

Theory Talks

Presents

THEORY TALK #49

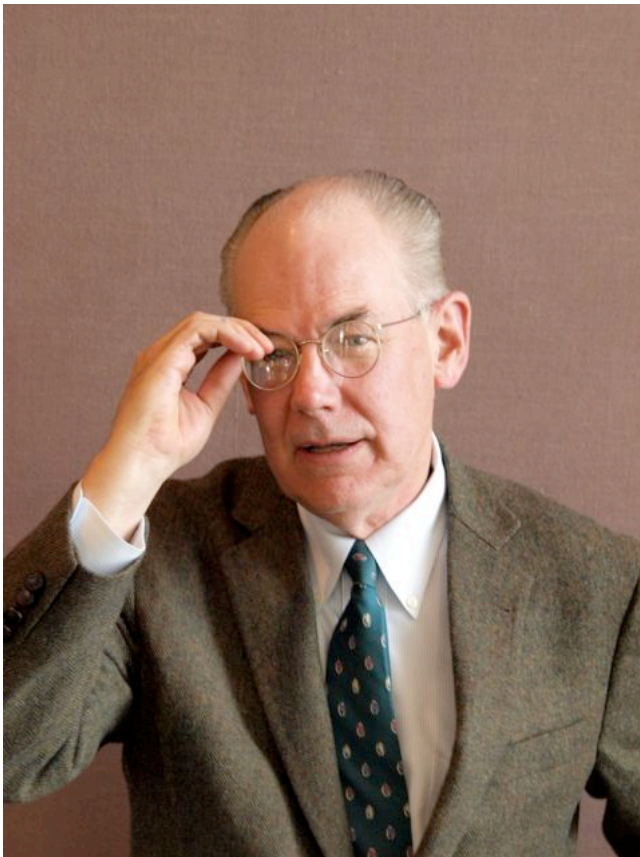
JOHN MEARSHEIMER ON POWER AS THE CURRENCY OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, DISCIPLINING US FOREIGN POLICY, AND BEING AN INDEPENDENT VARIABLE

Theory Talks

is an interactive forum for discussion of debates in International Relations with an emphasis of the underlying theoretical issues. By frequently inviting cutting-edge specialists in the field to elucidate their work and to explain current developments both in IR theory and real-world politics, *Theory Talks* aims to offer both scholars and students a comprehensive view of the field and its most important protagonists.

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JOHN MEARSHEIMER ON POWER AS THE CURRENCY OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, DISCIPLINING US FOREIGN POLICY, AND BEING AN INDEPENDENT VARIABLE



Structural realism dominated International Relations (IR) during the Cold War. After the Cold War, international politics became imbued with different ideas. US foreign policy, for instance, turned out an eclectic mix of democratic peace theory, imperialism, and economic neoliberalism. John Mearsheimer, a giant among structural realists, has stuck to realist theory in a changing world. Not without its problems, Mearsheimer realizes: the unprecedented power of the US has rendered its domestic politics a force of global purchase, leading to dynamics not easily explained by structural realism. This prompted him to write the controversial book about the Israel Lobby. In this *Talk*, he discusses, among others, how hard-core realists are now—surprisingly—closer to the radical left because of their shared adversity to armed interventions; argues that becoming a great IR theorist

requires you to be an independent variable; and—despite seemingly radical changes—underscores the enduring tragedy of great power politics.

What is, according to you, the central challenge or principal debate in International Relations? And what is your position regarding this challenge/in this debate?

I think the principle debate in international relations theory, certainly in the US, is between realists on one hand and liberals on the other hand. There are three key liberal theories—economic interdependence theory, liberal institutionalism, and democratic peace theory—and those theories offer a very different view of the world than realism. Whenever we study big questions, like whether China can rise peacefully or not, it essentially comes down to the question of whether or not one views that subject through the lens of a liberal or a realist. That is the big

fault line in international relations theory in the US. Constructivists matter, for sure, but I don't think constructivists are that important in terms of defining the theoretical debates here in America. I think it is basically liberals versus realists. And, of course, I'm a realist who believes that one can explain what happens in the world much better with a realist theory than with a liberal theory—which is not to say that realism can explain everything. But I believe its relative punching power is greater than liberalism's.

I think the principle real-world problem for the US today is its liberal imperialist bent. The fact is that, both on the left and on the right in contemporary America, there is a powerful inclination to try to run the world and to rely heavily on military force for that purpose. Take the Bush Doctrine, for example. The US was bent on using military force to reorder the entire Middle East. The US was talking about imposing democracy on countries all across the Middle East at the end of a rifle barrel. This was a remarkably ambitious strategy! It was a strategy that many liberals and democrats supported, which is why there was so much support across the American political spectrum for the 2003 Iraq War. The key point is that the US has this imperial impulse wired into it today, and this includes both left and right wing elites.

The end result of this is that the US has gotten itself into a heck of a lot of trouble over the past ten years, maybe even the past twenty years if you include some of the misadventures of the Clinton administration. The question is, how are we going to rid ourselves of this imperial impulse, and how are we going to break our addiction to war? If you look at the US today, it's quite clear that its elites are addicted to war. The US has been at war for two out of every three years since the Cold War ended. The US has fought six wars since 1989: the 1991 war against Iraq, the war against Serbia over Bosnia in 1995; the war against Serbia over Kosovo in 1999; the Afghanistan war, which started in 2001 and is still going on; the 2003 Iraq war; and then the war against Libya last year (2011). This is remarkable! And we're now talking about the possibility of using military force against Iran, and maybe even Syria! America's elites are addicted to using military force. Plus they believe the US has both a right and a responsibility to run the world. This is not a healthy situation and it is imperative that the US figures out a way to break these bad habits. This is the key foreign policy issue at this point in time.

One might have expected me to say that the key issue facing the US is the rise of China. But I think that's a problem for another day. It's an interesting intellectual question at this point in time, but the question of whether or not China will challenge the US is a decade or so away. America's imperial impulse is the central problem that exists today, and indeed has been the main problem since the end of the Cold War.

How did you arrive at where you currently are in your thinking about IR?

Well, I think my views on American foreign policy in what we used to call the 'developing world' or the 'third world' were profoundly influenced by the Vietnam War. I served in the American military from 1965 to 1975, which was coterminous with that conflict. So, my early thinking about the use of military force was heavily influenced by Vietnam and I came to the conclusion back then that it was a huge mistake for great powers like the US or the Soviet Union to fight wars in places like Vietnam or Afghanistan. You were, in a sense, jumping into a hornet's nest. I think my convictions from those long ago times have endured and influenced my thinking in very

important ways about the Afghanistan war in 2001, and especially the Iraq war in 2003. I was an outspoken opponent of the Iraq War, which I think is in good part due to my memories of Vietnam.

With regard to great power politics and the realism I'm identified with, I'm not sure how to explain how I became a realist. I think a lot of it has to do with my reading of history and current events and trying to think about how the various theories in our literature fit with what has happened over time in world politics. At some point, I came to the conclusion that realism did a better job of explaining great power politics than the other theories did. That's not to say that I believe realism is a perfect theory; I just thought it captured the essence of international politics better than liberalism or Marxism. You want to remember that when I started graduate school in the mid-1970s there was no constructivism. The three main schools of thought were liberalism, Marxism, and realism, and I studied all of them. Of course, there are different variants of each of those perspectives, but I gravitated toward realism. Then, as I became more interested in realism, I read the major works by scholars like Morgenthau and Waltz ([Theory Talk #40](#)), and I found that I agreed with them on some points but disagreed with them about other points. Thus, I decided in the late 1980s to write a book laying out my own realist theory of international politics and trying to show where I overlapped with Morgenthau and Waltz, and where I differed from them. Of course, I read the works of other realists as well. That's essentially how I came to the views laid out in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (2001).

I'm tempted to say that Hobbes influenced me, especially his arguments in *Leviathan*, but that's not true. Although I have come to appreciate how much Hobbes's arguments dovetail with structural realism, the truth is that I didn't read *Leviathan* carefully until after I had worked out my main ideas in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. So, Hobbes did not influence me. But, since discovering Hobbes, I realize how much overlap there is between his arguments about individuals in the state of nature and my argument—well, any structural realist's argument—about states in an anarchic system.

The truth is, I have not been heavily influenced by the writings or thinking of any individual. I've always been the sort of person who came up with his own ideas about how the world works, and my inclination has been to disagree with people who were famous and were said to have the most important explanations for this or that phenomenon. I think that instinctively I'm a contrarian, and not inclined to look for guidance about what to think from other people. I'm not saying that this is good or bad, but it's the way I'm hard-wired. I would say that I established my own pathway without much guidance from other scholars.

Now, that's not to say other scholars haven't influenced me. After all, I have had many interlocutors along the way. Being able to read Morgenthau, Waltz, and the writings of liberal scholars, has been very helpful for formulating my own ideas. But, I don't think that anybody inspired me in the sense that they provided me with a way of thinking about the world or a set of ideas that I then adopted. I was much more interested in creating my own theory about how the world works, for better or worse.

What would a student need to become a specialist in IR or understand the world in a global way?

Well, I think there are a number of factors that contribute to producing an IR theorist. First of all, you have to be intellectually curious. You have to constantly be asking questions, constantly challenging the conventional wisdom. Second, you have to be creative. It's very important to be an 'independent variable', to put it in social science speak, to be a person who is interested in

creating his or her own explanations for particular events and phenomena. The third ingredient is that you need to have intellectual breadth; you need to be interested in all sorts of subjects. You cannot afford to be narrowly focused. You have to read in other fields; it is especially important to know a lot of history. You want to have a lot of information at your fingertips.

Finally, you have to have an instinct for simplification. My previous point was that you want to know a great deal about the world, and you also want to appreciate how complex it is. But to be a theorist, you have to be a simplifier. A good theory is a simple theory that has a compelling logic and can explain a large number of the relevant cases. A good theory should say that if you have A, you get B; but if you don't have A, you get C. We all know that the world is enormously complicated, and hard to understand, which is why we need theories. They provide simple pictures of reality, which help us to make sense of the world and navigate our way through it. Of course, no theory can explain every case because it is a simplification of reality. Specifically, theories purposely leave out certain explanatory factors that are judged to be not so important—that is what simplification is all about—but occasionally those omitted factors matter a lot, in which case your theory fails. So, no social science theory can account for every case, although good theories can account for most of the cases. Many students of international politics don't like simple theories. They prefer complex explanations instead. But if you're a complexifier and not a simplifier, you're not going to be an important international relations theorist. You have to be interested in making simple arguments with a persuasive logic. I think these four factors are the key ingredients that go into making a top-notch IR theorist.

What are the eternal features of international politics and what role does history play in accessing these features?

A lot of people argued when the Cold War ended that we were witnessing a fundamental change in the nature of international politics. It was said that security competition among the great powers had been relegated to the dustbin of history and indeed there would not be much war of any kind from now on. In essence, realism was said to be no longer relevant in the new world. I think those claims are wrong. The nature of international politics has not changed at all; what has changed is the structure of the system. We operated in a bipolar world during the Cold War, where there were two superpowers involved in an intense security competition with each other. That competition shaped international relations in very important ways. Then, in 1989, one of the superpowers went away and you ended up with a world that most people describe as unipolar: there was one superpower that had an enormous amount of military might and had the capability to influence events in every nook and cranny in the world. That new distribution of power has led to a very different set of outcomes over the past 23 years than you had during the Cold War, when the system was bipolar. In essence, the structure has changed, and for sure that change has had a substantial effect on what international politics looks like! But the nature of the system has not changed in any meaningful way. We still operate in an anarchic world where states have offensive military capability and where it's impossible to know for sure what the intentions of other states are. As long as those conditions apply, you're still in a world that is realist at its core, and where the danger of great power competition and war remains very much alive. I think that if China continues to rise, there will be abundant evidence to support my viewpoint.

I think history plays a small role in influencing the contemporary thinking and behaviour of states. In my estimation, how you think about history or how you think about the past, doesn't exert much influence on a country's present actions. My perspective on history is hardly surprising, since I'm a structural realist and I believe that the structure of the international system pushes states or the leaders of those states to behave in predictable ways. So, if you're the leader of China, even if you don't know a lot about Chinese history, it doesn't matter. You quickly figure

out what the structure of the system demands and you behave accordingly. A structural realist, by definition, cannot put too much weight on history.

But please understand that I am not saying that history does not matter at all. Remember I argued earlier that a theory is a simplification of reality, and as such it leaves out a number of potential explanatory factors that are deemed to be of secondary or tertiary importance. But there will be occasions where those omitted factors affect outcomes in important ways. Returning to the matter of history, a structural realist theory obviously leaves history out of the story in the same way it leaves out domestic politics. However, there will be instances, not many I believe, where the lessons of history, whether read correctly or incorrectly, are going to affect state behaviour in ways that contradict my theory. The same is true, of course, regarding domestic politics.

Don't we need to take domestic politics into account to explain US foreign policy? And would you characterize US foreign policy as realist or liberal?

With regard to the distinction between realism and idealism, I think that up until 1989, when the Cold War ended, you could describe US foreign policy over the course of the country's history in largely realist terms. The US usually behaved in a realist fashion and defended its behaviour with idealist rhetoric: we acted realist and talked idealist. Since the Cold War, however, America has tended to behave in an idealist way in large part because it is so powerful that it doesn't have to worry about its survival the way it did when the Soviet Union was still a superpower, or before that when it had to worry about Germany and Japan. In other words, the US can act in non-realist ways and pursue foolish policies, and when it gets into trouble, it doesn't really pay a significant price because it's so powerful relative to the other states in the system. Nevertheless, I would argue that it would have been much better for America over the past 23 years if it had behaved according to the dictates of realism and not idealism or liberalism. Hopefully, it will make the necessary corrections and get back on track and behave the way it did before 1989.

Now with regard to domestic politics, there are certainly instances where domestic politics, which are left out of my theory, do matter for how the US behaves in the world. The most glaring example of this is, as you know well, the Israel lobby. Steve Walt ([Theory Talk #33](#)) and I wrote a book on the subject. This is a case where a remarkably powerful interest group is able to push American foreign policy in ways that are not in the US national interest. This, of course, is contrary to what my theory would predict, because that theory says states behave in rational ways and don't behave non-strategically. If you're going to argue that the lobby pushes the US to behave in strategically foolish ways, then you're effectively saying the theory cannot explain US Middle East policy at particular points in time. I think that what's happened here is that the US has been so powerful since 1989 that it's relatively easy for interest groups, whether it's the Israel lobby or the Cuban lobby, or any other strong lobby, to push American policymakers to pursue foolish policies. In short, because the US has controlled such a large share of world power since the end of the Cold War, idealism and domestic politics have been well positioned to trump realism in various instances.

This situation, however, is likely to change if China continues its impressive economic growth and looks like it might become a peer competitor to the US. In that world, realism will dominate and the US will have to behave in strategic ways, because there will then be a great power in the system that can threaten America's position in East Asia, and maybe even threaten to dominate Asia the way the US dominates the Western Hemisphere. In that situation, idealism and domestic politics will play a much smaller role in US foreign policy, as was the case before 1989. In effect, the distribution of power will discipline America, as it did prior to and during the Cold War. What's happened over the past 23 years is that the distribution of power—call it unipolarity,

American primacy, or whatever you want—has left the US free to misbehave. There's no discipline!

Given the abundance of military power that America possesses, and given its favourable geography, it is remarkably secure and thus we don't have to worry about the balance of power the way we did in the past. A world with the Soviet Union or its equivalent is fundamentally different from the post-Cold War world. As I said before, the architecture of the system doesn't discipline the US anymore. So, it's free to run around the world doing all sorts of foolish things because the costs are not great.

Now some people liken the contemporary situation with the British Empire of the 19th century. But the British Empire was never as powerful, relative to the other states in the system, as the US is today. If you look at Britain in the middle of the 19th century, it was by far the richest country in Europe, but there were countries in the system like France, Prussia and Russia, which were also powerful players. In fact, one of the reasons that Britain supported Bismarck's efforts to transform Prussia into Germany between 1864 and 1871 was because British leaders feared France and they thought that a unified Germany would be a check on France. What this tells you is that British leaders, even at the height of British power, were worried about France, and of course they were worried about Russia as well.

So, Britain operated in a multipolar world where it was clearly the wealthiest power and probably the most powerful state in the system. But the gap between it and the other major players in the system was nowhere near as great as the gap between the US and everybody else today.

What was the main point of your work in *The Israel Lobby* and how does it relate to more recent tensions, perhaps in relationship to the two-state solution and to Iran?

Talking critically about Israel—especially the US-Israeli relationship and Israeli policy towards the Palestinians—is the equivalent of touching a ‘third rail’ in the US. These are remarkably controversial subjects, even though most academics and most policymakers in Washington understand that the US-Israeli relationship has a profound effect on US Middle East policy, that the Israel lobby is very powerful, and that Israel's brutal treatment of the Palestinians is not in America's national interest. But hardly anyone is willing to criticize Israel because of fear that the lobby will put its gun sights on you and smear you as well as do everything it can to either marginalize you or ruin your career. This is why most people were shocked that Steve Walt and I wrote an article—and then a book—that was highly critical of Israeli policy toward the Palestinians, America's special relationship with Israel, and the lobby itself. We did it because we thought that it was in the national interest to talk about these subjects. Furthermore, we are tenured professors at elite universities, and the reason that we have a tenure system is so that professors can make controversial arguments, so they can speak truth to power. In essence, we felt that we had a responsibility to put these issues on the table and get people talking about them.

I also think most academics are in favour of the two-state solution. There are few people in academia in my opinion who disagree with us about the merits of creating a viable Palestinian state. It is Israel that is not interested in the two-state solution and instead is bent on colonizing the West Bank and creating a Greater Israel that will surely be an apartheid state. This would be a disaster for Israel. But it's because the US has a special relationship with Israel—thanks to the enormous power of the lobby—that we cannot put any meaningful pressure on Tel Aviv to move toward a two-state solution. In essence, Steve and I are arguing that the special relationship between the US and Israel is not only bad for the US, but it is bad for Israel as well.

I think that people inside the academy have been more sympathetic to our book and to us than is the case in the broader public. I don't think that a lot of scholars have taught the book or teach courses on the US-Israeli relationship or Israeli politics, simply because those subjects are just too controversial. But, a good number of scholars have assigned the original article and the book in classes. So, we've had, I think, a quite positive reception in academia. The story is very different with regard to the general public, where the lobby went after us with full force. Although Israel's defenders often say we are anti-Israel and anti-Semitic, there is no truth in those charges. Some even say we are interested in destroying Israel. On the contrary, we're not interested in destroying Israel; in fact, we're interested in saving Israel from itself. But making such arguments in the US is going to get you into a lot of trouble, as we have proven!

How does this tie into recent tensions with Iran?

I think that what we see happening regarding Iran is that both Israel and the lobby are deeply interested in getting the US military to attack Iran and destroy its nuclear facilities. However, the last thing that President Obama wants to do is start another war with a Muslim country in the Middle East. By the way, the same was true with President Bush in his second term. The US has zero appetite for a war against Iran, but the lobby and the Netanyahu government have been pushing hard for that war. The crucial question is whether Obama can resist that pressure before the 2012 presidential election. If he's re-elected, he can then tell the Israelis that he's just not going to do it, as President Bush told the Israelis in 2008. But if this does not happen and the US goes to war with Iran, it will be due mainly to pressure from Israel and especially the Israel lobby. And it will not be in the American national interest.

It's interesting, but hardly anyone in the American national security establishment, outside of Israel's staunch supporters, thinks that attacking Iran is a good idea. Almost everybody thinks that it would have disastrous consequences. We simply have no appetite for a war with Iran! However, this case seems to fit neatly with the basic thesis of our book, which is that the Israel lobby is a remarkably powerful interest group that pushes the US to pursue policies that are not in its national interest, and indeed are not even in Israel's interest.

Let me make two other points. First, it's not clear that Iran is developing nuclear weapons. Indeed, both the 2007 and 2011 [National Intelligence Estimates](#) say that the available evidence indicates Iran is NOT developing nuclear weapons. Second, and I think this is the key point, even the proponents of war agree that if you attack Iran, all you can do in the best-case scenario is set back Tehran's nuclear program 3-5 years. In other words, the US cannot use military force to eliminate that program once and for all. Moreover, almost everybody agrees that if you attack Iran, it will then have a powerful incentive to build nuclear weapons. I think that if it were possible for the US to use force to eliminate Iran's nuclear program forever, the Obama administration would be tempted to do it. If you could convince Obama and his lieutenants that they could permanently eliminate the program at a relatively cheap cost, and that few Iranians and Americans would be killed, the US would probably do it. But that is simply not possible; we can't eliminate Iran's nuclear capability once and for all; the best we can do is set it back a couple of years. Then they will get nuclear weapons and will surely be mad as hornets, and paranoid to boot! This would not be good!

What are the biggest misconceptions that you come across in the discipline of international relations?

What Walt and I wrote on Israel may come of a surprise for those who associate realism with warmongers. In general, I sometimes find that when I'm discussing that I end up agreeing with people who come from very different traditions, more than I agree with other realists. This is especially true in the post-Cold War world, where many of the old ideological and scholarly divides have broken down in important ways. In fact, I sometimes find myself closely allied with people on the far left, and vehemently disagreeing with people on the right. You would expect a realist to be closer in his or her thinking to people on the right rather than the far left. But for me the reverse is often the case these days.

And this is stunning to me. It turns out that contrary to the conventional wisdom, realists are much less willing to use military force than most people on either the left or the right in the US. When I say the left, I'm talking about liberals. When I talk about the right, I'm basically talking about neo-conservatives. The fact is that when you look closely at the American national security elite, and this includes academics, you discover that many liberals and neo-conservatives are powerfully disposed to using military force around the world to serve US interests. Realists, on the other hand, tend to be much more wary about using military force. This means that in many situations—and we saw this in the run-up to the Iraq war—the realists end up opposing hawkish policies being pushed by liberals and neo-conservatives. In those circumstances, what you often find is that realists have more in common with people on the far left, and here I am talking about individuals who are clearly outside of the mainstream or the consensus.

My good friend Steve Walt recently said to me that what's bizarre about the world today is that he and I are often identified as leftists in the US, despite the fact that we are both card-carrying realists. I've run into all sorts of people in recent years who are on the hard left and who are opposed to using military force, who once saw me as the devil incarnate and now view me as a powerful ally. Of course, they find it hard to believe that realists could be opposed to using military force. But the fact is that realists have always been wary about using military force. As I often point out to people, every realist—except for Henry Kissinger—opposed the Vietnam War. The two most public opponents of the Vietnam War in its earliest days were Hans Morgenthau and [Walter Lippmann](#), who were both realists. Almost every realist opposed the 2003 Iraq war as well.

So realists are not warmongers. And very interestingly, it is liberals, who dominate foreign policy in the Democratic Party, and neo-conservatives, who do the same inside the Republican Party, who seem to have a huge appetite for launching wars across the globe. They are birds of a feather when it comes to questions of war and peace. This situation is really quite counter-intuitive and interesting!

In the same line, what's so offensive about offensive realism? Or, to put it more generally, what is it about realism that makes it so unpopular?

What makes realism so unpopular is that it is a fundamentally amoral theory. Realism says that states should be concerned with the balance of power above all else and should pay little attention to ethical and moral questions; this disturbs most people very much. This kind of thinking especially disturbs people in a liberal society like the US, where there is a deeply held belief that states should act in ethical and moral ways. Many Americans believe in the ['just war' theory](#) and the importance of international law, which is not to say that is how the US actually

operates in the international system. Realism, in fundamental ways, cuts against this liberal way of thinking about the world. Realism assumes that the world is nasty and brutish and therefore states have to worry mainly about how much power they have, not behaving morally. For realists, power is the currency of international politics; one might even say that for some realists it is the end all and be all. When you think and talk that way, as realists do, you are sure to offend people who are idealistic and naturally gravitate to liberal theories.

It is important to understand that the US has often acted according to the dictates of realism in the past. But when it does, it describes its behaviour with idealistic or liberal rhetoric. When we go to war in places like Afghanistan or Iraq, we refer to the campaigns as 'Operation Enduring Freedom' and "Operation Iraqi Freedom." We always like to portray our behaviour in noble terms and we like to argue that our behaviour is invariably consistent with international law and 'just war' theory. After all, we are the chosen people. We are the city on the hill. As such, we have a responsibility to behave in proper ways and not act like those nasty realists say we should. There's no question that the US is going to steer clear of describing its behaviour as 'warlike'. Remember, we used to have a Department of War, which we renamed the Department of Defence. One might argue, given our behaviour since the Cold War ended, that we should rename it the Department of Offence. But, that's not the American way.

One should be very suspicious of the words that come out of the mouths of American policymakers. One should instead pay attention to their actions, not their rhetoric. Of course, they will occasionally slip up and say in plain English what the US is doing or has done in another country. But, for the most part, they will talk in ways that are designed to make what is often brutish behaviour look benevolent and noble.

One can perhaps summarize your view on international politics as 'the tragedy of billiard balls in the state of nature'. How can realism help to make sense of the coming tragedy and which billiard balls will be involved?

I think that one big question these days is whether China can rise peacefully. Will it continue to expand at a rapid economic pace and if it does, how will that play out in international politics? If China continues its rise, there will be two big billiard balls in the system, the US and China. The \$64,000 question is whether or not those two countries will engage each other in a security competition with the ever-present danger of war. Will those two billiard balls, the US and China, interact with each other in the future in ways that are similar to how the US and the Soviet Union interacted with each other during the Cold War? My answer is that they will, that there is no way that the US and China can avoid an intense security competition, if China continues its impressive rise.

When I give talks and make the case that China cannot rise peacefully, someone in the audience will invariably say: 'Okay, your argument is interesting and even compelling, but tell me, what can we do to avoid this problem? What are the policies that the US and China should adopt to head this problem off?' My answer is that there is little China or the US can do to avoid an intense security competition. The core of the problem is twofold: first, there's no way that either the US or China can trust the other side because of uncertainty about each other's intentions, especially regarding future intentions. If you ultimately cannot trust the other side, there is a powerful incentive to make your country very powerful in case the other side decides to come after you. Since both countries understand this logic and are governed by it, they end up competing with each other for power.

The second problem is the security dilemma: simply put, the measures states take to defend themselves invariably appear to be offensive in nature to rival states. This means there's little that China or the US can do to defend itself that won't look offensive to the other side. Consider the case of Chinese defence spending. Beijing has increased defence spending quite significantly over the past few years. Mind you, they still don't spend anywhere near as much money on defence as the US does. Indeed, the US spends almost as much money on defence as the rest of the world combined (see [graph](#)). So here are the Chinese, who are far behind the US in terms of defence spending, increasing the size of their defence budget. How does the US react? It is highly critical of China and interprets its increased defence spending as offensive in nature. This is evidence, so the argument goes, that the Chinese are potentially dangerous and threaten America's strategic position in Asia.

The Obama administration then decides it has to react, and does so by announcing that the US is going to '[pivot toward Asia](#)'. It is going to move additional military forces to the Asia-Pacific region. The US, of course, sees this as a defensive move; it's just shoring up its defences in the region. But if you're sitting in Beijing and the US starts moving additional aircraft carriers, attack submarines, and troops into your backyard, it hardly looks like the US is acting defensively to you! America's behaviour instead looks offensive! It looks threatening.

So, you end up in this tragic situation where there is no way the US and China can avoid competing with each other for power. When I make this argument, someone will usually say to me, 'One problem I have with your argument, John, is that it's a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you say that China and the US *should* prepare for a security competition with the other side, then of course you're going to get a security competition. Isn't that self-fulfilling prophecy, and doesn't that give you pause?' And my answer is, 'Yes, it is a self-fulfilling prophecy, and it does give me pause. But the question is, what's the alternative? The fact is that neither China nor the US can take the chance that there won't be trouble down the road. Therefore, even though it creates a self-fulfilling prophecy, both countries have to arm themselves and try to be more powerful than the other.' And of course, when they arm, what looks defensive to them looks offensive to the other side. There's no escaping that cruel dilemma, which sits at the heart of international politics.

The sad fact is that you can have a situation where two countries are satisfied with the status quo and have no interest in using military force to alter it, but they still are doomed to compete with each other for power. The reason is that neither side can be certain about the other side's intentions. Therefore leaders on both sides have to assume the worst case; they have to assume that the other side is a revisionist state, not a status quo power, and compete for power with the other side. That is the tragedy of great power politics.

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- [Faculty Profile at the University of Chicago](#)
- Read Mearsheimer's *Imperial by Design* (The National Interest 2010) [here](#) (pdf)

- Read Mearsheimer's *The Gathering Storm: China's Challenge to US Power in Asia* (Chinese Journal of International Politics 3 (4) 2010) [here](#) (pdf)
- Read Mearsheimer & Walt's *The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy* (2006 working paper) [here](#) (pdf)
- Read Mearsheimer's *Structural Realism* (in Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki, and Steve Smith (eds.) *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity* (Oxford University Press) 2006 pp. 71-88) [here](#) (pdf)
- Read Mearsheimer & Walt's *An Unnecessary War* (Foreign Policy 2003) [here](#) (html)
- Read Mearsheimer's *The False Promises of International Institutions* (International Security 19 (3) 1995) [here](#) (pdf)
- Read Mearsheimer's *Back to the Future: Instability in Europe After the Cold War* (International Security 15 (1) 1990) [here](#) (pdf)
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