BOOK REVIEW

John J. Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*

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The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities

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U.S. foreign policy is widely debated and contested around the world, and the main reason for this is the fact that U.S. foreign policy decisions have had global consequences for a long time. So much so that International Relations (IR) is claimed to be an American social science. Despite this widespread interest, however, there is no consensus on what variables actually determine U.S. foreign policy. John J. Mearsheimer's *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* provides a convincing explanation of what drives U.S. foreign policy, and sets the ground for a fruitful debate. Mearsheimer argues that liberal hegemony has shaped U.S. foreign policy in the post-Cold War period and that this strategy has produced nothing but failure at the end of the day. The main reason for the failure of this strategy, he argues, is that liberal political theory is based on erroneous assumptions about human nature, and it ignores the role of nationalism and realism in shaping the way international relations flow (p. viii).

The book consists of eight chapters. The introductory chapter defines concepts such as political liberalism and liberal hegemony and, in a nutshell, explains what happens when a state adopts the liberal hegemony strategy. Accordingly, liberal hegemony as a grand strategy aims to turn countries into liberal democracies, promote an open international economy, and build international institutions. However, the strategy fails because of the role of nationalism and realism in international relations (p. 3). Chapter 2 demonstrates that key assumptions about human nature determine theoretical arguments in politics. The author embraces two assumptions: that human beings have limited capacity to discover inclusive thrusts about what constitutes good life and that they are social beings. Driven by survival and as members of social groups positioned in anarchy, the groups often have fundamental disagreements about the first principles regarding good life. Consequently, there is a high propensity toward conflict in the world (p. 17). Chapters 3 and 4 demonstrate how progressive liberalism, a social engineering-prone variant of liberalism, triumphed over modus vivendi liberalism and assess liberalism as a political ideology. In Chapters 5 and 6, the author asks the question of what happens

when liberalism goes abroad and argues that it turns into liberal militarism, renders diplomacy harder, undermines sovereignty rights, and causes instability and costly failures (p. 152). Lastly, Chapters 7 and 8 reveal the weaknesses of liberal theories of peace and suggest a restrained foreign policy based on realism.

As a leading structural realist, Mearsheimer argues that the United States as the sole great power did not need to consider structural constraints when deciding on a foreign policy strategy. In this regard, the post-Cold War presidential administrations interfered with China's politics to promote human rights and liberal democracy, promoted the so-called color revolutions in Russia's immediate neighbors, initiated the Ukraine crisis, and committed itself to regime change in weak states such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Egypt and Syria. In other words, the United States has tried to remake the world into its liberal image (p. 162). The author argues that this liberal grand strategy, based on liberal assumptions about human nature, oversells individual rights and ignores nationalism and realism and is therefore destined to fail. In politics, human beings mostly care about their groups' interests rather than individual rights, and in international relations, social groups (nation-states in political science terminology) are sensitive to their sovereign rights. Directly violating of Afghan and Iraqi sovereignty produced high costs, and interfering in domestic politics in China and Russia disrupted bilateral diplomatic relations. Continuing the liberal hegemony made the United States is responsible for the endless wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and for the deterioration of diplomatic relations with China and Russia.

One may criticize the book because it gives no agency to China and Russia in regard to their deteriorating relations with the United States. Mearsheimer ironically ignores the offensive realist rule that rising powers are always in search of more influence in world politics, and thus China and Russia are bound to do so. As an offensive realist, Mearsheimer should acknowledge in advance that the United States cannot escape from confronting these rising states since "the tragedy of power politics" is a fact of life.

What kind of foreign policy strategy should the United States adopt? The author argues for a restrained one because such a policy is based on a realist understanding of politics and a clear perception of how nationalism mobilizes states even against a great power (p. 220). Even though the foreign policy establishment will be reluctant to abandon the liberal hegemony strategy, Mearsheimer is optimistic that U.S. foreign policy will be shaped according to the realist dictates of politics because of the changing structure of the international system from unipolar to multipolar.

All influential books are open to criticism, and Mearsheimer's latest is no exception. First, the book lacks a clear distinction between nationalism and realism in international politics. Mearsheimer underlines the fact that myths of nationalism hold societies together as a kind of glue (p. 84), but he overlooks the possibility that they could also reinforce overexpansion even in a multipolar world. Second, although Mearsheimer is an offensive realist who argues that expansion pays in international relations, he acknowledges the strength of nationalist resistance against foreign invasion, which could decrease the benefits of expansionism. It remains to be explained how a rising power could overcome nationalism if expansion is a profitable enterprise. Third, even though Mearsheimer is the most prominent living theorist of structural realism, he explains the last thirty years of U.S. foreign policy through the liberal

theoretical lenses of international relations.[1] Realism as a theory of international relations must provide an explanation of the phenomenon under review to secure its theoretical relevance to current issues in international relations. Finally, the causal relation Mearsheimer establishes between liberal hegemony and U.S. foreign policy is hard to test, since there is no comparative case study in the book in which another ideology is examined as an independent variable in foreign policy decision-making.[2]

John J. Mearsheimer's *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* offers a critical account of post-Cold War U.S. foreign policy and forecasts future U.S. foreign policy. Although Mearsheimer's book suffers from the theoretical and methodological problems mentioned above, it lays the groundwork for future studies not only of U.S. foreign policy but also of theories of international relations. Mearsheimer's plain language appeals to both academics and a wider audience interested in foreign policy and international relations.

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1   William Wohlforth also makes this point in his review of the book, "Roundtable on *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Relations,*" *H-Diplo/ISSF* 11, No 2 (September 23, 2019), https://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/ISSF-Roundtable-11-2.pdf, p. 27.

2   Robert Jervis, "Liberalism, the Blob, and American Foreign Policy: Evidence and Methodology", *Security Studies,* Vol. 29, No 1, 2020, p. 434.