to promoting world peace and actively practising a peaceful and autonomous foreign policy. The mainstream diplomatic values of China are those of inclusiveness, friendship and harmony, and China is striving to build a "community of destiny" and provide the world with a "Belt and Road" development platform. China's rapid economic growth has made it the world's second largest economy, thanks to its long-standing commitment to socialism with Chinese characteristics and to a path that is consistent with its own national conditions. In particular, when the COVID-19 epidemic broke out, China took effort to actively fight the epidemic and, while restoring and developing its domestic economy and production, actively helped its neighbours and other countries around the world, demonstrating its role as a great power and its style, and taking practical action to reflect the principle of a position of sharing the fate of the world. The fact that China maintains good and stable cooperative relations with South and Southeast Asian countries shows that the attitudes and practices of China's neighbours are not as Mearsheimer inferred, and that they are more willing to believe in China's practice of the mainstream ideology of "one world, one family". Therefore, Mearsheimer's view of China's rise is highly subjective and speculative.

## 5. Conclusion

Mearsheimer was a leading figure in offensive realism, and his central thesis that "security competition would re-emerge in post-Cold War Europe and Asia, and that international institutions could not maintain peace" was an important complement to Kenneth Waltz's neo-realism. At the same time, Mearsheimer's view that the real challenge to American survival was China, and that the US should focus on containing China's rise, met the political needs of the US at the time, and Mearsheimer was promoted and the theory of offensive realism grew for a time. However, after the test of time, it is not difficult to find that the internal logic of offensive realism is not without problems, and the deviation from reality has gradually become bigger.

Firstly, Mearsheimer's basic assertion of offensive realism, with its one-sided emphasis on insecurity, exaggerates the 'anarchy' of the international system and the resulting security dilemma, and focuses on the danger of the international community, thus promoting the desire of states for survival and security.<sup>[8]</sup> So survival is seen as an important and eternal pursue. Secondly, Mearsheimer overemphasises conflict, fear, paved with insecurity, states see survival as the main goal, and because of the inability to figure out the intentions of other states, there is little trust between states and a concomitant fear and anxiety, one state sees all other states as enemies, international cooperation is difficult to achieve, conflicts and contradictions become easy and frequent, and the international community's vision of peace is hardly ever realised, which is very pessimistic and limiting. Again, in the context of Mearsheimer's life, it can be argued that Mearsheimer is the "voice of the US military" and that the US position is clearly biased against China's non-peaceful rise and its threat to the US and the Asia-Pacific region. At the same time, Mearsheimer also holds a linear mindset, which asserts that states' commitment to the pursuit of power will lead to international conflict, but the pursuit of power cannot reach the point of war; Mearsheimer only sees the state's pursuit of power as a straight line, moving tirelessly from the starting point all the way to the end, but ignores the fact that states have the ability to adjust themselves and will adjust to the size of the demand for power according to the situation. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, Mearsheimer treats states from the outset as one and the same actor, states are all the same, striving for power with the goal of survival, ignoring the influence of factors such as the cultural factors of the state on its foreign policy. Finally, Mearsheimer is too polarising. States have an understandable quest for power and security, but there are a variety of ways to gain security and have power. It is possible to take a compromise route and pursue security and appropriate power, using the complementary strengths of states to co-operate with each other and

achieve a win-win situation, then a liberal theory develops. If hegemony is pursued, then three scenarios emerge: gaining security, achieving cooperation and war. He ignores the dynamic 'historical cycle theory' and chooses the worst case scenario from the hypothesis.

The analysis of Mearsheimer's "offensive realism" reveals the problems with its internal logic. It also gives us some insight that in the field of international politics, there is a possibility for different schools of thought to express their ideas based on different assumptions, and that a dominant or long-established theory may reveal its limitations and short-sightedness with the development of the times, and that we need to be critical and dialectical and rational in our approach. At the same time, whether it is a liberal school or a realist school, or an emerging socialist school, it needs to reflect and develop in a timely and appropriate manner in order to maintain its usefulness or value in the long term.

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