
Conversations in *International Relations*: Interview with John J. Mearsheimer (Part I)

Editor's Introduction

This is an edited and shortened version of an interview between Professor Mearsheimer, and, for *International Relations*, Professor Ken Booth, Professor Nicholas J. Wheeler, and Professor Michael Williams. It was held in the Department of International Politics, University of Wales, Aberystwyth, on 14 October 2004.

John Mearsheimer is the R. Wendell Harrison Distinguished Service Professor of Political Science and the co-director of the Program on International Security Policy at the University of Chicago, where he has taught since 1982. He was born in Brooklyn, New York, during the second year of the famous baby boom (1947). When he was eight, his family moved to the suburbs of New York (Westchester County). He was an enlisted man in the US Army from 1965 to 1966, and then entered West Point; he graduated in 1970. After serving five years as an officer in the US Air Force, he started graduate school at Cornell University (1975), where he studied with Peter Katzenstein, George Quester, and Richard Rosecrance. He spent the 1979–80 academic year as a research fellow at the Brookings Institution, and was a postdoctoral fellow from 1980 to 1982 in a security studies program that Samuel Huntington had just established at Harvard University.

Mearsheimer has published three books: *Conventional Deterrence* (1983), which won the Edgar S. Furniss, Jr., Book Award; *Liddell Hart and the Weight of History* (1988); and *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (2001), which won the Joseph Lepgold Book Prize. He has also written many articles for academic journals like *International Security* and popular magazines like *The Atlantic Monthly*, as well as Op-Eds for the *New York Times*.

Finally, Mearsheimer received the Clark Award for Distinguished Teaching when he was a graduate student at Cornell in 1977, and the Quantrell Award for Distinguished Teaching at the University of Chicago in 1985. In addition, he was selected as a Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholar (1993–4). In that capacity, he gave talks at eight universities. In 2003, he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

IR *Please tell us how you got interested in the subject?*

JM For reasons that are hard to divine, I was fascinated with international security issues – like deterrence theory – from the moment I was first exposed to them.

IR *Was that because you had been in the Air Force?*

JM No. I first became interested in international relations when I was a junior at

West Point. I had little interest in the subject before that, but then I took a political science course that captured my fancy. I took more courses and discovered that I had a real passion for it, especially the international security. I decided that after graduation I would go to great lengths to attend graduate school and get a Ph.D. But I never thought of becoming a professor. I never saw myself writing articles and books. I was remarkably naive at the time. The main reason that I wanted to go to graduate school was because I *really loved* learning about international politics, not because I wanted to become a professional political scientist.

IR *When you went to West Point were you originally thinking of a career in the military?*

JM No. I actually had no interest in going to West Point. In fact, I always disliked the military: not for philosophical reasons, but for constitutional reasons. I hate shaving. I hate sleeping in the woods. I hate uniforms. I hate guns. I hate authority. So there was nothing about the military that attracted me. In other words, I didn't dislike the military because I was a pacifist; I just didn't like the trappings of military life. The main reason I ended up at West Point was because my father really wanted me to go there and he was a powerful force in my life. My father grew up in New York City during the Depression of the 1930s. His main goal as a youngster was to go to West Point, but he could not get in because he had bad eyesight. It was a bitter disappointment to him; afterwards, he lived vicariously through his children. I have a sister who went to West Point and a brother who went to the Naval Academy. So, three out of his five children are service academy graduates. I was his oldest child and he was determined that I would go to West Point.

IR *Did he regard you as a failure when you became a professor?*

JM I don't think my father was deeply concerned about me having an illustrious military career. He was just deeply concerned with seeing me graduate from West Point. Once I graduated, I had achieved his dream. I think he would have been very happy if I had been a successful military officer but for the reasons I elaborated on earlier, I don't think it was on the cards.

Both my father and mother are proud of my accomplishments as a professor, and they certainly don't consider me a failure for becoming a scholar. But, like most people outside of academia, they find it difficult to understand what professors do for a living. For the most part they think our principal mission is to teach; and of course teaching is a very important part of our job. But research is the other half; and I would argue that for scholars like us it is clearly the more important half. It is, however, the part of our job that outsiders – including my parents – find the most difficult to comprehend. They have trouble understanding that it is of enormous importance for us to sit around for endless hours just thinking about ideas and then writing them up in articles and books. They certainly cannot grasp the difficulty of the enterprise. And when you tell them that you have only one or two courses to

teach in a particular year, they think that means you are going to spend the rest of the time at the beach, or traveling to Paris for vacation. They don't understand that you are probably going to work as hard or harder doing your research than if you were teaching full time. We all know that it is more painful to produce first-rate scholarship than it is to teach, and thus having time off from teaching to do research and write is hardly ever a lot of fun. But most people outside of the academic world think the opposite. In short, there is a lot of ignorance about the life of a professor.

IR *What else fascinated you about the subject at the start, in addition to security issues?*

JM What I especially liked about international relations was that the scholars and teachers I encountered asked big questions about the world and then came up with simple – sometimes simplistic – theories or arguments that answered those questions. For reasons I can't put my finger on, I like simple theories that address important issues. I am always attracted to an elegant theory, even if I think it is wrong-headed. During my graduate school days, I liked certain Marxist theories, not because I agreed with the claims, but because they were simple and intuitively attractive. One of my favorite books for teaching purposes is Lenin's *Imperialism*, which has a simple argument that is boldly stated. It ultimately proved to be wrong, but at least Lenin was asking a big question and making a big argument, which certainly helped me clarify my thinking about how the world works.

IR *Is that the attraction to you of offensive realism?*

JM Yes. I think it is the attraction more generally of realism. Realist theories are invariably simple or parsimonious, which has an upside and a downside. Any simple theory, as we all know, can only explain so much about the world, because by definition it omits a variety of factors from its explanatory apparatus, and sometimes those factors matter a lot. I believe that realist theories can shed light on a reasonably large chunk of international politics; but, like all theories, they have their limits.

IR *When you were starting in the subject, whose work most attracted your attention?*

JM It is funny but I don't have a clear recollection of any particular scholars who grabbed my attention in graduate school. I was especially interested in deterrence theory in those days, so I did pay considerable attention to the works of Bernard Brodie, Thomas Schelling, Glenn Snyder, and Albert Wohlstetter, among others. But even then, my major interest at the time was conventional deterrence, and those thinkers had little to say about that subject.

When I was a graduate student (1975–80) I did not pay much attention to the debates among the three 'isms' of the day: realism, liberalism, and Marxism. There

was no social constructivism or critical theory in those days. This may seem shocking, but I did not pay much attention to realism, which was pretty much a moribund paradigm at that time. You have to remember that Waltz's seminal tract, *Theory of International Politics*, was not published until 1979. I did not read it until I started teaching an IR theory course at Chicago in early 1983. I don't think that I was even aware of the book before then.

Morgenthau was the dominant realist before Waltz, but Morgenthau's *Politics among Nations* had lost its cachet in the academic world by 1975. So I never read *Politics among Nations* in graduate school (or I have no memory of reading it!) and Waltz's great book did not come out until after I had finished my Ph.D. exams and was embarked on my dissertation. The person who filled the realist void at that point was Robert Gilpin, especially with his book *US Power and the Multinational Corporation*. But as smart as his work is, he did not have the impact of Morgenthau and Waltz.

Regardless, I did not explicitly identify myself as a realist at that time. However, I think we have reached a point in the discipline today where everyone has to identify him or herself as belonging to a particular school of thought. But when I went to graduate school it was not necessary to do that, or at least it didn't seem that way to me. I studied security issues, so I understood that I generally fit into the realist camp, but I did not give the matter much thought. It was not until I went to the University of Chicago and started teaching IR theory courses that I began to self-identify as a realist.

IR *A parochial question: you haven't mentioned a British writer yet – when did you become conscious of Bull or Carr?*

JM I read Hedley Bull in graduate school. Moreover, the first time I taught IR theory at Chicago – when I first assigned Waltz – I also assigned Bull's *The Anarchical Society*. I am embarrassed to say that I cannot remember when I first read Carr's *The Twenty Years' Crisis* (and truth be told, the same holds for Morgenthau's *Politics among Nations*). I think this illustrates that neither Carr nor Morgenthau were treated as major thinkers in American graduate programs in the 1970s. Let me say a few words about why I think that happened.

Realism controlled the commanding heights in the United States (and Britain as well) from 1945 to 1965. But that situation changed drastically during the late 1960s for two reasons. First, the campus protests against the Vietnam War made it terribly unfashionable to promote realism, with its emphasis on the balance of power and the necessity of sometimes using military force in pursuit of the national interest. This is ironic since almost all of the realists of the day opposed the Vietnam War. Second, the social science revolution was just then taking hold on campuses and it was widely believed that Carr and Morgenthau were not 'real' social scientists. Thus, they got pushed aside, along with realism more generally, during the 1970s.

That situation began to change in 1979 because of a number of important developments. First, Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* was published that year. Second, the Shah was overthrown in Iran by Islamic fundamentalists and then the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, a pair of events that gave Americans a powerful sense that the world is a dangerous place. In particular, the Soviets' move into Afghanistan convinced many Americans that *détente* had failed and that the United States had to be more hard-nosed in its dealings with the Soviet Union. This mindset, of course, played an important role in Ronald Reagan's election to President the following year. The end result of these various events was that, over the course of a brief two years, realism got a new lease on life. That realist resurgence lasted throughout the 1980s. But when the Cold War ended and the Soviet Union collapsed, many people argued that the world had changed in ways that rendered realism irrelevant. Thus, the 1990s were a lot like the 1970s for realism.

IR *Would you then say that Waltz has been the most important realist for you in terms of the development of your own ideas?*

JM There is no question about that. In fact, I think it is true for all realists under the age of 60, as well as for many non-realists. I would argue, for example, that Waltz has had a great influence on Alexander Wendt's work. Waltz has been the king of thought in IR theory for the past 25 years. Almost everyone in that world has been responding to Waltz in one way or another.

IR *Many of us would agree, but some of us might think that *Man, the State and War* is a better book than *Theory of International Politics*.*

JM Which book is best is debatable, but there is no question in my mind that *Theory of International Politics* has had a bigger impact on the field and the way people think about IR theory. Take Waltz's students as a measure. Barry Posen, Stephen Van Evera, and Stephen Walt – all prominent scholars who studied with Waltz – wrote dissertations that became important books: Posen's *Sources of Military Doctrine*, Van Evera's *Causes of War*, and Walt's *Origins of Alliances*. Each builds upon and challenges important ideas that Waltz laid out in *Theory of International Politics*. Posen introduces organization theory and says it has a great deal of explanatory weight. Van Evera believes that 'structure' is much more benign than even Waltz thinks it is. And Walt argues that focusing on material factors alone, as Waltz does, is not going to produce a powerful IR theory; it is necessary to introduce intentions into the equation. It is to Waltz's great credit that he produced such outstanding students and then allowed them to evolve in ways where they ended up challenging his theory.

IR *Interestingly, all three of Waltz's students you just mentioned would be characterized as defensive realists. In this sense, they stayed true to 'the king of*

thought'. Can you explain how you established a theory which is a much more fundamental critique of the Waltzian project, even while starting from the same structural assumptions?

JM It took me a long time, I am embarrassed to say, to recognize that Waltz has a rather benign theory of international politics. He believes that international anarchy encourages aggression, but not too much of it, mainly because he thinks that states balance efficiently against aggressors. If a great power gets too greedy, according to Waltz, the other great powers will gang up on it and crush it. Still, Waltz's theory does allow for moderate levels of aggression. The follow-on wave of 'defensive realists', especially Jack Snyder and Steve Van Evera, go further than Waltz and argue that war hardly ever pays. Structural factors, according to them, should discourage aggression altogether and encourage peaceful policies.

Once I fully understood what Randall Schweller calls the 'status quo bias' in the writings of Waltz and his followers, I found myself dissatisfied with their theories. Simply put, they did not accord with how I saw states behaving over time. I then began to think about developing a different theory. I found that I agreed with Morgenthau that states were constantly looking for opportunities to increase their power, but I did not share his starting assumption that states were hard-wired with an all-encompassing will to power. With regard to starting assumptions, I was a structural realist like Waltz, but I did not share his view that states should not maximize their power. Thus, I recognized that I had to come up with a structural theory that explained why it is rational for states to pursue hegemony. My efforts resulted in my theory of offensive realism.

I won't go into it at this point, but I would note that although Waltz and I are both structural realists, there are some important differences in our starting assumptions.

IR *In Glenn Snyder's review of your book, he implies that there is a possibility of bringing defensive and offensive realism together as an explanatory theory: a kind of super-realist theory. Do you think they can be combined?*

JM No. There is obviously some overlap between the two approaches, but there are too many fundamental differences between them to allow them to be combined into one super-realist theory. I am not bothered by the fact that there are competing realist theories, or that there are constructivist and liberal theories. Every theory confronts anomalies as well as issues where it has little explanatory power. No theory can explain all of international politics. Therefore, we should be tolerant of other theories, even if we privilege our own in most cases.

IR *But if these other theories can explain some of the cases, doesn't that call into question your argument that there is a structural determinism that produces an unending quest for hegemony? If there are some anomalies in offensive realism, don't those cases build up and call into question the fundamental postulates of the theory?*

JM Again, every theory faces anomalies. Our theories are too crude to be able to explain every relevant case. The interesting question is: how many anomalies does it take to cause us to lose faith in a particular theory? I do not argue that my theory is right all the time, and that I can explain all dimensions of international politics. Still, I think there is an abundance of evidence that supports my claim that states relentlessly pursue power.

On the subject of anomalies, I think that Waltz argues that we need a theory of foreign policy as well as his theory of international politics because he recognizes that his theory faces so many anomalies. Specifically, Waltz argues that states should not maximize their power, but should instead pursue what he calls an ‘appropriate’ amount of power. Of course, he is well aware that great powers often do not follow his advice. Imperial Germany, Imperial Japan, and Nazi Germany all attempted to dominate their region of the world, contrary to what Waltz’s theory would expect. Moreover, Waltz was an arch-critic of US foreign policy during the Cold War, which he thought was overly militarized and overly aggressive. To explain these cases which clearly contradict his theory of international politics, he maintains that we need a theory of foreign policy.

IR *That seems to be a fundamental problem. If states don’t behave in rational ways, how can it be argued that there is a logic of anarchy at work? Arguably, the play of contingency and agency in Waltz becomes so great that the arguments he makes about structure become problematic. His theory seeks to deal with all the anomalies by saying: ‘Oh well, that’s foreign policy’. Waltz does not want to say such anomalies are relevant to his theory. Do you agree?*

JM I agree that this is a problem.

IR *Is there not the same danger in your theory?*

JM I don’t think so. Let me make two points on this matter, one empirical and one theoretical. Although the cases that I just described contradict Waltz’s theory, they do not contradict my theory. I expect great powers to pursue regional hegemony, so the actions of Imperial Germany, Imperial Japan, and Nazi Germany are not anomalies for my theory. Nor is most of US foreign policy during the Cold War. As I said earlier, my main problem with defensive realism is that it does not do a good job of explaining how the world actually works. It may be a good normative theory but it is not a good descriptive theory. I tried to invent an alternative realist theory that does a better job of explaining how great powers behave toward each other.

This discussion highlights an important theoretical difference between me and Waltz. As I emphasized, Waltz believes that there are going to be a good number of cases where states do not behave according to the logic of his theory. Instead, they behave foolishly. For those cases, he says that we need a separate theory of foreign policy, which is clearly not a realist theory, since it is explaining behavior that is

strategically unwise. By the way, this is why Waltz maintains that his theory explains outcomes, but not state behavior.

In contrast, my theory explains behavior and outcomes. I do not need a separate theory of foreign policy. What this means is that any time a state behaves in a strategically foolish fashion, it counts as a clear contradiction of my theory. Waltz, however, can say it is not an anomaly for his theory, because he does not claim to explain individual state behavior. For that you need a theory of foreign policy. The problem with Waltz's approach is that not only does it make it difficult to falsify his theory, but it is also hard to have confidence in a theory of international politics that is not good at explaining great power behavior.

The taproot of our disagreement lies in the assumptions that underpin our structural theories. Waltz says that his theory is built on two simple assumptions: (1) the system is anarchic, and (2) states seek to survive. He explicitly says that he does not assume that states are rational actors. My theory is based on five assumptions: (1) the system is anarchic, (2) all great powers have some offensive military capability, (3) states can never be certain about other states' intentions, (4) states seek to survive, and (5) great powers are rational actors or strategic calculators. For purposes of the discussion here, the key difference between us is that I have a rational actor assumption in my theory and he does not. If you assume that states are strategic calculators, as I do, then your theory has to account for foreign policy behavior as well as for international outcomes. After all, your theory expects states to act rationally; and if they don't act rationally your theory has a problem. But if your theory explicitly eschews the rational actor assumption, as Waltz's does, you can say that foolish state behavior does not contradict your theory, and needs to be explained by a separate theory of foreign policy. In effect, Waltz has created an escape hatch in his theory that mine does not have.

At the risk of saying too much about this matter, let me make one final point. If you look closely at the theories of defensive realists like Posen, Snyder, and Van Evera, you see that their work conforms closely to the basic Waltzian template described above. Specifically, they argue that systemic logic can explain some of what happens in world politics, but a great deal of state behavior cannot be explained by realism. Therefore, we need an alternative theory, a theory of foreign policy, to explain those cases where states fail to act rationally. To that end, Posen relies on organization theory, Snyder on domestic regime type, and Van Evera on militarism. Each is filling in the foreign policy theory box in Waltz's basic architecture. In short, defensive realists combine unit-level and system-level theories to explain how the world works. Offensive realists, on the other hand, stick exclusively to the systemic level, because of the rational actor assumption.

IR *But are you not then pushed into the corner of arguing that all great powers at all times behave aggressively because the system makes them?*

JM That is correct, with the caveat that there are a few cases that contradict the theory.

IR *That is a bold claim.*

JM I agree. But this is why I spend considerable time in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* explaining that the aggressive behavior of Imperial Germany, Imperial Japan, and Nazi Germany was based on rational calculations, not domestic political considerations, as Jack Snyder argues. As you note, I have to make that argument for those important cases; otherwise my theory would fall apart. I can allow for a few anomalies, but not many and certainly not in a handful of prominent cases. Unlike defensive realism, my theory cannot tolerate much non-strategic behavior.

IR *Can we take your logic of great power action one step further? What is your view of the claim that there is unipolarity today?*

JM I don't believe we live in a unipolar world. Just look at the situation in Iraq: does the United States look like a hegemonic power to you? The mighty American military is stuck in a quagmire and I think it is likely to suffer a humiliating defeat in Iraq. That doesn't happen to real hegemons.

IR *In that case, how today would you characterize US power, and its limits? You spend a long time in your book *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* talking about the nature of power. Can you give a sense of how you think about the character and limits of US power, if you don't believe, as some do, that we live in a unipolar epoch?*

JM There is no doubt that the United States is by far the most powerful state on the face of the earth. But that does not mean that it is the only great power in the system, which is by definition what is necessary to have unipolarity or global hegemony. Remember, bipolarity means two great powers, multipolarity means three or more, and unipolarity means one. Thus, the key to determining the polarity of a system is figuring out how many great powers there are around the globe, and that depends mainly on how one defines a great power.

For me, a great power is a state that has the military wherewithal to put up a serious fight in an all-out conventional war against the most powerful state in the system. A modern great power must also have a nuclear deterrent. Today, China and Russia have the conventional capabilities to give the United States a good fight in a major war, and they both have nuclear arsenals. Neither country would be easy to conquer in a conventional war. Thus, both qualify as great powers. Germany and Japan are not great powers in my account, because they do not have nuclear weapons. So I think that we live in a multipolar world that has three great powers – China, Russia, and the United States, the mightiest of them all.

IR *What about the limits of American power?*

JM I think that many commentators and security experts overestimate the power of the United States. Despite all the talk about global hegemony, it is especially difficult to dominate the entire planet, not only because it is very large, but also because it is necessary to project power over large bodies of water, which is a formidable task. For sure, the United States is a hegemon in the western hemisphere. That is because the Americas are its backyard and because there is no state in the region that has the military power to stand up to the United States in a war. But dominating the rest of the globe is virtually impossible at this point in time. To accomplish that end, the United States would need immense power projection capabilities and lots more land power or boots on the ground than it now has or is likely to have anytime soon. I have a chapter in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* titled 'The Primacy of Land Power', where I explain why armies and the forces that support them are the core ingredients of military power.

The Bush Administration made a fatal blunder in this regard. It assumed that it could use sophisticated aircraft with precision guided munitions and small ground forces to reorder the Middle East, and maybe even the whole world. Instead of relying on big battalions, the United States was going to shock and awe its way to victory. Iraq was supposed to be the first of many great triumphs. There was even much talk about creating an American empire in the Middle East. This whole scheme was delusional from the start, because there was no way that the United States could succeed in Iraq without a large army. Any state bent on reordering the world at the end of a rifle barrel better have an abundance of land power, because that task is not going to be accomplished on the cheap. The United States, however, does not have and will not have in our lifetime anywhere near enough soldiers to dominate the globe the way it dominates the western hemisphere. The unipolar moment never was and probably never will be.

IR *What lessons might the world's most powerful state learn from its experience in Iraq since 2003?*

JM That is simple; don't do it again. By the way, I hope Britain learns the same lesson from its experience in Iraq.

The decision to invade Iraq was predicated on arguments that made no sense to most realists. Indeed, many of the claims of the neo-conservatives who drove the United States to war contradicted basic realist logic, which is why almost every realist opposed the war. Of course, states occasionally act in non-strategic ways, which is why realism confronts anomalies from time to time. But when states violate realist precepts, they invariably get punished, often severely, for their errors.

IR *Is that what you think is happening in the case of the struggle over Iraq?*

JM Yes. Because I am an offensive realist who believes that war is a legitimate instrument of statecraft and that states should maximize their relative power, many people were surprised – if not shocked – to find out that I was adamantly opposed

to the Iraq War. But they should not have been surprised. Virtually every prominent realist, except for Henry Kissinger, opposed going into Iraq, and virtually every prominent realist, except for Henry Kissinger, opposed the Vietnam War. It is important to note that two of the principal dissenters when Lyndon Johnson took the United States into Vietnam in 1964–5 were Walter Lippmann and Hans Morgenthau, both card-carrying realists. Moreover, Ken Waltz was on record as being staunchly opposed to the Vietnam War long before most liberal academics in America adopted that position.

My main point to people who were surprised that I opposed the Iraq War is that just because you think using force is sometimes justified does not mean that you think it is always justified. Realism does not mean that you favor every war your country contemplates fighting. For sure, no realist in his or her right mind would favor a war that is bound to turn out to be a disaster. I was almost certain that Iraq would turn into a debacle, much like Vietnam, and that it would damage America's position all around the globe. I also thought that although Saddam was a threat, he was not much of a threat, and thus he could easily be contained. I think that all the evidence so far indicates that the realists got this one right and the neo-conservatives got it wrong.

IR *With hindsight you can. You said you could find a rational explanation for the decisions for war by Imperial Germany, Imperial Japan, and Nazi Germany. But is it not possible to find a perfectly plausible realist explanation for the decision to go to war with Iraq, to do with oil, relative gains in the Middle East, a strategic base for the United States in the Middle East if Saudi Arabia falls apart, and so on?*

JM For sure, there is a temptation for me to say that every decision for war is rational and therefore it is impossible to find cases that contradict my theory. But that would be foolish for me to do, not simply because Iraq doesn't fit my theory, but also because no social science theory can explain every case. There will always be some anomalies.

The story that you spun out for attacking Iraq is certainly more of a realist story than the one the Bush Administration told in the run-up to the war. But even a geo-political argument built around oil could not have justified attacking Iraq, if for no other reason, because the United States could not win the war at any reasonable price. Moreover, the United States does not need a strategic base in Saudi Arabia or Iraq to protect its oil interests in the region. The United States acted as offshore balancer in the Middle East during the Cold War, and there is no reason it could not pursue that same policy today. Indeed, with the Soviet threat gone, it should be even easier to be an offshore balancer now than it was in the Cold War.

IR *In terms of your own predictive thinking, can we shift to the argument you made most prominently and colorfully in the Atlantic Monthly in 1990, in an article called 'Why We Will Soon Miss the Cold War'? Do we miss it? And, if so, why?*

JM No, we don't miss it, at least yet, and that is because the United States has remained in Europe. My central claim in that controversial article was that if the Soviet Union pulled out of eastern Europe and the United States pulled out of western Europe, the European states would compete among themselves for power the way they had for centuries before the Cold War. Of course, the Soviet Union removed its troops from eastern Europe and then it collapsed. But American troops have remained in Europe; indeed, NATO has expanded eastward. Therefore, my original argument has not yet been put to the test.

Nevertheless, there is evidence that policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic accept my basic logic. After all, the principal reason that American troops did not come home is because US and European leaders believed that their presence helps keep the European states from engaging in security competition with each other. Some argue that there has been no serious security competition in Europe, not because of the presence of the American pacifier, but because war has been burned out of the region. To quote my good friend Steve Van Evera, Europe is 'primed for peace'. However, if that were true, there would be no good reason to keep US troops in Europe; they could go home. But they have not left because policymakers worry that trouble will break out if the United States leaves Europe. This logic was clearly reflected in the speeches of Bill Clinton and Madeleine Albright during the 1990s.

IR *Do you still think that were the Americans to withdraw the dynamics you predicted (such as Germany acquiring nuclear capabilities) would come to pass?*

JM Yes.

IR *Would you not consider the European Union to be a big anomaly in your theory? Has it not transcended the anarchic structure of politics among nations, and created a security community in which the threat or the use of force is not only not rational, it is unthinkable? Isn't the EU such an anomaly in offensive realist theory that it actually calls into question the whole edifice of the theory?*

JM I do not think it is an anomaly. The unprecedented economic integration in Europe was due largely to the American military presence in Europe and the dynamics of the Cold War. Power politics lie at the root of the European Union. Very importantly, European integration has its limits; there has not been significant political and military integration, and there is good reason to think that European economic integration is slowing down. Regarding the peace in Europe today, that is the result of the American pacifier, not the establishment of a security community. War between France and Germany was also unthinkable in 1955, as well as in 1965 and 1975. The reason: Uncle Sam's presence made it impossible for those former enemies to tangle with each other.

IR *But there is a different explanation, and it goes like this: between 1955 and 1975 the identities of France and Germany changed significantly. This meant that*

the French could say that they were not the sort of people who fought Germany any more – and vice versa. The ‘American pacifier’ might have helped, but the fact is that a fundamental change has come about in the identity of the units.

JM I disagree with that interpretation. I believe that structure is the independent variable and that identity is the dependent variable, and that the reason French and German people do not think of themselves as potential adversaries today is because the US military presence in Europe makes war between them unthinkable. I do not think there has been a permanent change in their identities. Indeed, I think that if the structure changed, i.e., the American pacifier went away, the people of France and Germany would begin to worry about each other again and act more competitively toward each other.

IR *So you could imagine European states once more threatening or using force against each other, in the absence of the ‘American pacifier’?*

JM Yes: that is my argument. Of course, we won’t know whether I am right or you are right until the Americans leave Europe. But I have a question for you: if your interpretation is right, why haven’t the Americans gone home? Why don’t European leaders tell us to go home? Why do you need us if there has been a permanent change in Europe’s identity which makes it virtually impossible to have a war?

IR *It may well be that there are anxieties on the part of European elites about the future. But if that is the case, many people in Europe would say that they are being overly timid, and that if the so-called American pacifier went away nothing significant would change. Where the US presence is now important is in terms of the wider transatlantic relationship, and not in pacifying inter-European rivalries. That is obviously a very different way of looking at the situation. Let us pose another. If US troops continue to downsize in Europe, and are eventually withdrawn completely, what would your response be, ten years later, if there had been no negative consequences of the kind predicted in your book? Would you be saying: ‘It is too soon to say, because the independent variable of the structure has not yet kicked in’? That has been Waltz’s argument since the end of the Cold War. He has argued along the lines that we can say it is going to happen, but we cannot say when it is going to happen. The theory cannot be falsified because its proponents can always revert to the argument: ‘The structure has not yet had time to work its effects.’*

JM Let me turn the tables on you. Let’s assume that the Americans pulled completely out of Europe tomorrow and hardly anything in Europe changed in the immediate aftermath. And you were to say to me: ‘John, I believe your theory has been falsified.’ And I said, ‘You are right.’ But then, two years later, conflict broke out between two states in Europe. What would you say about that?

IR *The argument about a security community would have a problem!*

JM I think our back and forth here illustrates that one of the key issues in determining whose theory is right is finding the appropriate time line. Nevertheless, I would be comfortable saying that if little changed after 10 years, if things were pretty much the same as they were when the United States was here, then my theory was falsified. But we cannot know who is right until we run the experiment.

IR *In terms of the link between theory and practice, would it be your argument that the United States should stay in Europe? Or from your offensive realist perspective, under what circumstances do you think it ought to withdraw? Is it your view that the United States should stay in Europe for the foreseeable future, or can you foresee a scenario under which it is in US interests to cease playing what you call the 'pacifier' role?*

JM My theory simply says that the United States is an offshore balancer. That means that it sends troops into strategically important regions – Europe, Northeast Asia, the Persian Gulf – when there is a potential hegemon that the local states cannot contain. For example, Nazi Germany was clearly a threat to dominate Europe by 1939, but it made sense for the United States to rely on Britain, France, and the Soviet Union to keep Hitler at bay. However, in 1947, there was no European state that could contain the Soviet Union, so the United States had to do the heavy lifting itself.

The most powerful state in Europe today is Germany, but the other European states could contain it if the need arose. Therefore, my position is that the United States should leave Europe. With regard to Asia, there is good reason to think that China's rise will create a situation where it is so powerful that its neighbors cannot contain it without help from the United States. Therefore, I think it makes strategic sense to keep American troops in the region. However, the United States should pull most of its forces out of the region if China stops rising.

IR *So, if you were National Security Advisor, you would recommend pulling the American troops completely out of Europe?*

JM Yes.

IR *But if you did that, would you not set in motion the very things your theory predicts are dangerous (such as increasing the risk of war between the European states, or encouraging Germany to develop nuclear weapons)? Wouldn't that be irresponsible in relation to your theory?*

JM It would be consistent with the theory and it would not be irresponsible. I do not believe it is the responsibility of the United States to play the role of peace-keeper all around the globe. Nor should America use its military force for social

engineering schemes as has been the wont of both the Clinton and the Bush Administrations. This may sound odd coming from an offensive realist, but I think that the United States is overextended today, and that its foreign policy is over-militarized. I favor sharply cutting down the size of the American military and reducing our foreign policy commitments. The United States is by far the most powerful state in the world; it faces no threats in the western hemisphere; and, with the possible exception of China, there is no state on the horizon that looks like a peer competitor. Yes, there is a terrorism problem, but that is largely the result of occupying foreign territory, especially in the Middle East, and interfering in the affairs of every state in every nook and cranny of the world. In short, the United States ought to be an offshore balancer, not the world's policeman.

IR *What if the result were a conflict between a nuclear-armed Germany and a nuclear-armed Russia? That would not be a world in which the United States would be safe. Even if it didn't directly affect the US homeland, a nuclear exchange between those countries could have catastrophic consequences for global security.*

JM Does this then mean that the United States has to remain forever as the pacifier in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East?

IR *Presumably so, according to your theory. It has a vital interest, for example, in preventing nuclear proliferation (especially in an era of potential transnational nuclear terrorism). Surely an offensive realist National Security Advisor must recommend upsizing US forces not downsizing them?*

JM These are not my views. I do not believe that the United States has to get involved in every war in Europe, and historically it has not done so. My argument is that the United States should only get involved in Europe's wars when there is a potential hegemon that the local great powers cannot contain. On nuclear proliferation, I prefer to limit it as much as possible, but I am not in favor of invading and occupying countries like Iran and North Korea to prevent them from having a nuclear arsenal. As I said earlier, we ought to downsize the US military, not upsize it.

IR *What about the prospect of another ambitious and powerful Russia, moving westwards and increasingly dominating a Europe which has been deserted by the United States?*

JM That is definitely not going to happen. Russia has roughly half the population of the former Soviet Union and it has a struggling economy, which is nowhere near as dynamic as the Chinese or German economies.

IR *But we are talking 20 or 30 years down the line, and your book importantly stresses the sweep of history.*

JM Most experts think that Russia's population will shrink markedly over the next 20 to 30 years and that its economy will continue to face serious problems. I don't think we have to worry about a second coming of the Soviet Union in the decades ahead. If the American pacifier goes away, security competition is most likely to break out in the eastern half of Europe, and it is likely to involve Germany and Russia squabbling over the buffer states between them. I don't think there is likely to be significant hostility between Germany and France, although any serious German rearmament would scare the French for sure.

IR *Wouldn't 60,000 or even 30,000 US troops be a small price for you to pay to ensure that never occurred?*

JM No. Again, I simply do not favor the United States acting as a policeman in Europe or anywhere else for that matter.

IR *Let us shift from the future to the underlying dynamics. You called your last major book The Tragedy of Great Power Politics. What was your understanding of 'tragedy' in that book? Why do you see the world as 'tragic' instead of just seeing the world 'as it is' from your point of view? Could you not have called it The Inevitability of Great Power Politics? And could you link this with your earlier remarks when you implied that political realists always seem to be on the historically wrong side of debates (they lose) and so governments go on to make mistakes such as Iraq? Is this part of the tragedy?*

JM I definitely do not believe that realists are always on the wrong side of debates. That is occasionally the case, but not often, and when states act in ways that contradict realist logic they invariably pay a steep cost. But that is not the tragedy of great power politics, or at least what I meant when I used that phrase for the title of my book. What I meant by tragedy is that the structure of the international system forces all states, whether they have revisionist goals or not, to behave as if they were revisionist powers and compete with each other for power. In other words, you could have a system in which all the great powers are satisfied with the status quo and have no interest in revising it; nevertheless, those great powers would have no choice but to engage in security competition and maybe fight wars with each other.

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.

If we had a system where states were confident that they could read the intentions of other states today and tomorrow, then states satisfied with the status quo could live together peacefully. Alternatively, if we lived in a hierarchic system rather than an anarchic one, we could afford to guess wrong about the intentions of other states, because there would be a nightwatchman to call if trouble came knocking. In brief, the two key factors that underpin the tragic nature of international politics are anarchy and uncertainty about the intentions of other states.

IR *That is the view of all those who believe there is a true security community in western Europe today.*

JM I accept the point that many people believe that western Europe is a true security community because every state in the region knows with full confidence that every other state has benign intentions. But that is not my view. I think you have peace in western Europe because there is a higher authority that maintains order. There is a 911 to call: the United States. Your counter, of course, is that the American pacifier is not necessary to have peace, because Europeans can now be certain that all their neighbors have and will have benign intentions. Thus, the tragedy of great power politics has been eliminated, at least in western Europe. To go back to our earlier discussion, I cannot prove you are wrong and I am right. We will only find out who has the story right when American troops leave Europe.

IR *So the essence of the tragedy of great powers is the security dilemma?*

JM Yes. In fact, I said in my book that the security dilemma reflects the basic logic of offensive realism.

IR *Although you say the essence of the tragedy of international politics is the security dilemma, you don't use the concept in the manner of its original formulation. All your states are not status quo powers; they all have aggressive intentions. So, you cannot have a 'security dilemma' in (your) world in which states are primed for offensive behavior: you do not have 'dilemmas' in such a world – you know to assume the worst. Are you not therefore using the concept of the security dilemma in a way that is very different to that of Herz and Butterfield in their original formulation?*

JM I don't think so. Let me explain why. It is very important to distinguish between the starting assumptions that underpin my theory and the behaviors that follow from those assumptions. As I said earlier, I start with five simple assumptions about the international system: (1) it is anarchic, (2) all states have some offensive military capability, (3) states can never be certain about the intentions of other states, (4) states seek survival, and (5) states are rational actors. Please note that I do not assume that states have malign intentions or that they are bent on aggression. I simply say that they cannot be certain about the intentions of other

states, save for the fact that they want to survive. It is possible, as I pointed out above, that every great power could be satisfied with the status quo, or alternatively that every great power is bent on using force to change the system. My starting point was simply that you cannot know with any reasonable degree of certainty what the intentions of other states are today and certainly tomorrow. In short, I do not assume that states have aggressive intentions.

However, once you marry those five assumptions together, powerful incentives are created for states to behave aggressively toward each other. Specifically, states look for opportunities to gain power at the expense of other states, and to make sure that other states don't take advantage of them. In other words, states seek to maximize their power. The system leaves them no choice if they want to survive. It does not matter whether they are content with the status quo or not.

IR *You start then with the same assumption as Herbert Butterfield.*

JM I believe that is right. I tried to make this distinction between assumptions and behavior crystal clear in the book. In fact, I included a footnote that explicitly makes the point (chapter 2, footnote 7).

IR *But you do make the claim, which some of us would not, that because of your starting assumptions the only rational behavior for states is aggressive.*

JM That's correct.

IR *So has Glenn Snyder got it wrong in his review of your book, then, when he suggests your theory cannot have a Herzian understanding of the security dilemma? Is the more sophisticated way of putting it to say that in your assumptions you have a classic Herzian understanding of the security dilemma, but that when it comes to behavior you do not assume a security dilemma: states may be either revisionist or status quo in your assumptions, but they have to act as if they are revisionist.*

JM I think Snyder is mistaken; I do not see any significant difference between me and Herz regarding either assumptions or behavior.

IR *So there is no misunderstanding: is your point that the uncertainty of intentions assumption means that because a state cannot be reassured, it has to behave aggressively in order to be secure? You make a jump from an assumption of uncertainty to the rationality of aggressive behavior.*

JM That is precisely what I argue.

IR *Whereas some would argue that uncertainty can be ameliorated through institutions and so forth, you are not persuaded?*

JM Yes. I think that international institutions serve some useful purposes, but they cannot ameliorate uncertainty in any meaningful way. Let's take this discussion a step further. There is much emphasis in the rational choice literature these days about 'costly signals'. According to some scholars in this tradition, states can take costly measures that allow them to signal their type, which is another way of saying that states can signal whether they are a revisionist power or a security seeker, i.e., satisfied with the status quo. But I do not believe that states can signal type, although if they could it would go a long way toward fostering international peace.

IR *Why do you believe states cannot signal type?*

JM The problem is simply that I do not see how states can actually send the necessary signal. Leaders can say that their intentions are benign, but talk is cheap, and even if they mean it today, that does not guarantee that they will think the same way tomorrow. Some of the defensive realists argue that you can distinguish between offensive and defensive weapons, and thus by building only defensive weaponry it is possible to signal benign intentions. This is a costly signal in the sense that the sender is giving up its ability to attack another state. The problem with this approach is that it is almost impossible to make meaningful distinctions between defensive and offensive weaponry.

There was a clever attempt to solve this problem in Europe during the last decade of the Cold War. Many left-leaning European security experts argued that NATO should adopt a policy of 'defensive defense'. This was a way of signaling type. The idea was that if NATO deployed military forces that had little mobility, and therefore hardly any offensive capability, the West could signal to the Soviets that it did not have aggressive intentions, but rather was satisfied with the status quo. The problem with this approach was that a defensive force with hardly any mobility would not have been able to stand up to a Soviet offensive, which is why NATO never seriously pursued the idea.

Finally, I would argue that even if states could signal type, it would still be prudent for them to maximize their power. Let me explain. A state's leaders might be genuinely satisfied with the status quo and fully capable of conveying their benign intentions to the other states in the system. But what if those leaders, after ten years, change their mind and develop revisionist goals? Or what if they are simply replaced by leaders who have aggressive intentions? There is no reason that cannot happen in a world of costly signals. The problem, however, is that the potential victims, because they did not act like good offensive realists over the intervening ten years, may have passed up opportunities to gain power, which would have left them better prepared to deal with trouble down the road. The lesson here for states is simple: if the opportunity to gain an advantage over another state arises, take advantage of it.

The concluding part of the interview will be published in the next issue of *International Relations*.