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The Tragedy Of Great Power Politics (Updated Edition)

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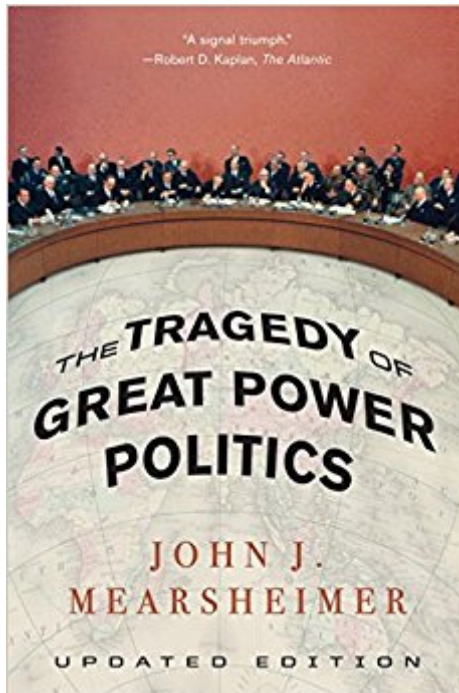
Synopsis

"A superb book.Ã¢â ¬Â|Mearsheimer has made a significant contribution to our understanding of the behavior of great powers."Ã¢â ¬â ¢Barry R. Posen, The National Interest The updated edition of this classic treatise on the behavior of great powers takes a penetrating look at the question likely to dominate international relations in the twenty-first century: Can China rise peacefully? In clear, eloquent prose, John Mearsheimer explains why the answer is no: a rising China will seek to dominate Asia, while the United States, determined to remain the world's sole regional hegemon, will go to great lengths to prevent that from happening. The tragedy of great power politics is inescapable.

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Customer Reviews

This hardheaded book about international relations contains no comforting bromides about "peace dividends" or "the family of nations." Instead, University of Chicago professor John J. Mearsheimer posits an almost Darwinian state of affairs: "The great powers seek to maximize their share of world power" because "having dominant power is the best means to ensure one's own survival." Mearsheimer comes from the realist school of statecraft--he calls his own brand of thinking "offensive realism"--and he warns repeatedly against putting too much faith in the goodwill of other countries. "The sad fact is that international politics has always been a ruthless and dangerous business," he writes. Much of the book is an attempt to show how the diplomatic and military history of the last two centuries supports his ideas. Toward the end of The Tragedy of Great Power Politics,

he applies his theories to the current scene: "I believe that the existing power structures in Europe in Northeast Asia are not sustainable through 2020." Mearsheimer is especially critical of America's policy of engagement with China; he thinks that trying to make China wealthy and democratic will only make it a stronger rival. This is a controversial idea, but it is ably argued and difficult to ignore. --John Miller --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

The central tenet of the political theory called "offensive realism" is that each state seeks to ensure its survival by maximizing its share of world power. Mearsheimer, professor of political science at the University of Chicago, sets out to explain, defend and validate offensive realism as the only theory to account for how states actually behave. He proceeds by laying out the theory and its assumptions, then extensively tests the theory against the historical record since the Age of Napoleon. He finds plenty of evidence of what the theory predicts that states seek regional dominance through military strength. Further, whenever a condition of "unbalanced multipolarity" exists (i.e., when three or more states compete in a region, and one of them has the potential to dominate the others), the likelihood of war rises dramatically. If history validates offensive realism, then the theory should yield predictions about the future of world politics and the chances of renewed global conflict. Here Mearsheimer ventures into controversial terrain. Far from seeing the end of the Cold War as ushering in an age of peace and cooperation, the author believes the next 20 years have a high potential for war. China emerges as the most destabilizing force, and the author urges the U.S. to do all it can to retard China's economic growth. Since offensive realism is an academic movement, readers will expect some jargon ("buckpassing," "hegemon"), but the terms are defined and the language is accessible. This book will appeal to all devotees of political science, and especially to partisans of the "tough-minded" (in William James's sense) approach to history. Maps. Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

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 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 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 want 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 would 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 MasterÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢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 worldÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢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.MearsheimerÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢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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