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A CALCULUS OF POWER

FORGET GLOBALIZATION. Clear your mind of euphemisms like planetary 'governance'. Drop the idea that the foreign policies of Western democracies are devoted to liberal goals, controlled by popular opinion or dedicated to peace. The inter-state system generates rivalry and war, today and tomorrow just as much as yesterday. Get ready for the great-power conflicts of the twenty-first century. Simply put, such is the scandalous message of *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*.¹ The book, however, is complex enough. Its author, John Mearsheimer, has for some time now been an iconoclastic voice in America's complacent foreign-policy elite—one who, not by accident, has spent his career in scholarly work in universities, rather than serving as a functionary in the national-security bureaucracies whence conventional apologies for Washington's role in the world are furnished. Not only is his writing refreshingly free from the cant that normally surrounds the world role of the United States, it is extraordinarily accessible: forceful, direct and clear, without a trace of the usual academic jargon. But it is also both erudite and sophisticated on complicated and disputed subjects within the field. Combining historical depth and theoretical vigour, it is likely—notwithstanding its heterodoxy—to have a wide readership round the world.

Intellectually, Mearsheimer is a product of the post-war tradition of neo-realist international-relations theory founded by Kenneth Waltz. The postulates of the neo-realist paradigm are economical, and stark. States, the principal agents of the international system, can be treated as so many black boxes or billiard balls, if our purpose is to analyse their interactions. Their differing domestic arrangements and pressures may be ignored. For the main lines of any state's external policy are necessarily driven by the structure of the international system, whose anarchy—that is, lack of any consensual jurisdiction—forces states to struggle for

supremacy over each other, in an endless search for their own security. A great power which fails to engage in a rational pursuit of hegemony will ultimately put its very survival at risk. This is the tragic fate evoked in Mearsheimer's title.

But Mearsheimer breaks with Waltz in a number of crucial ways. First and foremost, he rejects the notion, developed by Waltz, that the logic of the international system tends towards an equilibrium, since all states must pursue the same aim of security, and any state that exceeds this goal, driving towards paramouncy over others, is bound to generate a coalition of its rivals against it. Aware of this inevitable backlash, great powers—in Waltz's view—tend to become status-quo states, accepting balance-of-power constraints and acting defensively to uphold them. Mearsheimer's key move is to reject this deduction of what he terms 'defensive realism'. The imperative of survival, he argues, is incompatible with any equilibrium between states. For the only sure guarantee of survival, in an anarchic order, is primacy—that is, not balance with other powers, but predominance over them. The reasons are simple and two-fold. How can any power know what would be a 'safe' margin of advantage over its neighbours, one that would allow it to rest on its oars—and how could it predict the capabilities of its rival a decade or two into the future? These inherent uncertainties of the international order compel states, however powerful, to seek more power: there is no resting-place for them

Given the difficulty of determining how much power is enough for today and tomorrow, great powers recognize that the best way to ensure their security is to achieve hegemony now, thus eliminating any possibility of a challenge by another great power. Only a misguided state would pass up an opportunity to become hegemon in the system because it thought it already had sufficient power to survive.²

In effect, what Mearsheimer does is project into the international arena the fundamental Hobbesian maxims: 'Because the power of one man resisteth and hindereth the power of another: power is simply no more, but the excess of the power of one above that of another'—

so that in the first place I put for a generall inclination of all mankind, a perpetual and restless desire of Power after power, that ceaseath only in Death.

¹ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, W. W. Norton: New York 2002, 555 pp, \$27.95, hardback, ISBN 0 393 02025 8. Henceforward TGPP.

² TGPP, p. 35.

And the cause of this, is not always that a man hopes for a more intensive delight, than he has already attained to; or that he cannot be content with a moderate power; but because he cannot assure the power and means to live well, which he hath present, without the acquisition of more.³

These are the relentlessly logical premises on which Mearsheimer, correcting Waltz, develops a doctrine of 'offensive realism'. In this world, there is no such thing as a satisfied state. Far from behaving defensively, he argues, 'a great power that has a marked power advantage over its rivals is likely to behave more aggressively because it has the capability as well as the incentive to do so'.⁴

Records of conquest

Having laid out these basic axioms, Mearsheimer proceeds to an analytic survey of international relations since the French Revolution, with the aim of demonstrating that the historical record amply proves their validity. The bulk of his book is taken up with detailed accounts of the strategic calculations and decisions of the leading powers of the modern world: Napoleonic France and the coalitions arrayed against it; Bismarckian Prussia and its Wilhelmine sequel; British naval predominance; Italian ambitions in the Mediterranean; Japanese expansion in East Asia; the rise of the United States; two World Wars; and the Cold War. Each of these offers fascinating insights; together, they make for a work of great riches. Threading through them is the cold, unillusioned judgement of a historian proof against the ideological fads of his country or time.

The United States emerges, inevitably, in a bleak light. Mearsheimer does not mince words. 'Henry Cabot Lodge put the point well', he writes, 'when he noted that the United States had a "record of conquest, colonization and expansion unequalled by any people in the nineteenth century"'.⁵ This was not, of course, how most Americans have understood their past: 'idealist rhetoric provided a proper mask for the brutal policies that underpinned the tremendous growth of American power'.⁶ This was a duality that has persisted to this day. Puncturing later myths, Mearsheimer shows that US entry into the Second World War, far from

³ Thomas Hobbes, *The Elements of Law, Natural and Politic* [1650], Cambridge 1928, p. 26; *Leviathan* [1651], London 1988, p. 161.

⁴ TGPP, p. 37.

⁵ TGPP, p. 238.

⁶ TGPP, p. 250.

being the reaction of a stunned and innocent victim at Pearl Harbor, was the preordained outcome of ‘massive coercive pressure against Japan to transform it into a second-rate power’—triggered not so much by Tokyo’s expansion in East Asia, as fear that it could deliver a knock-out blow to the USSR, when Hitler was at the gates of Moscow, so destroying any balance of power in Europe.⁷ Once the war was won, and the Soviet Union in turn became America’s prime adversary, the over-riding US goal was nuclear superiority. ‘It would thus be more accurate to define US nuclear policy in the 1950s as “massive pre-emption” rather than massive retaliation.’⁸ As for the post-Cold War epoch, the UN furnishes little more than a decorative facade for US policies.

When the United States decided it did not want Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali to head the UN for a second term, it forced him out, despite the fact that all the other members of the Security Council wanted him to stay on the job. The United States is the most powerful state in the world, and it usually gets its way on issues it judges important. If it does not, it ignores the institution and does what it deems to be in its own national interest.⁹

Mearsheimer does not conceal his contempt for the effusive guff with which ‘Clinton and company’—Madeleine Albright, Strobe Talbott and lesser underlings—attempted to dress up these realities. His book can be read as the requisite epitaph for the unbeatable dictum of the late President, which he bitingly cites: ‘In a world where freedom, not tyranny, is on the march, the cynical calculus of power politics does not compute. It is ill-suited to a new era.’¹⁰ In all these respects, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* is a work of definitive demystification.

⁷ TGPP, pp. 222–4.

⁸ TGPP, p. 226.

⁹ TGPP, pp. 364–5.

¹⁰ TGPP, p. 23. Just how free from conventional cant Mearsheimer tends to be, may be judged from his comments on Clinton’s scheme for Palestine at Camp David:

‘The plan apparently envisions a Palestinian state divided into three cantons, each separated from the other by Israeli-controlled territory. In particular, the West Bank would effectively be divided in half by Jewish settlements and roads running from Jerusalem to the Jordan River Valley. The Gaza Strip and the West Bank are already geographically separated by Israeli territory. Palestinian neighbourhoods in East Jerusalem would become part of the Palestinian state, but two of these neighbourhoods would be islands surrounded on all sides by Israeli territory—outposts cut off from their homeland. The Clinton plan lets Israel maintain military forces in the strategically important Jordan River Valley. This means Israel would control the eastern border of the Palestinian state. Israel says it might be willing to remove its forces after six years, but there is no guarantee that it would actually do so. And why should it? The strategic value of the Jordan Valley to Israel—which is great—will

Yet, lucid and powerful though Mearsheimer's critique of liberal obfuscations is as a prophylactic, his own account of the dynamic of inter-state relations contains two great flaws at its very core. The first of these is built into the assumption on which his whole theoretical structure rests: namely, that 'survival is the number one goal of great powers'¹¹—a survival that is potentially always threatened by the equivalent drive of other states, in conditions of international anarchy. It is important to note what Mearsheimer is claiming here: not the lives of its population but the existence of the state is at stake in this competitive struggle. His entire explanatory schema hangs on this premise. In a work as historically informed and detailed as *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, one would expect at least a chapter devoted to substantiating it. Yet Mearsheimer devotes no more than a single paragraph to this central assumption. In it, he offers a first specification of what he means: 'Survival is the primary goal of great powers. Specifically, states seek to maintain their territorial integrity and the autonomy of their domestic political order.'¹² This suggests that a state defeated in war will lose its territory and be colonized—failure in the inter-state struggle will spell its disappearance.

This is a factual claim that can be investigated historically. Mearsheimer assumes that we will accept it intuitively. Now it is certainly possible to think of many examples of states being torn apart or annexed by more powerful states. This happened all over the world in what is today 'the South', during hundreds of years of European colonialism and also during the Cold War, not least in Africa. American officials continue to threaten this kind of obliteration in these regions: Paul Wolfowitz, for example, has declared that the US will 'end states' that harbour

not diminish over time. Moreover, the Palestinians will not be allowed to build a military that could defend them, and they would have to let the Israeli army move into their new state if Israel declared a "national state of emergency". This stricture has echoes of the infamous Platt Amendment of 1901, which gave the United States broad rights to intervene in Cuba but which poisoned Cuban-American relations for more than 30 years. Finally, Israel could hold ultimate control over the Palestinians' water supply and air space. It is hard to imagine the Palestinians accepting such a state. Certainly no other nation in the world has such curtailed sovereignty. Even if the Clinton plan is accepted, the new state is sure to be a source of boundless anger': *New York Times*, 11 January 2001. Such blunt truths are, of course, absolutely taboo for Democratic and Republican establishments alike: indeed, one can search high and low in the pages of such organs of enlightenment as the *Atlantic Monthly* or *New York Review of Books* for so much as a hint of them.

¹¹ TGPP, p. 46.

¹² TGPP, p. 31.

terrorists. Mearsheimer, however, is not concerned with states of this kind. For he makes a fundamental conceptual distinction between great powers—the subject of his book—and all others. The criterion that separates them is military. ‘To qualify as a great power’, he writes, ‘a state must have sufficient military assets to put up a serious fight in an all-out conventional war against the most powerful state in the world’.¹³ His claim about state survival refers to *these states*.

Is it the case, however, that the defeat of a great power typically means the destruction of its territorial integrity and redistribution of its land as booty among the victors? Undoubtedly, this was often the upshot of feudal warfare, and we can find famous instances of it—not least the Partition of Poland—in the history of absolutism. But if we look at the historical epoch covered by *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, we can see right at its outset that this was not the rule in the period that concerns Mearsheimer. At the end of the Napoleonic wars, France was not dismembered after Waterloo. Talleyrand convinced the victors that breaking it up or even imposing a punitive peace would be a mistake. Bismarck did annex Alsace-Lorraine, but left the Austrian Empire intact. The Entente restored Polish independence and occupied the Rhineland, yet otherwise respected the boundaries of the Reich. Even Hitler did not abolish the French state after crushing it on the battlefield—the American government, indeed, continued to recognize the Vichy regime even after D-Day. His territorial engineering was confined to Eastern Europe, where Nazi warfare was racially exterminist in character, and certainly would have involved breaking up the USSR, but for reasons of ideological hostility to the Soviet social system that Mearsheimer would consider irrelevant to his theoretical argument.

The only real case of a great power being torn apart in defeat is that of Germany after 1945, where political conflict over social orders—Communism versus capitalism—was at least as salient as the logic of offensive realism. In general, in the age of international capitalism, there is no evidence that defeated great powers or even their allied minor states fail to survive as territorial entities. Such destruction may be visited by the advanced countries on weak, non-core states—the break-up of Yugoslavia contained elements of such behaviour by the great powers. But even this tendency has dramatically declined. Selective destabilization of states in the South by manipulation of separatist

¹³ TGPP, p. 5.

movements may persist, but tends to stop short of endorsing boundary changes. The days when victorious great powers might wipe away the statehood of their peers seem long gone. What then of ‘domestic political autonomy’? Regime changes have certainly been imposed on defeated powers by the victors, beginning with the restoration of the Bourbons foisted on France after 1814, through to the manufacture of Japan’s post-war constitution by MacArthur after 1945—although as frequent have been indigenous upheavals in the wake of defeat, which gave birth to the Third Republic in France, the Weimar Constitution in Germany or the Italian Republic of 1946, without direct foreign intervention. When, however, has the domestic political autonomy of a major power ever been permanently impaired?

State power and social order

Thus Mearsheimer’s whole edifice of realist theory appears to rest on an abstract postulate—that great powers face an existential threat—for which there is scant historical evidence. We are left with a mystery. Mearsheimer can easily convince us that major states still engage in power politics. But, on this basis, he cannot tell us why they do so—what *generates* mortal tensions between them. In the very same paragraph, however, in which he lays out his basic definition of the struggle for state survival, he offers a quotation as illustration of it. ‘We can and must build socialism’, declared Stalin in 1927, ‘But in order to do so we first of all have to exist’.¹⁴ Mearsheimer seems to think Stalin is here just pithily expressing his own conception of the need of any state to preserve its territorial integrity and domestic autonomy. But Stalin plainly had something very different in mind. What ‘national security’ meant for him was the need for *a particular type* of state to shield a particular type of socio-economic order. In this view, national security always has a specific *social substance* at its core. It is the bulwark of particular social systems—structures of domestic power, in class-divided societies, which embrace the entire way of life, institutions and culture of the dominant and dominated classes, founded on specific economic orders.

Mearsheimer is perfectly aware of the differences between these systems. While ‘security is the number one goal of great powers’, as he puts it, ‘in practice states pursue non-security goals as well’—which may be economic prosperity, a particular ideology, national unification,

¹⁴ TGPP, p. 31.

even ‘occasionally’ human rights. Offensive realism has no difficulty acknowledging these non-security goals, ‘but it has little to say about them, save for one important point: states can pursue them so long as the requisite behaviour does not conflict with balance-of-power logic, which is often the case’.¹⁵ Then security prevails: for example, ‘despite the US commitment to spreading democracy across the globe, it helped overthrow democratically elected governments and embraced a number of authoritarian regimes during the Cold War, when American policy-makers felt these actions would help contain the Soviet Union’.¹⁶ As for ‘human-rights interventions’, since they do not affect the balance of power one way or another, they are mere self-righteous velleities. ‘Despite claims that American policy is infused with moralism, Somalia is the only instance during the past hundred years in which US soldiers were killed in action on a humanitarian mission’—and ‘in that case, the loss of a mere eighteen soldiers so traumatized American policy-makers’ that ‘they refused to intervene in Rwanda in the spring of 1994’, although ‘stopping that genocide would have been relatively easy and would have had virtually no effect on the position of the United States in the balance of power. Yet nothing was done.’¹⁷

These cool contemporary judgements certainly hit their mark. But as Mearsheimer moves to study great-power conflicts of the past, he is obliged to make a revealing concession. Remarking that ‘structural theories like offensive realism’ are not capable of predicting the outbreak of wars, he explains that ‘these limitations stem from the fact that nonstructural factors sometimes play an important role in determining whether or not a state goes to war. *States usually do not fight wars for security reasons alone.*’¹⁸ Since *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* is essentially a theory of modern wars, this avowal might seem to drive a coach and horses through its argument. Mearsheimer, however, provides an anticipatory defence. Although ‘there is a price to pay for simplifying reality’—that is, ignoring ‘non-security’ factors, even where the consequences are as momentous as this—‘offensive realism is like a powerful flashlight in a dark room; even though it cannot illuminate every nook and cranny, most of the time it is an excellent tool for navigating through the darkness.’¹⁹ The image is attractive enough. But what if the batteries in the torch are defective?

¹⁵ TGPP, p. 46.

¹⁶ TGPP, p. 47.

¹⁷ TGPP, p. 47.

¹⁸ TGPP, p. 335; italics added.

¹⁹ TGPP, p. II.

To change the image, let us say that, to grasp the dynamics of any modern international order, we have to move beyond a picture of states as one-dimensional, cut-out characters with weapons and examine the dominant social forces hidden behind the institutional cardboard. For capitalist states encase social systems very different from their predecessors, containing social forces—notably, ‘free’ wage-labour and an ever-expanding intelligentsia—that have long posed new problems to them. An enormous amount of international politics and war since 1792 has been deeply connected to control of ‘domestic’ challenges to ‘domestic’ order, generating a pattern of alliances or interventions missed by Mearsheimer. Thus it was obvious, after all, to the great powers at the end of the Napoleonic wars that France might again bid for primacy in continental Europe. The logic of offensive realism would suggest that a Carthaginian peace was called for. Yet Talleyrand was able to persuade the victors to preserve France’s territory and domestic autonomy because his interlocutors understood very well that they had a common interest in rebottling the French revolutionary genie, and the restoration of the Monarchy appeared to be the safest instrument for doing so. But to do its job effectively, it had to be given back its traditional territory and sovereignty.

International class alliances

Similarly, Mearsheimer does not explain why the Entente bungled the Versailles settlement so badly. Here he seems not to have registered Arno Mayer’s *Politics and Diplomacy of Peacemaking* (1967), which makes clear how deeply the calculations of the victorious powers were affected by fears of the Russian Revolution—just as the great expansion of American power after the Second World War was hugely facilitated by the preoccupation of so many states with their domestic security in the face of Communism; and the wars in Korea and Vietnam must be understood as exercises in ‘social’ power politics, the need of the US to demonstrate its capacity to crush the advance of Communism as a revolutionary movement.

In other words, we cannot ignore the internal socio-political structures of states when studying their foreign policies. The national strategies of states always operate to mediate domestic and external socio-economic and political drives, and the stability of inter-state systems depends upon a fit between these internal and external arrangements of the

main states. Before the First World War European systems of domestic domination hinged on the mobilization of militarist and imperialist nationalism. This turned out to be an inter-state system that worked well internally but blew up externally. Today, it might be thought, we see the opposite pattern: a set of external mechanisms for stability (the 'globalization' regime) that tend towards internal strains and blow-outs.

In Mearsheimer's optic none of this is visible. From his point of view, the period leading up to the First World War in Europe offers perhaps the strongest case for offensive realism, and he makes the most of it. Arguing that there was a systemic logic at work driving the great powers into struggles for regional dominance, he focuses on the expansionism of the newer claimants to major status, Prussia—later Wilhelmine Germany—and Italy. Bismarck's wars with Denmark, Austria and France are dissociated from the disputes between different social and political forces within Germany over who would succeed in unifying the nation, and presented instead as preparations for an eventual bid to dominate the whole of Europe, which came in 1914. 'There is little doubt', Mearsheimer writes, 'that Prussia acted as offensive realism would predict from 1862 to 1870.'²⁰

There is, in fact, a lot of doubt, given the political prize that national unification yielded junkerdom in its internal contest with other groups wanting to speak for Germany, and the lack of any evidence that Bismarck was bent on subjugating the rest of Europe, restrained only by a still unfavourable balance of forces. Mearsheimer argues that by 1900 Germany was powerful enough to bid for hegemony, and began seriously preparing to take on France, Russia and, if necessary, Britain. But if this was the overriding thought in the minds of German elites, why did they not take advantage of Russia's defeat by Japan in 1905 to finish off the Tsarist army and launch the Schlieffen Plan against an isolated France? Mearsheimer concedes that his theory cannot account for this lapse from offensive realism, without considering alternative explanations. Could it have been that Germany's rulers were more concerned to buttress Tsarism in its hour of revolutionary danger, as the monarchy appeared to be tottering under the assault of workers and national minorities in 1905–6, than with taking strategic advantage of it?

²⁰ TGPP, p. 183.

There is, of course, plenty of evidence that in 1914 Berlin believed it could win a European war, although none that it deliberately triggered one. The crisis of that year does not readily fit the framework of offensive realism, since its roots lie so clearly in the deep social and political tensions shaking the various imperialist powers of the Continent in their transitions to modern capitalism, and the role that orchestrated chauvinism and militarism had long played as a linchpin of domestic domination, keeping the wolves of labour and suffrage at bay. Time after time, from Fashoda to Agadir, this pattern had already led the rival European states to the brink of war, mostly on matters of little substance in a rational power-political calculus, but with potentially major domestic consequences for groups that could be associated with a diplomatic climb-down. In short, the deep structural flaw in the European international order that bred the Schlieffen Plan and its Entente counterparts was inherent in destabilizing mechanisms of internal political dominance, common to all the contending powers.

The oneness of Mearsheimer's *Primat der Aussenpolitik* is perhaps even more striking in his otherwise interesting discussion of Italian expansionism. For here, too, he starts by equating competition among different domestic forces to lead a movement for national unity with a systemic inter-state logic, and then proceeds to an impressive list of Italian hopes for expansion in all kinds of directions, and actual efforts under Mussolini. But Italian expansion into the Western Balkans and North Africa should surely be viewed as an attempt to give Rome the colonial credentials considered at the time to be the necessary accoutrements of a European great power, against the background of the internal divisions and tensions that eventually led to the rise of the hyper-nationalism of the fascist regime. Mussolini's imperial ambitions were no doubt more serious than the risible campaign by Polish elites in the 1930s to acquire some colonial possessions anywhere, to demonstrate that Poland, too, had the status of a great power. But his principal inter-war strategy was to build a bloc of states in Central Europe, starting with Austria and Hungary, that would be linked to Italy—a project that collapsed as first these states, then Italy itself, fell in behind German leadership. In much the same way, the Japanese annexation of Korea at the turn of the century must be seen within the context of European and American strategic penetration in East Asia. Everywhere, the great powers were scrambling for control over the territory and wealth of

weak states at this time, a dimension of international politics to which Mearsheimer pays scant attention.

Water's stopping power

What, then, of Britain in this period? Here a second fundamental anomaly of Mearsheimer's account of the inter-state system comes into play. Offensive realism is not, contrary to appearances, a theory of *world* power. The Hobbesian logic of survival drives states to maximize their power. But unlike Hobbes's abstract space of the 'naturall condition of mankind', Mearsheimer's universe is geographically concrete, made of continents and seas. Every great power must aim to dominate, and there can in principle be no limit to its drive. In practice, however, no state can hope for world domination, because oceans pose an insurmountable barrier to the free movement of even the most powerful armies across the earth's surface. Mearsheimer dubs this 'the stopping power of water'. It plays a crucial role in his overall account of modern history. After considering the record of seaborne invasions, from the Anglo-Russian fiasco in Texel in 1799 to the present, he concludes that 'there is no case in which a great power launched an amphibious assault against territory that was well defended by another great power'—apparent exceptions, like D-Day or the attack on Okinawa, striking down opponents already on the ropes for other reasons.²¹ If such are the limits of naval transport, still less can air power secure any effective mastery over a major state situated overseas.

In such conditions, how is hegemony to be conceived? For Mearsheimer, a state is hegemonic when 'no other state has the military wherewithal to put up a serious fight against it'.²² It follows, from the stopping power of water, that global hegemony is by definition impossible. The only hegemony a great power can realistically aim for is regional: that is, one confined to its own continental landmass. Beyond this perimeter, its interest is simply to act as an 'offshore balancer'—casting its weight, from a distance, into the scales of whatever coalition is needed to prevent a regional hegemon emerging overseas. Here Mearsheimer's logic appears self-contradictory. For why should any regional hegemon be concerned at this prospect, if it enjoys maritime immunity from peer assault anyway? Mearsheimer extricates himself with the weak corollary

²¹ TGPP, pp. 119–25.

²² TGPP, p. 40.

that a hegemon in one region must remain vigilant against the danger of a hegemon in another extending assistance to an upstart within its own bailiwick. Since the same logistical obstacles must dictate that such aid could never be of much military value, this is not a persuasive argument. Such theoretical difficulties, however, pale before the empirical problems his account of offshore balancing presents.

Mearsheimer's first great exemplar of offshore balancing is, as one might expect, Great Britain. Pointing out that, for much of the nineteenth century, Britain had the industrial power and population to produce a mighty force for expansion into Europe, he notes that Britain attempted no such thing. Instead it spent the century playing off continental powers against each other, in the manner classically prescribed by Sir Eyre Crowe's memorandum of 1907. Mearsheimer's explanation of this self-limiting role flows from his marine proviso. British leaders would no doubt have liked to establish their military-political dominion over Europe, he suggests, but were prevented from doing so by the Channel. Had they even tried to project land power across the water, moreover, they would have been opposed by a strong coalition of continental rivals. If Japan, another insular power, could cross the Korea Straits to mount land operations on the peninsula and in Manchuria, subsequently invading mainland China itself, that was because it faced no great power in its path—Russia, as its rapid defeat in 1905 showed, lacking that status in the Far East.

Mearsheimer, however, adduces no evidence that any political force in Britain ever envisaged expansion into the Continent, or bemoaned the Channel as a barrier to British power projection. After the defeat of Napoleon, London—insisting on its right to secure free passage of the river Scheldt—could have garrisoned the Low Countries with the greatest of ease. The creation of Belgium in 1830 offered another obvious opportunity for the establishment of a continental bridgehead if Britain had desired it. In neither case was either France or the various German states a serious obstacle to the projection of British land power across the Channel. But London was not interested in the logic of offensive realism. British governments believed, rightly, that they could use their wealth and other forms of non-military influence to balance (or buck-pass) against any rising European state with hegemonic ambitions; and that the very fact that they had no territorial ambitions on the Continent would increase rather than weaken their political influence in Europe.

This, of course, did not mean that Britain's rulers were more pacific or less power-hungry than their counterparts on the Continent—if anything, quite the contrary. It was simply that they had other uses for their military force: seizing and holding down India and the rest of an enormous overseas empire. British army commands marched in step with a socio-economic order geared to industrial exports, financial intermediation and imperial expansion beyond Europe. Great Britain was as much of a warrior state as anyone could wish for, but its militarism was devoted to the subordination and exploitation of pre-capitalist societies, in the largest territorial empire in history. The logics binding together the external drives and internal structures of this system do not belong to the categorical imperatives of Mearsheimer's world, in which every major power must seek to overmaster every other in its own region. For London, what mattered was command of the seas. The hegemony it pursued was not regional, but naval. Of course, in a European war Britain would switch military resources from the colonies to the Continent. But its leaders never accepted the idea that the region abutting a great power is a perpetual emergency zone unless it is subdued by superior force. If Britain was an offshore balancer in Europe, as Mearsheimer correctly maintains, it was not from geopolitical necessity, but by strategic choice—a long-standing option derived from the country's history and social structure.

American limitations?

Mearsheimer's study ends, logically enough, with the prospects for American power today. His treatment of the United States, however, brings the paradoxes of his theoretical structure to their most acute point. Unlike many conventional realists, he does not try to present the US as essentially a twentieth-century successor to Victorian Britain: Washington has long represented an exception among the great powers. Unlike right-thinking liberals, on the other hand, Mearsheimer attributes no distinctive moral or political value to its role in the world at large. What makes the United States unique is the fact that it, alone of the great powers, has actually enjoyed what they all must seek, but the rest have never attained: namely, true regional hegemony.²³ For since the time of the Monroe Doctrine, the US has been the single, unchallengeable great power in the Western hemisphere—a position of such superordinate eminence as no rival state has ever achieved

²³ TGPP, pp. 141, 170.

in Europe or Asia. Protected by two oceans from any interlopers, the Americas have been Washington's exclusive bailiwick. Here, it would seem, lies the probable origin of the strength of Mearsheimer's belief in the stopping power of water as a key to all modern geopolitics.

The reverse then follows. The United States may possess an unrivalled ascendancy on the landmass from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego, but by the same token it could never hope to acquire an equivalent dominion beyond the seas. Global hegemony has always been, and remains, beyond its reach. Outside the Western hemisphere, the role of the US has therefore always been that of an offshore balancer. So it is today, and will be in the future (save in the inconceivable circumstance of it acquiring a monopoly, rather than mere superiority, of nuclear weapons). Coolly timing its interventions in the two World Wars unleashed in Europe to ensure maximum prior weakening of its rivals, and minimum cost to itself, America twice helped to block the emergence of Germany as a continental hegemon, and then fought the Cold War to prevent Russia dominating one end of Eurasia, and China the other. Historically, however, it has become involved in great-power conflicts overseas only if it feared the emergence of a regional hegemon there could not be contained by a local coalition of powers—its first preference always being to 'buck-pass' to others, rather than taking on the arduous task of halting the danger itself.

Now that the over-riding threat of the Soviet Union has disappeared, Mearsheimer concludes, we can expect the US to revert to its traditional role, and withdraw its forces from Europe, allowing the variously weaker local contenders—a newly reunified Germany, a humbled Russia, an apprehensive France or Britain—to check the rise of any new hegemon among them. In East Asia, on the other hand, the situation is undoubtedly less favourable, since the enormous demographic weight and rapid economic growth of China threaten to produce in time a genuine regional hegemon, whose rise America must seek to delay or foil. But in either of these key strategic theatres, the US will continue to play the same basic role that it has in the past. 'Only the threat of a peer competitor is likely to provide sufficient incentive for the United States to risk involvement in a distant great-power war. The United States is an offshore balancer, not the world's sheriff.'²⁴

²⁴ TGPP, p. 392.

It would be a mistake to dismiss this strange upshot of Mearsheimer's argument as merely apologetic. His book offers little or no embellishment of American foreign policy, from the days of Jefferson onwards. Rather, conclusions like this are in some sense inherent in his premises. It is perversities in the structure of his theory, not common-or-garden political blinkers, that generate them. Pivotal to everything else here is Mearsheimer's overstatement of the 'stopping power of water'. Two basic flaws mar it from the start. The first is logical. If it is axiomatic that seas ensure any hegemony can never be more than regional, why should the United States—secure in the Americas—ever have worried about the prospect of a hegemon in Eurasia? The lemma that rivals overseas might stir up challengers at home, therefore requiring offshore balancing abroad, is patently too flimsy to sustain the weight of explanation of the massive record of US military interventions around the world in the twentieth century—as if the earth could be made to turn on the pin of the Zimmerman telegram, which is virtually the only evidence Mearsheimer produces of the menace of extra-hemispheric meddling in the Americas. Some other, more credible motor was needed from the start.

A second weakness of Mearsheimer's construction is more empirical. If the United States has enjoyed a more or less absolute fiat in the Americas since 1900, can this have been a function of the stopping power of water? For in practice there was—still today, is—no land bridge between North and South America. The isthmus joining Panama to Colombia remains impassable mountain and jungle: no land-route connects the two halves of the hemisphere. For all practical purposes, South America is separated by sea from North America, at distances very much greater than those of the English Channel. An American attack on Paraguay or Argentina would even today not differ greatly, in its logistic demands, from an assault on Norway or Morocco. Historically, the US was quite unable to stop Peron returning to power in 1945, or have much influence on the course of his regime. Even much closer to home, in the Caribbean, Washington has been defied by Cuba for forty years.

American hegemony in the Western hemisphere is, of course, real enough—diplomatically speaking, Castro's famous quip that the OAS is best regarded as Washington's Ministry of Colonies remains accurate—but it has depended less on any 'insular' immunity than on the overwhelming economic, demographic and territorial preponderance of

the US over all other states in the hemisphere: strategic advantages as decisive beyond the Americas as within them.

Path to global dominance

For, as the record makes abundantly clear, from the time of its entry into the Second World War, the US has pursued not regional, but global hegemony—which it has now finally achieved. The evidence of this ambition, exuberantly proclaimed by leading American spokesmen and policy-makers, is so plain and plentiful that it would be supernumerary to rehearse it all here. It is sufficient, for the purpose, simply to point to Washington's central strategic initiative of the past decade—not the winding down of NATO after the end of the Cold War, as required by Mearsheimer's logic, but its first deployment in action in the Balkans, and then expansion full-steam ahead to the frontiers of Russia itself. Since September 11, of course, the 'revolution in military affairs' has carried the American war machine still further, into hitherto unimagined terrain, with bases in five or six Central Asian states, and forward posts in the Caucasus, to add to the eighty countries in Eurasia, Africa and Oceania already in its keep. The staggering scale of this armed girdling of the planet tells its own story, which is patently not Mearsheimer's offshore balancing.

To understand how this has come about, however, it is necessary, once again, to look behind the military statistics at the social system that has created them. If American imperial strategy has all along been quite distinct from British, that is because the structural evolution of the US domestic order has been so different. American capitalism, after the triumph of the North in the Civil War, became an industrial power of a kind still unknown in Europe, geared to constant technological innovation and fed by a steady flow of immigrant labour, offering vast opportunities for a business class in command of a state devoted to its unlimited expansion. At the start of the twentieth century, the US tried some European-style colonial adventures, but its industrial heartland could not be satisfied with a projection of international power geared, British-style, to exploitative subjugation of pre-capitalist societies. It sought expansion into the most advanced capitalist markets, which could not be engineered into being in areas like the Philippines. The structure of American manufacturing—not to speak of finance—was such that its international extension could only be realized through dominance within the rest of the advanced capitalist core.

This did not take the immediate form of a security strategy in the conventional political sense. In the inter-war period, American statecraft was primarily economic. Since the United States was not facing even a remote threat from Western Europe, Washington's strategy was to rely on the mechanisms of war debt and reparations to keep the Germans at loggerheads with the British and the French, and the doors open to American industrial penetration—especially into Germany, the European capitalism most congenial to its own structures of accumulation. All this changed, of course, with the outbreak of the Second World War, when the Roosevelt administration—as Gabriel Kolko has shown in *The Politics of War* (1968)—laid down the political goal of a far-reaching reconstruction of the world order that would preclude any return to a system of separate regions and balances, in which the United States could withdraw offshore once again.

Such plans took definitive shape under Truman, when the few voices that still advocated something like an offshore balancing role—Kennan was briefly and inconsistently one, before swinging violently to the emergent consensus—were marginalized or silenced. Acheson, the builder of the post-war American imperium, was more clear-sighted: the US could and should aim for nothing less than permanent military-political hegemony over Western Europe and Japan. Victory in 1945 enabled Washington to take command of the entire advanced capitalist core, planting its troops from Reykjavik to Tokyo, reviving the local capitalisms within the international framework set up at Bretton Woods, and binding their elites into a common anti-Communist cause. The United States became the regional hegemon both in these core zones and in the former European colonies of Southeast Asia. Politically, its domination took the form of a protectorate system, which managed a basic contradiction of capital rather effectively: the fact that economic accumulation requires a relatively stable and predictable international order, yet political power is centred in competing states. The flexibility of the institutions now developed by the United States offered a framework in which its Eurasian auxiliaries could grow and flourish in ways acceptable to them and welcome to their protector. So long as the Soviet Union existed, of course, American hegemony could never be more than partial, or multi-regional. But since the collapse of the USSR, no 'peer competitor'—as Mearsheimer would put it—has existed, and US hegemony has for the first time become truly global.

This does not mean, of course, that its power is absolute or ubiquitous. As Mearsheimer is the first to insist, China, Russia, Germany, France and many other lesser states retain their own interests and objectives, which are far from always coinciding with America's. Hegemony after all, as its original theorist Gramsci conceived it, never meant an auto-cracy, either domestic or international. It signified rather an economic, social and cultural leadership, resting not just on military force, but on an ideological ability to impose on allies and even adversaries the images and idealizations of the hegemonic state as universal values. Who could doubt the grip of the 'American dream' on the assorted national elites of G-8 and APEC? Viewed strategically, the United States is the one state to which Mearsheimer's schema of 'offensive realism'—once we drop its unrealistic maritime proviso—can be unambiguously applied. For neither Nazi Germany nor Japan had serious ambitions beyond regional hegemony in the 1940s, but the logic of American expansion has been truly unlimited—'power after power', in Hobbes's words, stretching to the ends of the earth. But if that has been possible, it is because the US state has not just been pursuing its own interests at the expense of all its rivals, but securing the general conditions for the expansion of capital as a system, in which they have an interest too.

Future faultlines?

In this configuration, the American state has not only retained but reinforced the particularism of its political order. This is a structure that has been transformed dramatically by its own protectorate system, gaining a huge military sector with extensive influence at the heart of the American political system, and a social cohesion that is strongest at home when it has a deadly enemy abroad, to arouse and unify its domestic population. In short, the US today is primed in its internal politics and international projection for a struggle to dominate the globe. Mearsheimer is, of course, right to argue that, notwithstanding its might, it remains extremely difficult for America to wage large-scale land war in Eurasia. But the obstacles do not lie in logistic barriers created by oceans. Desert Storm showed Washington's extraordinary capacity for long-range power projection. The impediments are internal and socio-cultural. The American people and the American military are unwilling to accept major casualties; they have lost any appetite for carnage on a Korean or Vietnamese scale. But in compensation, the US has developed a monopoly of increasingly accurate technologies of electronic

warfare that gives the American state a capacity for military statecraft on a world scale which enables it to exert very strong pressure—about which Mearsheimer is silent—on other states, well short of great-power land war. Furthermore, it is now feverishly preparing to acquire an anti-ballistic missile shield that would afford it an offensive nuclear provision no other power could match. Its capacity for low-intensity warfare and covert action to destabilize lesser states is also impressive.

But there are also external impediments. While its military and security services are evidently attractive as supports to a range of regimes in the South, and its destructive potential can bend the will of many states to American purposes, the US has yet to demonstrate that it has gained the technological fix necessary to prevail over serious, popularly rooted political resistance. The Gulf War was no such test. The military balance-sheet of the Kosovo campaign was at best ambivalent. Afghanistan was an impressive electronic show, against a fragile quasi-state. Taking, holding and transforming Iraq would be a more serious demonstration of the political efficacy of US military technology—one likely to require a readiness to place combat troops on the ground to control populations. Nor is it clear that global capitalism desperately needs the feverish deployment of American armed force to protect itself from dissent today. As a backstop for the future, the capabilities of the Pentagon are no doubt valuable, but excessive reliance on them will not reassure securities markets, stabilize oil prices or even secure the dollar or the foreign exchange markets. Regimes expected to bow to threats may not always do so: the United States could be dragged into wars that it neither expected nor wanted. On the bourses, the memory of the Yalu River has not altogether faded.

More fundamentally, it has yet to be demonstrated that the interaction of American imperial power with the social systems of a greatly enlarged capitalist world will generate the same kind of commitment to the 'American dream' that so bewitched the elites of the OECD states during the post-war decades. The commanding vision of the architects of the American century, from Elihu Root through Stimson and Acheson to the Rockefellers, who believed America's surplus capital could transform and knit the world together, risks turning into something approaching its opposite: a US economy requiring manipulation of global monetary and financial, as well as political, relationships to suck in capital to sustain its domestic consumer booms and speculative bubbles. An American

military statecraft and geopolitics geared increasingly to sustaining international socio-economic relationships that serve too exclusively US domestic interests could eventually generate acute tensions at the heart of the new global order. A hegemon which up to now has always dominated the rest of the capitalist core indirectly, by shaping the external environment of its subordinate allies, might feel pressed to turn its arsenal of powers more directly in their direction.

The Tragedy of Great Power Politics side-steps all this. Its analytic focus resolutely abstracts from the changing historical character and commitments of the states whose historical record it surveys. But if this is in one sense a crippling restriction, in another it is what paradoxically permits the lasting interest and merit of the book. For the restriction is also an abstention. Mearsheimer's work stands in diametric contrast to the official ideologies of the period, which seek to delineate the 'concrete' character of these states all too profusely, in two versions. Either we are presented with the apparition of a 'democratic peace', after the imaginings of Kant, in which the leading capitalist states of the epoch have forsworn violence forever, as an unthinkable departure from the civil harmony among them; or we are offered a vision of 'postmodern' or 'market' states, that have put the vulgar ambitions of modern nation-states behind them, as they cooperate to build a civilized 'international community' in the North, and wage implacable battle with rogue states and terrorist cells outside it, in the barbarian South—the pious or frenetic apologies for the American empire offered by writers such as Bruce Russett and Philip Bobbitt.²⁵ *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* eschews sycophantic clap-trap of any kind. If its message is a chilling one—the probability of wars between the major states of the twenty-first century—it neither conceals nor acclaims it. The Left has more to learn from it than from any number of treatises on the coming wonders of global governance.

²⁵ Respectively, *Grasping the Democratic Peace*, Princeton 1993; *The Shield of Achilles: War, Peace and the Course of History*, New York 2002.