

OFFENSIVE REALISM AND CENTRAL & EASTERN EUROPE AFTER THE COLD WAR

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Abstract¹

At the end of the Cold War, John Mearsheimer published the article, "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War". The widely-cited piece included four predictions for the post-Cold War European geopolitical landscape founded on the theory of offensive realism, the realpolitik approach that Mearsheimer had established and developed over more than a decade of

scholarship. However, the emergence of a post-Cold War and pan-continental peace suggests that something was wrong with Mearsheimer's predictions and, by implication, the theory that informed them. This article argues that Mearsheimer's mistake was to rely on a theory that assumed the international system is anarchic. Instead, if the international system is assumed to be chaotic then it is possible to not only offer clear explanations as to why Mearsheimer's predictions were wrong but also to offer a justification for the order that did indeed emerge.

Introduction

The end of the Cold War and subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union came as a surprise to many international relations theorists. Realists – secure in their models of a stable, peaceful and bipolar Europe – were especially astonished by the fall of, first, the Berlin Wall and, second, the superpower that constructed it. One need only look at the academic press in the weeks and months prior to the Cold War's end to recognize that few realists thought the end of the half-century long conflict was nigh. Major journals published dozens of articles on Soviet doctrine and nuclear balancing, yet barely a handful of these articles dared to question that the established European order may be more fallible and have less traction than common realist notions would admit. When the Wall came down and the collapse of an empire in Central and Eastern Europe

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began, however, realists were among the first to make attempts to describe and then predict the new realities of post-Cold War Europe. Their predictions – rooted in a tradition that to a large extent did and does define the discipline of international relations – would turn out to be far from perfect.

This article provides an examination of these realist arguments and a review of the predictions made by offensive realists at the dawn of the post-Cold War era. Using John Mearsheimer's classic offensive realist treatment, 'Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War', as a framework but also drawing on other realist sources, this article will outline the four potential scenarios predicted by Mearsheimer for Europe in the post-Cold War period. After demonstrating the extent to which all four of these scenarios were, in a relatively short time, shown to be wrong, this article will consider five reasons the wider literature suggests can explain why the realists may have erred. Finding each of the five explanations for predicative failure unconvincing, this article then posits an original sixth: the foundational belief by realists in an anarchical international system and the implications drawn from this base assumption. After demonstrating how this assumption of anarchy might have been responsible for realist errors at the end of the Cold War, this article suggests an alternative conception of the nature of the international system – chaos – that may well have led to better predictions as the long East-West

struggle of the 20th century drew to an end. Concluding the argument, this article argues that offensive realism, realism and international relations theory in general would benefit from a reassessment of its core belief in a foundation of anarchy and be open to alternate and potentially very promising systemic conceptions.

Imaging Europe's post-Cold War Order: A Realist Assessment

While the end of the Cold War prompted many predictions of the future for Europe – and post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe in particular – few could match the influence or provocative prescriptions for policy embodied in John Mearsheimer's 1990 effort, 'Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War'.² Mearsheimer's article not only neatly summarized the prevailing realist opinion on the presumed future of Europe but spawned a number of follow up articles both agreeing and disagreeing with his rather pessimistic conclusions for the peoples of the continent.³ Written just months after the

² John Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War," *International Security* 15, no. 1 (1990): 5-56.

³ For example, see Stanley Hoffman, Robert Keohane and John Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future, Part II: International Relations Theory and Post-Cold War Europe," *International Security* 15, no. 2 (1990): 191-199; Bruce Russett, Thomas Risse-Kappen and John Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future, Part III: Realism and the Realities of

fall of the Berlin Wall and published only months before the Belavezha Accords effectively dissolved the Soviet Union, Mearsheimer's article was a look towards a post-Cold War future after decades of confrontation.⁴ This was not Mearsheimer's first foray into predicting the post-Cold War world: his 'Why We Will Soon Miss the Cold War' had appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly* just prior to the release of the *International Security* piece.⁵ This was, though, a far more considered and Europe-centric assessment of the emerging international order and one that drew together the existing literature and worked from his realist roots to forecast possible futures for the former Cold War battleground of Central and Eastern Europe.

'Back to the Future' is an article in three main parts. The first is a review of what Mearsheimer calls "the long peace" in Europe following the conclusion of World War Two. In this part Mearsheimer outlines the reasons behind this long peace, all of them related to precepts of realism such as the balance of power, stable bipolarity and nuclear deterrence. The second part

European Security," *International Security* 15, no. 3 (1991): 216-222; Stephen Van Evera, "Primed for Peace: Europe after the Cold War," *International Security* 15, no. 3 (1991): 7-57.

⁴ Richard Humphries, "Running on Soviet time," *The Japan Times* (2000): 1-7.

⁵ John Mearsheimer, "Why We Will Soon Miss the Cold War," *The Atlantic Monthly* 266, no. 2 (1990): 35-50.

of Mearsheimer's article considers four possible scenarios for a post-Cold War Europe. In turn, Mearsheimer outlines and assesses a Europe without nuclear weapons, a Europe with nuclear weapons states "on the flanks", a poorly managed nuclear proliferation regime in Europe and, finally, a well-managed nuclear proliferation regime across the continent. Mearsheimer concludes that the first two scenarios are highly unlikely and, of the latter two, the fourth is much preferred. Finally, in the third section of his article Mearsheimer assesses the counter arguments made by those primarily of a liberal-institutionalist perspective who regarded the end of the Cold War optimistically. Specifically, Mearsheimer rejects three key arguments of the post-Cold War optimists and concludes, pessimistically, that "the stability of the past 45 years is not likely to be seen again in the coming decades".⁶ Yet for all of his gloom, his first future scenario is remarkably hopeful.

Scenario One: A Nuclear Free Europe

Mearsheimer notes that there are some within the foreign policy elites of Europe and North America who would seek to make Europe a nuclear weapons-free zone.⁷ Such an outcome would necessarily demand not only a halt to further proliferation but also that

⁶ Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future", 56.

⁷ See also in Robert Hormats, "Redefining Europe and the Atlantic Link," *Foreign Affairs* 68, no. 4 (1989): 88.

the existing European nuclear powers – Britain, France and the Soviet Union – denounce and destroy their existing nuclear capacity.⁸ Mearsheimer argues that this will potentially lead to problems for the states of Europe as the “pacifying effects of nuclear weapons” – the security, caution and rough equality they impose – would be lost.⁹ Such a scenario would leave Europe in much the same way it was between the World Wars: multipolar, subject to shifting alliances and prone to violence. For Central and Eastern Europe this scenario is even grimmer, with Mearsheimer noting that a rising Germany would look jealously to the states which buffer it from the still-strong Soviet Union to its east.¹⁰ Nor would the Soviets do more than withdraw from Eastern Europe temporarily, he argues, as “the historical record provides abundant instances of Russian or Soviet involvement in Eastern Europe” which ebbs and surges over time.¹¹ A nuclear free Europe would be more dangerous for all but particularly the post-socialist states of Eastern Europe which would once again find themselves positioned between two continental powers.¹² Of the four scenarios he offers, Mearsheimer holds the least hope for this particular eventuality.

Scenario Two: The Cold War Nuclear Balance Continues

More plausible – but only just – for Mearsheimer is a second scenario wherein:

Britain, France and the Soviet Union keep their nuclear weapons, but no new nuclear powers emerge in Europe. This scenario sees a nuclear-free zone in Central Europe, but leaves nuclear weapons on Europe’s flanks.¹³

While more likely than pan-European strategic disarmament, Mearsheimer discounts this scenario for the reason that it does not address the incentives for non-nuclear powers to establish arsenals of their own.¹⁴ In particular, he notes that a reunited Germany would likely be eager to develop a nuclear weapons capacity, hardly able to rely on a relatively weaker Poland or Czechoslovakia to protect it from an advancing Soviet force.¹⁵ Furthermore, even those smaller states in Eastern Europe would see good reason to develop their own nuclear arsenals, being unable to match the conventional forces of a reunited Germany or the bordering Soviet state.¹⁶ Thus, Mearsheimer argues, without the enforced stability that nuclear arms provide, Central and Eastern Europe would be a region “made safe for conventional war” – an outcome that

⁸ Mearsheimer, “Back to the Future,” 32.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid, 32-33.

¹¹ Ibid, 33.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid, 35.

¹⁴ Ibid, 36.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

would lead to acute uncertainty, potential miscalculation the rise of dangerously nationalistic forces among the smaller Eastern European states.¹⁷ More likely than scenario one, Mearsheimer eventually dismisses this second scenario as realistically improbable bringing him to the ‘futures of proliferation’ in scenarios three and four.

Scenario Three: Poorly Managed Nuclear Proliferation

Mismanaged proliferation is one of two “most likely” scenarios for the continent post-Cold War.¹⁸ Assuming proliferation will occur (largely for the reasons discussed in the scenario two) a mismanaged process will involve four main dangers for Europe. First, this scenario would offer incentives for the existing nuclear powers to act with force to prevent other states from acquiring the armaments they desire.¹⁹ Second, it is likely the smaller Eastern European states pursuing such weapons would lack the economic resources to ensure survivability, that is, a second strike capability. Such a strategic environment would – in contrast to the Cold War – encourage a potentially devastating first strike policy to emerge in the former Soviet sphere of influence.²⁰ Third, Mearsheimer

assumes the doctrines of existing nuclear powers regarding the use (or non-use) of nuclear weapons may not easily emerge in Eastern Europe in an atmosphere of mismanaged nuclear proliferation. Indeed, he fears that “there will probably be voices in post-Cold War Europe arguing that limited nuclear war is feasible”.²¹ Fourth and finally, this scenario would seem to necessarily imply an increase in the “numbers of fingers on the nuclear trigger” which, according to Mearsheimer, increases the opportunity for accidental launch, accidental war and – one imagines – an accidental nuclear nightmare.²² In the eyes of Mearsheimer, then, although the proliferation of nuclear weapons seems likely, a mismanaged process of proliferation is the first step towards a more dangerous and unstable European state system.

Scenario Four: Well Managed Nuclear Proliferation

Mearsheimer’s fourth scenario can be considered the ‘brighter side’ of nuclear proliferation: a limited, well-managed horizontal proliferation of arms with the aim of securing Central Europe from the dangers of rampant arms races and pan-European proliferation. Mearsheimer suggests this scenario would see arms extended to a reunited Germany but no further. He argues:

¹⁷ Ibid, 35-36.

¹⁸ Ibid, 37.

¹⁹ Ibid. The historical parallel provided is Israel acting with force against Iraq to prevent that state from establishing a nuclear capacity.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid, 38.

²² Ibid.

Germany will feel insecure without nuclear weapons; and Germany's great conventional strength gives it significant capacity to disturb Europe if it feels insecure. Other states – especially in Eastern Europe – may also want nuclear weapons, but it would be best to prevent further proliferation.²³

In this scenario of limited nuclear proliferation dangers would still exist. However, in comparison to the mismanaged proliferation of the previous scenario, the dangers would be much reduced. Adding only Germany to the list of nuclear states in Europe would be a necessary decision to balance the perceived threat by Western and Soviet powers in Central Europe. It would, though, require the existing nuclear states to undermine their own Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and to actively support another state party to the treaty to violate its core principles.²⁴ Even an externally-focused realist such as Mearsheimer sees the likelihood of domestic opposition to such a move by France, Britain or the Soviet Union, hence allowing him to conclude that while this is the best possible scenario for post-Cold War Europe, it is not one that can be completely controlled by the nuclear states.

²³ Ibid. Mearsheimer supports this conclusion regarding the Eastern European states for the same reasons he outlines in scenario three.

²⁴ Ibid, 40.

In his four scenarios, then, Mearsheimer provides a realist's take on four potential futures for post-Cold War Europe. Including the unlikely nuclear free zone and the idealistic well-managed proliferation regime alongside a status-quo and proliferation free-for-all allows Mearsheimer to cover the spectrum from the diplomatic triumph (scenario one) to the brink of a third major pan-continental war in a century (scenario three). Yet for all of what Mearsheimer admits may be considered "pessimistic analysis" by students of European politics, his predictions and scenarios were soon to be found displaced from the reality that emerged. Departing Mearsheimer's predicative realm, an examination of what did happen demonstrates how wrong all four of Mearsheimer's scenarios proved to be.

The Post-Cold War Reality in Europe

For all the near-apocalyptic scenarios that emerged in everything from Tom Clancy novels to scientific studies of 'nuclear winter', the Cold War ended relatively peacefully. As historian Richard Hellie notes, the final days of the Cold War and of the Soviet Union mirrored those of the Russian Empire itself in 1917: both "collapsed almost without a whimper".²⁵ In November 1989 as the Berlin Wall fell and Eastern European states lobbied for free and competitive elections, the Soviet Union

²⁵ Richard Hellie, "The Structure of Russian Imperial History," *History and Theory* 44, no.4 (2005): 88.

began a process of withdrawing from its former satellite states. 1990 saw Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia declare independence from the Soviet Union. Almost a year later Germany was reunited and just months after Belarus, Ukraine and Russia signed the Belavezha Accords, effectively consigning the Soviet Union to history. Months of debate, media speculation and public discontent eventually led to a coup attempt in Moscow and the Christmas Day 1991 resignation of Mikhail Gorbachev as General Secretary of the Soviet Union. The hammer and sickle banner of a twentieth century superpower would fly for the last time over the Kremlin on New Years Eve 1991. The Cold War had ended and, in doing so, provoked “the most important historical divide in half a century”.²⁶ It did not, however, provoke a nuclear-free Europe, a dangerous and unstable status quo or proliferation, well managed or otherwise.

Indeed, as the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall approaches, the transition from the Cold War’s bipolar ‘balance of terror’ to entrenched, peaceful, pan-continental institutionalism has been remarkable. With the very notable exceptions of post-Cold War Yugoslav and Kosovo conflicts, the transition from a divided, Cold War Europe to a largely integrated twenty-seven state European Union has

²⁶ G. John Ikenberry and Daniel Deudney, “Who Won the Cold War?,” *Foreign Policy* 87 (1992): 123.

been a peaceful one. There were no nuclear exchanges and, indeed, states such as Belarus and the Ukraine were happy to relieve themselves of the nuclear arsenals the Cold War had forced upon them. Germany neither desired nor sought a nuclear weapons capacity and – less than a decade after the end of the Cold War – passed the Nuclear Exit Law to retire even its civilian nuclear power stations. In terms of nuclear proliferation, the post-Cold War strategic environment in Europe has been distinguished not by its instability and inherent dangers, as Mearsheimer imagined, but by a stability, economic growth and peace that characterises the European Union today. To be blunt, when it came to the post-Cold War reality of Central, Eastern and Western Europe, realists like John Mearsheimer got it almost completely wrong. One must wonder, then, why these experienced analysts and distinguished scholars concluded so poorly.

Five Reasons Why Mearsheimer Got It Wrong

John Mearsheimer never discounts the possibility that predicting the future of social and political systems is fraught with danger. Indeed, he acknowledges such in the opening pages of his article:

...political phenomena are highly complex; hence precise political predictions are impossible without very powerful theoretical tools, superior to those we now possess. As a result, all political

forecasting is bound to include some error.²⁷

Further, Mearsheimer is keen to reproduce the existing counter-arguments to his four scenarios, listing three – Europe ‘learning from history’ to avoid war, economic integration making conflict virtually impossible and the thesis of ‘democratic peace’ – as “alternative theories that predict peace” in post-Cold War Europe.²⁸ With hindsight we can add two others: a focus overly concentrated on nuclear weapons and a notion that the Soviet Union would not collapse in the wake of the significant changes in European politics post-1991. In these five counter-arguments we find potential explanation for the failure of Mearsheimer’s four scenarios to emerge, yet, as will become clear, we do not find that any of them can completely explain why the post-Cold War continent did not more closely resemble Mearsheimer’s precarious predictions.

In considering the first counter argument considered by Mearsheimer, it is possible to reflect on the words of Georg Hegel: what experience and history teach is this – that nations and governments have never learned anything from history, or acted upon any lessons they might have drawn from it. The realist, though, rightly rejects this thesis on the basis of

evidence alone, Mearsheimer arguing that:

[t]here is no systematic evidence demonstrating that Europeans believe war is obsolete. However, even if it were widely believed in Europe that war is no longer thinkable, attitudes could change...Moreover, only one country need decide war is thinkable to make war possible again.²⁹

Thus, like Hegel, Mearsheimer argues that not only is there no evidence Europeans have learnt the costs of war from history but – even if they have – it takes only one state “responsive to elite manipulation and world events” to turn the continent from a post-Cold War utopia back towards the brutal reality of the first half of the twentieth century.³⁰ The parallels between this ‘learning from history’ notion and the prevailing attitude after the “Great War” of 1914-1918 are clear. Mearsheimer’s realist antecedent EH Carr in his canonical *The Twenty Years Crisis* wrote of the presumed historical education and Europe’s “common interest in peace” in the wake of World War I but, significantly, noted that such arguments “did not seem particularly convincing” to all, especially the Germans for whom the wars of 1866 and 1870 had proved greatly profitable.³¹ Simply put, the history of Europe pre- and post-Cold

²⁷ Mearsheimer, “Back to the Future,” 9.

²⁸ Ibid, 40.

²⁹ Ibid, 41.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Edward Hallett Carr, *The Twenty Years Crisis*. (Hampshire: Palgrave, 2001), 50.

War does not suggest that any learning had taken place and Mearsheimer was quite right to reject the notion as any realist, here we can also include Kenneth Waltz, would do.³²

The argument that economic integration will lead to a peaceful post-Cold War Europe is also questioned by Mearsheimer – and with good cause. This objection is founded on a theory that “rejects the notion that the prospects for peace are tightly linked to calculations of military power” and instead posits that “stability is mainly a function of international economic considerations”.³³ Considering the pre-World War I European order where, as James Lothian recalls, “the securities and foreign exchange markets...were among the most integrated that the world has seen”, it is easy to see why Mearsheimer and other realists might not be convinced.³⁴ Despite the European world enjoying, for example, “a degree of internationalization...without precedent”, a devastating conflict which would become known as the War to End All Wars broke out in 1914.³⁵

³² Kenneth Waltz, “Structural Realism after the Cold War,” *International Security* 25, no.1 (2000): 8.

³³ Mearsheimer, “Back to the Future,” 42.

³⁴ James Lothian, “Financial Integration over the Past Three Centuries,” *Independent Institute Working Paper No. 26*, Oakland, California (2001): 3.

³⁵ Rondo Cameron, “Introduction,” in *International Banking 1870-1914*, ed. Rondo Cameron and V.I. Bovykin. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 3.

Mearsheimer suggests that this economic liberalist logic fails now as then for two primary reasons: first, it overestimates the ease of cooperation between states in an anarchic system where competition for security is rife; second, it fails to consider that interdependence is likely to lead to conflict because of the vulnerability interdependence engenders.³⁶ Whether pre-Great War or post-Cold War, Mearsheimer argues that economic liberalism and association economic integration and interdependence did not and will not save Europe from war.

Mearsheimer’s third potential counter-argument can be described simply as the democratic peace thesis.³⁷ This counter-argument holds that democracies are not less likely to go to war; however they do not go to war with other democracies. Thus, if all states in Europe are democratic, war between them will be a thing of history. It is history, though, that presents the biggest stumbling block for this thesis. As fellow realist Kenneth Waltz notes, despite being held as an absolute rule in international relations by some, it fails the test of history when specific cases including US interventions in the Dominican Republic, Chile and even “democratic England and France” fighting “democratic Germany” in 1914 are considered.³⁸ Mearsheimer himself refers to four clear problems with the

³⁶ Mearsheimer, “Back to the Future,” 44-45.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 48-51.

³⁸ Waltz, “Structural Realism,” 6-13.

democratic peace thesis: first, with such a small number of democracies from which to extrapolate a theory, it is hard to find a time when democracies were actually in a position to fight each other even if they had wanted to; second, where democracies have been close to conflict there exist adequate reasons for the failure to fight that need no reference to the governance model of the states involved; third, Mearsheimer contends that where existing realist explanations do not completely explain the failure to fight, it may be down to chance alone that rival democracies did not engage each other militarily (as with Britain and France in Fashoda); fourth and finally, the thesis would seem to fail alone if Wilhelmine Germany – considered a democracy by some – is included among the democratic regimes, in which case, World War I is a stark reminder that democratic states are willing to turn to violence and war.³⁹

To Mearsheimer's three potential counter-arguments, this article takes advantage of all the benefits of hindsight to add a further two. First, it is clear from the four scenarios Mearsheimer presents that there is much focus on the role of nuclear weapons and their assumed capacity as

the key strategic drivers on the continent post-Cold War. This seems to have been rather overestimated by Mearsheimer and critical elements of his analysis – including the continued references to a reunited Germany's desire for nuclear arms – today seems misplaced. Indeed, considering the strict anti-nuclear laws that the German state endorses today, it is difficult to reconcile the certainty of Mearsheimer's pronouncements on Central Europe's great power and the move to a post-nuclear future underfoot in Germany today. Mearsheimer's focus on nuclear arms is understandable, particularly after nearly half a century of nuclear standoff between the superpowers, where Central and Eastern Europe would have been nuclear battlegrounds. Yet at the same time this focus on nuclear strategy may have resulted in the author underestimating the influence of sub-strategic factors, including popular opinion in the post-socialist regions of the continent.

Finally, the Mearsheimer of 1991 betrays the almost paradigm-wide belief in the continued existence of the Soviet Union as a state power, if no longer a superpower with a significant Eastern European sphere of influence. Though realists had come to accept the withdrawal from Central and Eastern Europe by the USSR as logical and even offered explanations for such with regards to the economic and political overreach of the Soviet regime, to argue that the Soviet Union would cease to exist in the months following the publication of Mearsheimer's article

³⁹ Mearsheimer is right to reject Michael Doyle's counter-claim that Wilhelmine Germany does not satisfy the democratic standard. See Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future," 51. Also Michael Doyle, 'Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs.' *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 12, no. 3 (1983): 205-235.

was far from a common realist position.⁴⁰ Pronouncements like that of former Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev who once promised the West, “whether you like it or not, history is on our side...we will live to bury you in your grave!” today exists only as the prototypical empty threat: strong words from a country that would prove to be relatively weak.⁴¹ The inability of realists like Mearsheimer to imagine a world where the Soviet Union no longer existed may help to explain why the scenarios that he and others put forward in 1991 and 1992 were to fail so spectacularly.

Yet a focus on the potential endurance of the Soviet state – even coupled with the other four factors – cannot really account for the magnitude of Mearsheimer’s predicative misstep. It is possible, though, to seek what underlies both Mearsheimer’s predictions and also each of the counter arguments he, others and, indeed, this article offer. In international relations terms it is a foundational assumption of realists and liberalists, a concept neatly summarised in a single word but with overwhelming implications for the assessment of states and actors in the European and wider

⁴⁰ Even Stanley Hoffman, who was very critical of Mearsheimer’s conclusions in the article, could only imagine a different role for the Soviet’s than a world without the Soviet Union altogether. See Hoffman, Keohane and Mearsheimer, “Back to the Future, Part II,” 191-192.

⁴¹ In Arthur Schlesinger, “Foreign Policy and the American Character,” *Foreign Affairs* 62, no.1 (1983): 7.

international system: anarchy. A staple ordering principle for realists like Mearsheimer, an anarchical system underlies prototypical realist scholarship stretching from the ancient historian Thucydides through to Mearsheimer and Waltz writing in the period after the decades-long conflict. The following section will identify the strength of this notion in the realist literature – first within the classical tradition and, second, within Waltz’s structural or neorealism – before moving to a consideration of anarchy’s place in Mearsheimer’s four futures of post-Cold War Europe. This section will then suggest why the assumption of anarchy will necessarily lead to questionable conclusions should it not, in reality, be the nature of the international system and, in closing the section, an alternative conception of the ordering principle of the international system will be offered which, for this article, better accounts for the post-Cold War reality on the continent and – by implication – elsewhere in the international system.

Mearsheimer’s Wrong Turn: The Place and Nature of Anarchy in Offensive Realism and in *Back to the Future*

Before turning to the specifics of Mearsheimer’s predictions in *Back to the Future*, it is useful to first investigate the place, role and nature of anarchy in the wider paradigm of realism. Robert Powell offers a concise explanation for the term in a 1994 article where he states:

No agency exists above individual states with authority and power to make laws and settle disputes. States can make commitments and treaties, but no sovereign power ensures compliance and punishes deviation. This – the absence of a supreme power – is what is meant by the anarchic environment of international politics.⁴²

Anarchy in classical realism is not to be associated with principles of domestic political organization espoused by persons like Noam Chomsky or Howard Zinn; rather it is a description of the international political environment which is held to be constant and – dependent on the realist – has a varying effect on the conduct of international actors. The historian Thucydides, for example, outlines the inherent threat that *any* state in an anarchic system presents to every other state by virtue of its existence.⁴³ In time this recognition of the intrinsic threat offered by all states to all others would come to be a central feature of realist-described anarchy, particularly for the so-called offensive realists.⁴⁴ Other classical

⁴² Robert Powell, “Anarchy in international relations theory: the neorealist-neoliberal debate,” *International Organization* 48, no.2 (1994): 330.

⁴³ See Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*. (New York: Prometheus Books, 1998), 167-176.

⁴⁴ Jeffrey Taliaferro, “Security Seeking Under Anarchy: Defensive Realism Revisited,” *International Security* 25, no.3 392

realists would support the conclusions of Thucydides, among them the political philosophers Nicolas Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes, diplomat cum scholar Edward Hallett Carr and classical realism’s most eloquent author, Hans Morgenthau – particularly in his canonical work *Politics among Nations*.⁴⁵ All would speak to the nature of the international political environment as anarchical and,

(2001): 128. See also John Mearsheimer, “Conversations in International Relations – Interview with John J. Mearsheimer (Part I),” *International Relations* 20, no.1 (2006): 120: “The reason for this tragic situation is that states cannot discern the intentions of other states with a high degree of confidence. Moreover, it is almost impossible to know the future intentions of other states. Therefore, leaders have little choice but to assume worst case about other great powers’ intentions. The reason for believing the worst is that there is no higher authority that states can turn to if they guess wrong about another state’s intentions. States operate in an anarchic system, which means that they have nobody to turn to if they assume that another state has benign intentions, but that judgment proves wrong. As I said in my book, if you dial 911 in the international system, there is nobody at the other end.”

⁴⁵ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. P. Bondanella. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*. (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2004); Edward Hallett Carr, *The Twenty Years Crisis 1919-1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations*. (New York: Palgrave, 2001); Hans Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*. 6th edition. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993).

relying on this conclusion, compose theories and policy recommendations for the actions of city-states, kings and – later – states and superpowers alike.⁴⁶ The commitment to anarchy across the work of classical realist scholars is absolute and in time their collected works would go on to inspire the emergence of the neorealist thesis so different in form to the classical position but with an even stronger embrace of anarchy as a founding principle.

Emerging from classical realism in the second half of the twentieth-century and largely from the work of Kenneth Waltz was structural or neorealism.⁴⁷ Like his classical realist forebears, Waltz highlighted anarchy as the ordering principle of the international system but his emphasis was both stronger and more direct. Neorealism systematized anarchy, making it not only an assumption but a starting point for theorizing a system scientifically.⁴⁸ From this foundational point Waltz and

⁴⁶ Though the *subjects* of international affairs have changed with the evolution of world politics, for realists the *nature* of the international system remains the same.

⁴⁷ See Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*. (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1979); Kenneth Waltz, *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

⁴⁸ Indeed, the funding which enabled Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* was from the National Science Foundation which recognized that scientific approach that Waltz was attempting to graft to the analysis of international politics.

others were able to establish why states will attempt to balance the power in the system among themselves, why the British strategy of balancing against continental powers was more successful than Italian bandwagoning and why nuclear weapons brought a long-term peace to a system that had for centuries been one of conflict between the major state powers.⁴⁹ Neorealists point to the inherent weakness of international institutions in the midst of an anarchic realm. Drawing their limited powers to arbitrate disputes from the willingness of state actors to cede minimal sovereignty to them, such institutions rely on the good will of naturally competitive and relative-gains attuned actors. This is why, in the eyes of many neorealists, international institutions remain the pipe dream of liberal institutionalists who fail to truly recognize the impact anarchic order has on states.

Mearsheimer's article, of course, was written well after Thucydides' Athenian histories and well after Waltz's neorealism had been clearly outlined in the 1979 classic, *Theory of International Politics*. As a realist, his commitment to an anarchic system is fundamental to his interpretative and predicative efforts, as can be evidenced through not only his four future scenarios but also his rejection of arguments countering his conclusions. Consider, for example, his rejection of

⁴⁹ See Kenneth Waltz, "The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May Be Better," *Adelphi Papers* 171 (1981): 1-32.

the democratic peace thesis which might predict a future free from conflict in Europe. Mearsheimer's argument at its most basic is that the internal political organization of a state has no significant effect on the behavior of that state in international politics.⁵⁰ Thus, it matters little whether one speaks of pre-World War II Germany or post-Cold War Germany, the essential goals and conditions facing German foreign policymakers remain – like its geography, relative size and relative access to human resources – unchanged under anarchy. No matter that the manner of government has moved from dictatorship through decades of division and then on to democracy, the underlying reality of the German state in anarchy remains the same: to the East and West are threats to Germany that no political system can overcome through the goodwill of voters in that or other states alone. The assumption of anarchy as the systems organizing principle exists also in his rejection of economic interdependence as the harbinger of peace. He also turns to history as proof positive that the anarchy existing in nineteenth century Europe led to instability and conflict and did not dissipate with time. Indeed, even the counter arguments he presents are founded on that same anarchical assumption, economic liberalism and interdependence, for example, being presented as a way to overcome international anarchy. Like these

counter arguments and like Morgenthau and Waltz before him, Mearsheimer had embraced anarchy as the base reality in international relations and – upon this base – had constructed a future that would surely see war return to the great powers of Europe.⁵¹

Yet what if the system is not anarchic? That is, what if the ordering principle – and the foundational principle of the paradigm of realism – is not what realists and others assume it to be? Could this not be the reason, as opposed to the liberal institutionalist counter arguments outlined above, that the realist predictions for post-Cold War Central and Eastern Europe such as Mearsheimer's proved so wrong? As the axiomatic principle professed jointly by classical and structural realists alike, if it is proved to be incorrect then it follows that there exists a significant possibility that predictions based on such an axiom are also wrong. In analogical terms, if one states that that in mathematics $2 + 2$ and 2^2 are both equal to four and, therefore, $2x = x^2$ in every situation will surely make errors as integers other than 2 are tested. An error in calculation does not necessarily imply an error in a foundational axiom; however, where there *is* an error in a foundational axiom errors in predictions based upon this axiom are sure to emerge. In the case of

⁵⁰ See discussion of states as “like units” in Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 93-97.

⁵¹ Mearsheimer, “Conversation,” 121: “In brief, the two key factors that underpin the tragic nature of international politics are *anarchy* and uncertainty about the intentions of other states” (emphasis added).

the pessimistic predictions of realists for post-Cold War Central and Eastern Europe, this is exactly what this article holds to have occurred. An error as basic as the arithmetic allegory offered herein is to blame for Mearsheimer's errors, the error being, specifically, presenting the international system as anarchic.

The international system, though, must be able to be described in some way. That is to say, the *nature* of the system – as opposed to its polarity, alliances between states or balance of power – must be described in some way. Building on previous work by the author of this article, as well as emerging scholarship in international relations meta-theory, the alternate ordering principle is suggested here to be a complexly interdependent chaotic system. The following section will first describe such a system in relation to international affairs, outline the significant elements of such a system and contrast them to the assumptions of anarchy before suggesting how such an assumption could have helped in predicting the post-Cold War continent. Finally, it will suggest that this alternate conception of the international system shows particular promise for theorizing international relations. In short, this section will announce and outline not only the potential utility of the assumption of a complexly interdependent international system but suggest that this is indeed the direction international relations theory should be and is taking.

A Complexly Interdependent and Chaotic System

Despite the emergence of chaos in the scientific literature only in the latter half of the twentieth century it has, in some senses, been recognized by humanity for far longer than this. James Gleick, citing George Herbert and Norman Wiener, recalls the quotation:

For want of a nail, the shoe was lost;
For want of a shoe, the horse was lost;
For want of a horse, the rider was lost;
For want of a rider, the battle was lost;
For want of a battle, the kingdom was lost!⁵²

As the author of the verse recognizes, small events can have a large impact on affairs of much greater importance. This speaks to one of the core distinctions between an anarchic and a chaotic system: whereas the anarchic system compels realists to identify the largest and most powerful elements (states and great powers) and consider the role they play in shaping the world, a chaotic system demands that the smaller and seemingly insignificant elements of the system are assessed for the potential impact they may have on the wider systemic environment.⁵³

⁵² James Gleick, *Chaos: Making a New Science*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 23. The original verse is variously attributed to either John Gower or Benjamin Franklin.

⁵³ See Gleick, *Chaos*, 11-37.

Thus, analysis of a chaotic system that relies only on significant realist elements (states, nuclear weapons and grand strategy) will fail to comprehend the complexity that permits even small events to have a significant, system-wide impact.⁵⁴

Such small events have been suggested to have had wider impacts in my 2006 article, ‘The Balkan Bullet with Butterfly Wings’.⁵⁵ This article suggested that by reconsidering the events leading up to the outbreak of World War I as taking place in a chaotic, rather than anarchic, system, alternate explanations for the outbreak of war in Europe emerge, explanations previously ignored in the realist and wider disciplinary literature.⁵⁶ Where the standard realist analysis of the events surrounding the outbreak of war in the Balkans focused almost entirely on the actions of states and their entangling alliances, I offered an individual and unit level assessment of the pre-war environment which takes into account significant enabling factors including Serbian nationalism and imperial politics under the Austro-Hungarian regime to explain the origins of World War One. My conclusions – which are impossible to reach with the assumption of an anarchic international political system and the associated assessment of major powers that such

an assumption implies – indicated the potential utility of examining international politics through a chaotic prism.

As in that article, the important elements of a chaotic system spawning such explanations are described as relating to three key points: first, the complex and time-sensitive dependence of the system; second, the aforementioned potential importance of minor permutations on the wider system; and third, the impossibility of long term prediction.⁵⁷ The first point suggests that chaotic systems are fundamentally sensitive to when events occur and that even a seemingly unimportant delay in action by an actor in the system – a period that might be measured in days, hours or even minutes – can have significant effect on the shape and nature of the system in the period that follows. The second point is key to understanding chaotic systems and, in doing so, rejecting the notion that big events (for example wars, alliances and treaties) are caused by big actors and big actions. It is here that the analogy of the butterfly whose short flight can be responsible for causing a hurricane on the other side of the world – the so-called “butterfly effect” – emerges. With regards to the international political system, the “butterfly” might be a local warlord in Afghanistan, a banking executive in Singapore or any one of the other billions of people whose actions and interactions combine

⁵⁴ Dylan Kissane, “The Balkan Bullet with Butterfly Wings,” *Central European University Political Science Journal* 1, no.4 (2006a): 100-101.

⁵⁵ Kissane. “Balkan Bullet”.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 98-99.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 94.

to form humanity's system. Finally, understanding that long term prediction is impossible under chaos – the third point listed above – suggests that predictions like Mearsheimer's should not be made at all. Indeed, while it is common for theorists to make predictions about the future of state relations under international anarchy, theorists working from a chaotic perspective have to accept that predictions of the long term shape of international politics are little better than the weather forecaster who proclaims that tomorrow will be warm because yesterday and today were warm, too.⁵⁸

These basic elements combine to describe a system far removed from realist anarchy, particularly in regard to the actors assessed and the long-term rationality that realism assumes for those actors.⁵⁹ Significantly, they do not rule out domestic factors contributing to international events nor international acts impacting upon domestic political organization. In the case of the post-Cold War landscape of Central and Eastern Europe, such a difference is

⁵⁸ The weather analogy is apt here, arising as chose does from the research of meteorologists (cf.53).

⁵⁹ That realists assume states are rational actors in an international system is beyond doubt. See, for example, Paul Huth, Christopher Gelpi and D. Scott Bennett, "The Escalation of Great Power Militarized Disputes: Testing Rational Deterrence Theory and Structural Realism," *The American Political Science Review* 87, no.3 (1993): 610.

significant, opening up the possibility for local events to take on regional significance and for international expectations to shape domestic agendas.

Had Mearsheimer assumed a chaotic system rather than an anarchic one, he may well have noted the strong local pressure in European states against further proliferation of nuclear weapons and taken into account the wishes of newly-independent populations alongside his amoral assessments of nuclear strategy in Eastern Europe.⁶⁰ Further, he could have considered the movements for democratic change in the Soviet Union not as mere domestic squabbles but as the harbingers of the collapse of a superpower, the small, localized uprisings in the Baltic States foreshadowing a more radical change in the global balance of power.⁶¹ He might have noted the individual-level 'pull' factor of free market capitalism and the associated availability of consumer

⁶⁰ Consider the Robin Wood group in Germany, the Romanian Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, Ukrainian Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War or IPPNW Georgia – all of who protest against nuclear proliferation in Central and Eastern Europe in the post-Cold War period.

⁶¹ See Frans von Geusau, *The Sprit of 1989: Europe on the Threshold of a New Era?* The Fourteenth Corbishley Memorial Lecture, Wyndham Place Trust, 7 June 1990, <http://www.wpct.co.uk/lectures/1990.htm>; Steven Sowards, *The failure of Balkan Communism and the causes of the Revolutions of 1989*. Lecture presented at the Michigan State University, http://www.lib.msu.edu/sowards/balkan/lect_24.htm.

goods in Western Europe as potential peace builders, not so quickly rejecting the counter-argument of economic liberalism.⁶² Indeed, that counter-argument does not need to be held true in a chaotic system either for assessing one factor – economic liberalism and interdependence – alone is contrary to the implied importance of *all* factors in a truly complexly interdependent chaotic environment.

Mearsheimer might have considered the sub-national independence groups pushing for democratic changes and closer ties to the West as more significant than his state-based, anarchical reality would allow. Where he and other realists concentrated on the proliferation of nuclear arms and the logic of strategic nuclear balancing it would have been possible – assuming a chaotic system – to assess the growing popularity of these sub-national groups and their ability to force change in former Soviet republics. Furthermore, while the logic of anarchy which forced Mearsheimer to label as ‘impossible’ a scenario which included a disarming European continent, chaos urges the theorist to consider the likelihood of large and small actions promoting the disarming of Eastern European states

⁶² Indeed, one report on news site EurActive went so far as to describe the post-Cold War landscape as Central and Eastern Europe “queuing to join and an internal market in goods and services which cements European peace with the glue of economic interdependence”. EurActive, *European Peace and European Union*. [9 May 2005] <http://tinyurl.com/2z5qn2>.

Belarus and the Ukraine.⁶³ In short, by limiting analysis to state actors, to nuclear strategy, to great powers and by assuming that states would choose the ‘rational’ path – all of which are demanded by a realism founded upon anarchy – the smaller, sub-national but significantly influential events that would result in all of Mearsheimer’s scenarios failing to eventuate are effectively ignored. What chaos opens the theorist’s eyes to is blocked out by founding a thesis and predictions on anarchy, a starker example of which cannot be found than Mearsheimer’s post-Cold War futures for Central and Eastern Europe.

It is, however, one thing to suggest that chaos is a legitimate ordering principle to assume for the international system and to intimate that the conclusions of realists are wrong because the chaos of the system is ignored. It is quite another entirely to construct an alternate theory of the detail and richness of the realism of John Mearsheimer. Indeed, as it stands, there is no fully outlined theory of international politics based upon the assumption of a chaotic system. There are, though, movements in that direction within the literature. Besides the ‘Balkan Bullet’ article referenced above, I have outlined in a second paper – ‘Beyond Anarchy and Interdependence’ – various objections

⁶³ See Christopher Fettweis, *Dividing the Empire: Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan and the Collapse of the Red Army*. Program on General Disarmament Issue Brief 1, University of Maryland (2000).

to assumptions of anarchy in international relations theory and outlined some assumptions about what a possible chaotic theory might entail.⁶⁴ As well – and significantly, considering the direction that such a theory would take – I outlined the specific problems that such a shift from anarchy to chaos would entail. The problems I outlined were later considered independently and in more detail by another researcher, Shu-Yun Ma.⁶⁵ Ma highlighted the same sticking points on the way to a new understanding of the international system, adding two others to the list I had produced.⁶⁶ Thus, while a chaotic theory of international relations cannot be held to exist or to have been sketched completely, the discipline is seeing the beginnings of a turn from anarchy to other systemic ordering principles, including chaos, in the theoretical literature.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Dylan Kissane, *Beyond Anarchy and Interdependence: New Thinking about an Old System*. Paper presented at the *Order and Disorder in a Changing World* conference, American Graduate School of International Relations and Diplomacy, 19-20 June 2006.

⁶⁵ Shu-Yun Ma, “Political Science at the Edge of Chaos? The Paradigmatic Implications of Historical Institutionalism,” *International Political Science Review* 28, no.1 (2007): 57-78.

⁶⁶ Kissane, “Beyond Anarchy,” 20-23; Ma, “Political Science,” 71-73.

⁶⁷ As well as the fundamental theoretical implications I addressed and the challenges presented to existing understandings of the international system by historical institutionalist positions considered by Ma, the assumption of a non-anarchic system

Conclusion

On the edge of the post-Cold War world realists – like liberalists, journalists and interested individuals worldwide – were keen to make predictions about the future to come. Some were optimistic while others, like John Mearsheimer’s, were admittedly pessimistic. A European continent divided between nuclear powers in the West and East, tracts of Eastern Europe ripe for conventional wars between a re-united Germany and a still-powerful Soviet Union, an impossible peace and a Europe less stable than it had been for any time since the end of World War II.

also suggests that this new research program could include elements and assumptions common to post-internationalist thought. In particular, the work of James Rosenau – with his assessment of state and non-state actors in a time of changing world orders – is especially illuminating on the construction of a new prism through which the international system might be viewed. Key texts by Rosenau would include James Rosenau, *Turbulence in World Politics: A Theory of Change and Continuity*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); James Rosenau and Ernst-Otto Czempiel (eds.), *Governance Without Government: Order and Change in World Politics*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). An overview and critique of Rosenau’s post-internationalist paradigm is found in Heidi Hobbs, *Pondering Postinternationalism: A Paradigm for the Twenty-First Century?* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2000). I am grateful to two anonymous reviewers for their suggestion to more closely examine Rosenau and his post-internationalist position.

With hindsight it is easy to conclude that Mearsheimer got it wrong but explaining *why* he was wrong is not easily achieved with the standard counter-realist arguments. Indeed, Mearsheimer is right to reject them in his article and his charges against them remain valid a decade and a half later. Yet when both realist scenarios and the arguments against them are founded on the same assumption – anarchy – it should be clear why the latter cannot explain the mistakes in the former. What *can* assist here is a new assumption, a new founding point; in short, assessing the argument of Mearsheimer on its own incorrect terms is no way to discover the truth about why post-Cold War Europe appears the way it does – what is needed is a new perspective.

Assuming a chaotic system is just the sort of assumption that can assist in explaining the realist errors and the world that emerged after a long, cold European conflict. Better able to recognize the importance of sub-national and individual level motivations and their implications for the system as a whole, less bound to great powers and grand strategy as the basic tools of analysis, less constrained by anarchic logic and less likely to overestimate the influence of nuclear weapons on states in a post-Cold War world, this single changed assumption allows for explanations that anarchy-based theories simply cannot. While no thesis, no theory in total is outlined herein, reference to the literature indicates the door is beginning to open

to such alternate explanations and theories. The limitations of theories based on anarchy are clearly shown in the failure of realists like Mearsheimer to predict the future in a chaotic system. While it is clear that realism, liberalism and even constructivism are not likely to be moved from their popular status as ‘theories of choice’ for international relations scholars, the end of the Cold War in Central and Eastern Europe at least provides an opportunity to consider other approaches and to catch a glimpse of the potential of an alternate paradigm in this discipline of truly international importance.

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