

The International Spectator 2/2002

Book reviews and Notes

A Tragic Future?

*Filippo Andreatta**

The tragedy of Great Power politics / John J. Mearsheimer. - New York : Norton, c2001. - xvi, 555 p. ; 24 cm. - ISBN: 0393020258

The Tragedy of Great Power Politics is an ambitious and sophisticated book attempting to construct a general theory of international politics. Mearsheimer positions himself in the venerable realist tradition and, in particular, in the neo-realist strain begun by Kenneth Waltz, which attempts to identify regular patterns in state behaviour and to explain why war has been and still is a distinctive characteristic of international relations, in spite of political and economic progress and most people's peaceful intentions.

Despite this traditional starting point, the book has two main original arguments which provide a useful contribution to the contemporary theoretical debate, with particular reference to the future of the international system after the end of the Cold War: on the one hand, that states are generally more aggressive than originally believed and, on the other, that the prospects for maintaining order in the present international system are grim.

To capture the essence of international politics, Mearsheimer introduces the three main realist assumptions to explain the failure of alternative approaches. First, the most important actors in the international system are sovereign states. Other actors may exist at the subnational or supranational

* *Filippo Andreatta* is Associate Professor of International Relations, University of Parma.

14 A Tragic Future?

level but, given their lack of control over the instruments of force, they are ultimately influential only in so far as they can find the support of one or more states. Second, states are positioned in an anarchic structure, since they do not recognise superior authority and each controls only a fraction of territory. Third, the absence of a global government capable of protecting them induces states to resort to self-help and to be concerned with their own security. States must therefore care about their military power in order to guarantee their own survival. This third assumption, in turn, reinforces the first because states are important as ultimate holders of military power and cannot, therefore, afford to delegate this crucial function.

The realist framework excludes that the most popular remedies for international conflict can be successful. All states, whether democratic or authoritarian, whether interdependent or autarchic, are equally subject to the tyranny of anarchy and military concerns. Specific ideologies and individual states' preferences must give way to the primary concern for survival. International cooperation is further hindered by the fact that states must take account of other states' relative capabilities and will therefore forego collaboration, even when it is mutually advantageous, for fear that the counterpart will strengthen disproportionately and use this edge against their interests. States, leaders and public opinion may therefore find it desirable to conform to the cooperative guidelines provided by international institutions, but they simply cannot afford to do so if this contrasts with their national interest. Occasional conformity with institutional prescriptions may occur, but it is merely coincidental with self-interest. Mearsheimer then proposes his own specific brand of realism – offensive realism – which is even more pessimistic than the more traditional forms. In his view, states are not merely content with maintaining their position and preserving the balance of power, but they seek as much power as they can get and desire hegemony as an ultimate goal. After all, absolute security requires not only parity with other potential threats, but also that others not be in a position to constitute a threat in the first place. Despite this power struggle, order can be maintained nevertheless because the desire of each to prevail results in a mutually restraining equilibrium in which the attempts of one to undermine the others are reciprocated. The desire of all to prevail produces a pattern of actions and reactions which frustrates the attempts of each.

The probability of this automatic mechanism working effectively to maintain order and dissuade great powers from making a bid for hegemony

depends, in turn, on the structure of the international system. For Mearsheimer, the number of great powers in the system — and their relative power — determine the incentives to shape behaviour for states much more than their internal characteristics or preferences. Bipolar systems are the most prone to stability, because each power knows exactly from where the main threat is coming and who is responsible for containing it. Multipolar systems are less stable, even when evenly balanced, because the identity of threats and of those responsible for meeting them is less clear, as each power attempts to “pass ” the costs of containment onto others, while enjoying the benefits. The most unstable systems are multipolar and unbalanced, that is when one power is more resourceful than the others and could therefore presume that it has a reasonable chance of crushing them.

This discussion of the stability of international systems — for which Mearsheimer has become famous ever since the publication of his provocative article “Back to the Future” a decade ago — is particularly pessimistic as it leads him to predict increasing instability in the international arena in the future. He says we may soon come to “miss the Cold War”, as the bipolar confrontation ensured that disputes did not get out of control. On the contrary, the more diffuse structure of power in which new great powers will arise (China in particular) may well lead to more fragmented and uncertain diplomacy. In other words, the next fifty years are likely to be less stable than the past fifty years not because new types of dangers (such as terrorism) will emerge, but because the eternal “tragedy” of international politics will lead great powers to behave in ways similar to those of European states in the first fifty years of the twentieth century.

This is a bold conclusion which deserves attention for the simple and compelling logic from which it is derived. Mearsheimer’s work is a reminder of the fact that intellectual fads may lure us away from the real essence of politics, which sometimes draws individuals and groups into conflict despite their best intentions. However, the simplicity of the argument may also be the book’s greatest limit. First, the examination of historical evidence is somewhat mechanical and fails to convey the complexity of diplomacy. Second, the book is devised to highlight the great continuities in international politics without taking account of the changes that have undoubtedly occurred in the last decades, among which are the rise of non-state actors such as terrorist groups, multinational corporations and international organisations, both governmental and non. Lastly, the book

16 A Tragic Future?

fails to offer a theoretical interpretation of many contemporary events, attempting rather to diminish their significance. Given these shortcomings, the book is more a restatement of traditional theoretical thought, most notably that of Waltz, than the presentation of a new general theory. Nevertheless, it is an important book which should be read by scholars, students and policy-makers alike.