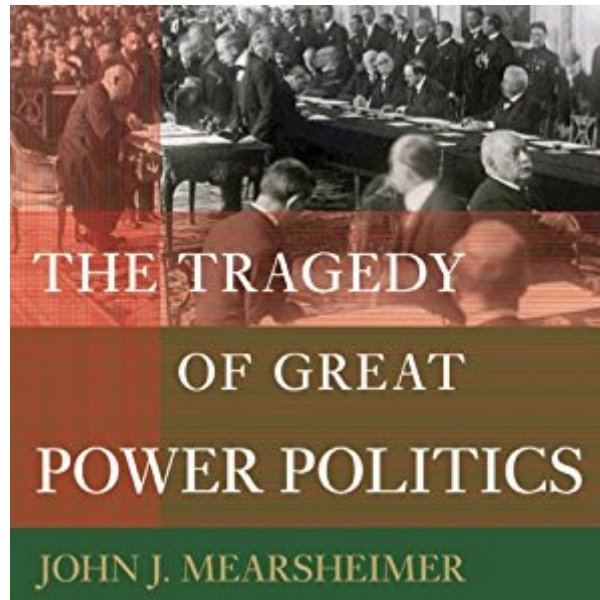


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The Tragedy Of Great Power Politics



Synopsis

A decade after the cold war ended, policy makers and academics foresaw a new era of peace and prosperity, an era in which democracy and open trade would herald the "end of history." The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, sadly shattered these idyllic illusions, and John Mearsheimer's masterful new book explains why these harmonious visions remain utopian. To Mearsheimer, great power politics are tragic because the anarchy of the international system requires states to seek dominance at one another's expense, dooming even peaceful nations to a relentless power struggle. Mearsheimer illuminates his theory of offensive realism through a sweeping survey of modern great power struggles and reflects on the bleak prospects for peace in Europe and northeast Asia, arguing that the United States's security competition with a rising China will intensify regardless of "engagement" policies.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

If you're interested in this, you are probably a political science or international relations student, which is a shame because very few general readers would pick this up, and it's those who need it the most, this really deserves to be a best-seller. I majored in biochemistry and am an indie game developer, never took a single class in political science, but on a friend's recommendation who was majoring in that I read this book, and I've re-read it several times over the years, and it's become one of my favorite books (certainly in my top 10 of nonfiction). Basically, this book presents an overarching theory of why wars exist, one that is precise enough to allow even uninformed readers

to make predictable, and historically accurate, and precise predictions about when a country will go to war (and why). Most people believe wars to happen for one of several reasons -- "human nature" (because humans just like fighting and are inherently violent or stupid or something), or perhaps the war over religion and ideology, or perhaps over resources. I'd guess that almost everyone believes war happens for one of those reasons. This book dispels that notion very cleanly and completely. After you read it, you'll realize that nations go to war simply because they are afraid. They know that if they lose a war against a greater power, their nation is done for -- it will become occupied, or a puppet state, of a greater power, and lose whatever power they had. Nations do not want that to happen, they are terrified of being dominated by greater nations. And this is a systematic thing, no individual might consciously decide on this, but this is how all nations do seem to work: they are afraid of being conquered, so they go to war to make sure they are the one who conquer, not the one being conquered. This central notion that fear of being conquered by another nation, and not anything else, drives almost all war is the main thesis of the book, and it's argued for very convincingly, with a lot of historical examples. So, the first way a country can be certain it's not going to be conquered by its neighbors is to become the strongest power in its major landmass -- the regional hegemon. Most nations in a position to do so will try to gain regional power -- that is what China is doing in Asia, that's what the US did in the Americas, and that's what various European countries (e.g. England, France, the Dutch, the Germans, the Russians) have attempted to do for Europe, and so on. By this thesis, it may seem counter-intuitive, but according to this idea, the reason Germany went to war was not because they were nationalistic or inherently violent, or because of the ideological differences between fascism, capitalism, and communism, or because they wanted to purify Europe of undesirable races, or even that they were angry over the conditions imposed on them after WW1 (though that's part of it), but simply because Germany feared being conquered and wanted to become the most powerful nation in Europe to make sure they would survive. This is a *very* different understanding of war than most people have, I want to emphasize that again. And it sounds strange at first, but this book will probably convince you of it (as evidence, Germany in WW1 had a very different ideology, but the conditions were somewhat similar, and they still went to war, for the same reason they did go to war in WW2. Sometimes WW1 is blamed on entangling alliances or the assassination of an archduke, but, in reality, according to this theory, Germany went to war in WW1 for the exact same reason they went to war in WW2, because they saw an opportunity to become local hegemon of Europe, and took that opportunity). If you still aren't convinced, that isn't of course the job of this review, it's the job of the book; the number of examples used in the book far exceed what I could bring up here. And the author's writing is much better

than mine in any case. I'm just trying to explain why I like the book: because it gives you a different opinion of war than the usual one, and does so very convincingly, through factual argument, and explains it in a simple to understand way (you don't need to have even taken a political science course to follow along with the argument).

The title of this review is the bottom line of *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* by John Mearsheimer. The central point is not that hard to grasp that the structure of the international system makes conflict between great powers inevitable. But the way he goes about both setting up and giving evidence for his theory, may bend the reader in so many different directions that great power war or the fear of great power war becomes an absolute certainty. I hold a Master's degree in Political Science and believes that while great power war may occur, it is the civil war type of conflicts and/or groups like Isis that deserve the world's attention. Further, while I believe realism is an important paradigm in International Relations, the various liberal theories of International Relations and the newer third way theories also have a varying degree of explanatory power depending on the topic. Mearsheimer's theory only holds the amount of currency the reader gives to the realist view of the world. For me, while it is plausible the world will end up this way, offensive realism is hard to stomach.

The central tenet in Mearsheimer's work, establishing the concept of offensive realism, is that the ultimate end-goal in the world today is global hegemony. Mearsheimer does a superb job at reinforcing this as his premise, using historical circumstance in abundance to detail cases where nations have pushed for such hegemony. In this respect, Mearsheimer argues that the growing confrontation with China will be caused because the United States cannot allow any nation to challenge its status as a hegemon. The author argues that the United States is the global hegemon of this time, able to project its power anywhere (via advanced technology and aircraft carriers). That being said, with such dominance, the United States, according to Mearsheimer, benefits in that no nation has established itself as a regional hegemon. Thus comes the conflict with China. As Chinese power grows, Mearsheimer argues that the United States must work to constrain such power, particularly through establishing India, Japan, and Korea as a barrier to Chinese hegemony. The same can be compared to Brazilian power growth in South America. All in all, this seems to be well on its way to become a standard in neo-realist theory, with all the pros and cons that come along with such a label. Because of Mearsheimer's use of history and example, however, I would recommend this as a starting point for modern theory along with, of course, Waltz and Morgenthau.

As with most neo-realist texts, however, this has as a negative in that it has a systematic bias against world organizations, cooperations, and other instruments of global power. Worth the read.

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