

John J. Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*, Yale University Press, 2018, 313 p.

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*The Great Delusion*, written by John J. Mearsheimer, a leading realist theorist of international relations, is a critical volume towards the US foreign policy, which according to the author, ultimately tries to establish a liberal hegemony. Ergo, the book is twofold: (I) it criticizes the US grand strategy after the Cold War (II) by explaining the interaction between liberalism, nationalism, and realism in international politics. To Mearsheimer, the “profoundly liberal” US foreign policy has been subject to failure since the end of the Cold War, specifically after the millennium.

Liberal hegemony has three layers: as many states as possible being liberal democracies, a free and open international economy, and sublime international institutions. Establishing a liberal hegemony supposedly makes the world more peaceful, meaning nuclear proliferation and terrorism are no longer a security threat, reducing human rights violations. However, Mearsheimer’s theoretical insight suggests that US foreign policy targeting liberal hegemony is doomed to fail, for liberalism primarily harms the US and the international system by making the US an increasingly war-prone state trying to seek its interests. He explains the failure of the US foreign policy after the Cold War by focusing on the trichotomy stemming from the relationship between liberalism, nationalism, and realism.

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Chapter one, “The Impossible Dream,” posits the ambiguity of liberal hegemony. Mearsheimer argues that great powers are not in a position to pursue an entirely liberal foreign policy for three reasons. (I) In order to protect the global balance of power, great powers need to pay attention to what others are doing. Regardless of how liberal a great power sounds, it is realist in its acts. (II) The international political structure is anarchic. Liberal hegemony is utopic because states act according to the balance of power logic. (III) Although liberalism and nationalism get along well since nation-states are the main political entities, nationalism is the dominant side in this relationship. Nation-states would not give in to the efforts of a liberal hegemon to assert influence over them. Chapter two, “Human Nature and Politics,” deals with human nature. Nationalism and realism trump liberalism in their coherence with human nature; both take humans as social beings, whereas liberalism focuses solely on individuals.

Chapter three, “Political Liberalism,” distinguishes *modus vivendi* and progressive liberalism. *Modus vivendi* liberalism is a lifestyle in which personal rights are essential, and it refers to an individual’s freedom from state interference. For progressive liberalism, the state is essential to provide individuals’ right to equal opportunity and ensure the realization of these rights. Unlike *modus vivendi* liberalism, which favors the minimalist government, progressive liberalism is all for a solid and activist state capable of maintaining order and preventing conflict. Progressive liberalism, though, has two significant flaws: the prominence of individualism and the significance of inalienable rights. Chapter four, “Cracks in the Liberal Edifice,” elaborates on these. Once again, Mearsheimer argues that humans are social beings and the commitment to individualism downplays nationalism. The concepts of nation, nation-state, and nationalism prove liberal individualism wrong. A nation comprises a sense of oneness, distinct shared culture, superiority over others, deep common history, sacred territory, and sovereignty. The nation is a collective formation that facilitates survival and fulfills psychological needs. Mearsheimer argues that nationalism dominates over liberalism in politics because it is more pervasive, more important than individual rights, and more in sync with human nature.

Chapter five, “Liberalism Goes Abroad,” copes with the idea of a robust liberal state trying to apply its liberal template in the world. The establishment of liberal hegemony requires an interventionist foreign policy, fighting wars, and social engineering. While liberals find liberal hegemony achievable, Mearsheimer argues otherwise on two grounds. (I) The realist rules of the game bind liberal great powers. (II) Liberal hegemony is related to the balance of power. Pursuing a liberal foreign policy to achieve liberal hegemony is costly. Unknown intentions of states and their

survival instinct make international politics anarchic. Anarchy pushes the states into endless power rivalry. Combined with nationalism's reflex against liberal hegemonic social engineering, this structure would unveil high resistance against a great power pursuing liberal hegemony.

Chapter six, "Liberalism as a Source of Trouble," clarifies the war-proneness of liberal great power and the troubles it would face in pursuing liberal hegemony. Mearsheimer's argument that "a liberal unipole soon becomes addicted to war" is based on five factors (p. 169). (I) Global democratization is a vast mission. (II) Liberal policymakers believe they have the right, the responsibility, and the know-how to engage in military activity to reach their objective. (III) There is a missionary zeal in the liberal hegemony task. (IV) Pursuing liberalism at the systemic level undercuts diplomacy, hence complicating dispute resolution. (V) Liberal hegemony undermines sovereignty, the essential pillar of the modern state system. Moreover, it is also not an easy task to export democracy to illiberal states. The US experience in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and Syria shows that "even weak states are tough nuts to crack" (p. 181).

Chapter seven, "Liberal Theories of Peace," examines liberal international relations theories. There are three goals of liberal hegemony: increasing the number of liberal democracies, facilitating an open market economy, and establishing international institutions. These goals are encountered by three liberal theories: democratic peace, economic interdependence, and liberal institutionalism. These theories aim to establish global peace, yet they have no formula, according to Mearsheimer. They do not ensure war-free international politics; on the contrary, they accept that states engage in wars. The primacy of survival and the anarchic international system are dead ends for liberalism. These theories do not address these matters. They -by nature- are restricted in scope and condition-based.

In the final chapter, "The Case for Restraint," Mearsheimer argues that examining the post-Cold War US foreign policy within the framework of liberal hegemony requires the examination of liberalism with nationalism and realism. Realism and nationalism, despite the common belief, are less war-prone than liberalism. Realism –even offensive realism- dictates that the balance of power would prevent wars to a large extent. Nationalism restrains wars due to nation-states' preventive nature against the spread of universal influencers.

*The Great Delusion* is a suitable volume for students of international relations as well as non-expert readers. Mearsheimer's tone is finely adjusted to make matters less complicated. The book is sound in that it questions the potential of liberal theories in contrast with nationalism and realism and evaluates the general framework of

post-Cold-War US foreign policy. Opening a debate on nationalism's influence in international politics is a significant contribution. Mearsheimer argues that liberalism is a good "ism" for domestic affairs but not quite intense for the international arena. He recommends that the US restrain its grand strategy: "Due to the flaws of the liberal hegemony, the United States should jettison its grand ambitions of liberal hegemony." (p. 235).