A Reply to Mearsheimer

Anna Cornelia Beyer, University of Hull

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Realism is divided into defensive and offensive Realism. Defensive Realists, such as Kenneth Waltz, claim that states pursue only as much power as the other states around them have. They don’t want to dominate the international system, they want merely to be able to survive. Offensive Realism, by John Mearsheimer, challenges this perspective and states that states want to dominate the international system. States want to acquire domination of the international realm. They want to be at least a regional hegemon. Because, if they dominate, they will be secure from threats as no other state will dare to challenge the hegemon. Defensive Realists will caution against this, and state that hegemony gives rise to formidable counterpower. Other states will do all they can to hold the hegemon in check. Power creates counterpower. The international system strives for equilibrium. I don’t want to challenge this point of Mearsheimer’s claims, but I will take some of his other assumptions, and discuss them. In the following order, I will discuss:

1) That states pursue absolute gains first, then relative gains.
2) Relative gains seeking is pursued under threat, not generally.
3) For acquiring latent power, states will need to cooperate. So, cooperation is inherently necessary, even for defensive Realists.
4) Balancing does take place, and I argue even that balancing takes place not only between the main powers, but also at other levels of analysis, or other areas of international affairs.
5) However, and this combines with point 2), balancing will be mitigated by good relations. When relations are good, balancing does not need to occur.
I will go through these points in the order that they are presented here.

1) Absolute gains first.

I like to think of power as control. I like the term control better, because for me it captures what states are after. Power for me only describes the resources that states want, they want power, yes, but for what purpose? The purpose of power is control. Control over self and environment. Haidt states in his musings on happiness, that a fundamental factor for happiness is how much we are in control. And I believe this therefore describes a normal human need, and also a need that applies to states. What has to be controlled? That would be the next question. If we apply Maslow’s needs hierarchy, we would assume that survival is the basis for control. States want to be in control, and structural Realists are right to state that the first goal of control is survival. States want to be in control of threats to their survival. But what threatens survival first? I believe, that first come absolute gains. First comes efficiency of the economy and the state. If we look at failed states, they are more under threat from internal problems and economic dysfunction, than from external threats. And I believe that this holds for other states also. First, the stability of the state needs to be ensured. If a state cannot control itself, it won’t be able to compete on the international realm. So, control of self comes first. We see that at the example of the Soviet Union towards the end of the Cold War. The Soviet Union ended the competition with the United States because it experienced severe internal economic distress. It needed to focus on absolute gains first, before it could even think of engaging in competition again. So, I believe, absolute gains come first. Second,
some states will go for economic power status, rather than military. The European Union is an example. This leads me to the second point.

2) Relative gains are pursued under threat.
Relative gains seeking is pursued when the application of force is possible, hence when states are under threat. It is not pursued generally, absolute gains seeking is possible when no threats are posed towards the state. And even though Realists will argue that all states at any time are under threat from each other, this might not always be the case. Consider the European Union or Switzerland for example. Or even Great Britain when it had its Empire. These states were or are pursuing mainly economic gains, not military ones. And this contradicts Realism’s predictions. Economic gains cannot be understood here as latent power. Mearsheimer sees economic power as latent power. He argues that latent or economic power is solely been pursued for military goals, as the basis for military armament. But neither the EU, nor Switzerland, not the British Empire did build a large army. So, my point is, that under threat, yes, military arms races are the norm and relative gains seeking. But when no direct threat is perceived, absolute gains might dominate the goal seeking of states.

3) Cooperation is natural
The third point is that for gaining latent power, states will need to cooperate. And this contradicts the logic of Realism as it sees the possibilities of cooperation limited. However, it assumes that states are fundamentally interested in latent power, economic wealth, and pursue this along with military armament. However, in today’s world economic growth of any country is not conceivable without
significant international cooperation. Wealth depends on being integrated in the international system. China would not have reached its position that it has today and that is predicted for it in the future without relying substantially on exports, and hence trade cooperation with other countries. It also has substantial financial ties to other countries. The same goes for the US, the EU, and all other great powers in the system. Isolated states cannot build latent power, and thereby undermine their position in the international power competition. So, Realist logic depends on the liberal logic of interdependence and trade. Without considering the importance of interdependence and trade, states will not be able to compete. This makes room for the claim that balance of power logic is counterbalanced by a more liberal logic of interdependence as mitigating the security dilemma and creating zones of peace. The virtues of trade have long been believed in by Liberal scholars.

4) Balancing takes place at many levels.

This argument is probably the most supportive of Mearsheimer as it argues for the reality of balancing. I argue that balancing takes place not only between great powers, but also at many other levels in the multidimensional chessboard that Joseph Nye described. States balance each other also economically. The world economy is one of competition, and states want to grow at the expense of others. But that is still contained in the economic realm. Not only to states compete at a lower level than the military one, also small states and substate actors are balancing. First of all, balancing is a mechanism which has been described in many different areas, at the national level for governmental politics, and at the private level as the balance of
power in couples. Sociologists, political scientist all have been interested in the balance of power. But even substate groups balance at the international level, if we think about Iran or Al Qaeda. These actors challenge the United States. And while they can never hope to equal the US in military prowess, they seek to increase their power so that they can either be secure from any US attack (with Iran’s alleged nuclear program, which is presumably also intended for deterring an attack by the US), or that they can inflict damage on the US in a war of attrition (Al Qaeda).

5) Balancing does not need to occur if relations are good.

The EU does not balance the US. It would if it were not in such good relations with the US. But it does not. It simply tries to build on its economic power. Balancing does not need to occur when relations are good and when no perceived threats are in the system. This follows from the points made above. Only when perceived threats are in the surrounding, and therefore control is endangered, will states start to balance.