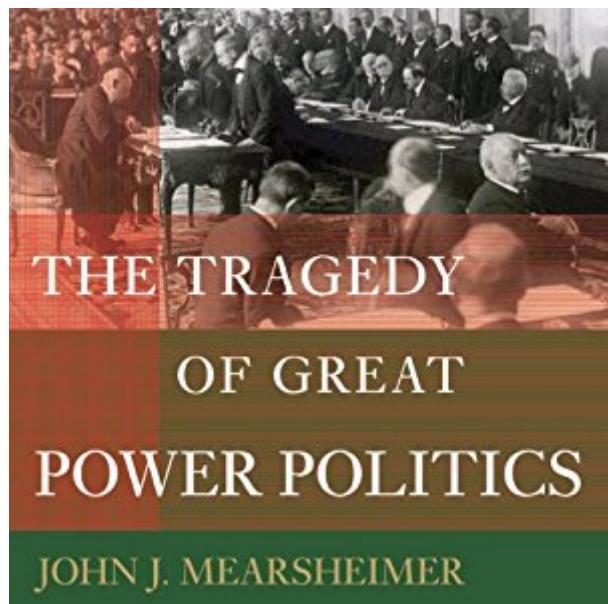


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The Tragedy Of Great Power Politics



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

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 16 hours and 14 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Audible Studios

Audible.com Release Date: July 11, 2013

Language: English

ASIN: B00D27AIAK

Best Sellers Rank: #120 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > Politics & Current Events > International Relations #248 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > Politics & Current Events > Freedom & Security #529 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > International & World Politics > Security

Customer Reviews

Those of us who are familiar with John Mearsheimer's illuminating and provocative work have been waiting quite a few years for him to put all his thoughts together in one coherent and all-encompassing book. The wait is finally over, and the result does not disappoint. Mearsheimer has written what is sure to be the standard text for the Realist paradigm for years to come. It is clear that he is in fact trying to place himself in the Realist cannon as the logical successor to Morgenthau and Waltz. Whereas Morgenthau could not explain why states are driven to be as aggressive as they are, and Waltz's Defensive Realism did not adequately describe the constant struggle for

power among states, Mearsheimer's Offensive Realism claims to explain both. States are aggressive due to the anarchic nature of the state system, which leads them to not only seek to ensure their survival, but to also try to acquire power at every opportunity possible. Mearsheimer's lengthy volume is divided roughly into two parts. The first half is the theoretical section, in which he presents his Offensive Realist theory in detail, along with an explanation of how to measure state power (population and wealth). Also included in this part is an entire chapter called "The Primacy of Land Power," in which he not only tries to explain why land power is the most important, but also goes into the limits of sea and air power, and the limited effectiveness of blockades and strategic bombing campaigns. It is somewhat surprising that these issues have generally been overlooked by IR theorists until now. Hopefully that will no longer be the case. The second half of the book is more empirical, including the histories of all the recent Great Powers, focusing on why and how they have been aggressive in their foreign affairs.

First off, the book is very easy to get through - the primary theoretical points are clearly laid out and easy to understand, the selected empirical evidence is interesting, and the style is fluid and coherent. This is the strength of realist theory - clarity of thought, and results in a much more enjoyable read than something by a radical-constructivist or critical theorist. The disagreement over theory is clear from the wide range of ratings in the reviews, but I'd like to briefly cover some of the issues brought up by other reviewers. Offensive realism, as posited by Mearsheimer is NOT a rehash of Waltz's structural realism but rather adds some important new elements to realist theory. As a result, it is still susceptible to some of the critiques of realist theory in general but also adds new theoretical problems. Mearsheimer uses Waltz' assumptions on the anarchic nature of the international system and its implication for state behaviour but goes in a very different direction. Using the same assumptions, Waltz believes great powers will essentially be status-quo and defensive while Mearsheimer believes they will be revisionist and aggressive power-maximizers. Mearsheimer thus can avoid the argument against Waltz's defensive realist theory that it leaves no room for transformation of the international system. The potential for conflict is a direct result of the distribution of power in the anarchic system. The assumptions used by both are by no means "given" and disagreement over them has come from liberal institutionalists, the English School, and the various subsets of constructivist theory.

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