



The Great Delusion:

Liberal Dreams and International Realities

By John J. Mearsheimer

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Reviewed by Burak Elmalı
Researcher at TRT World Research Centre

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In a public statement in which he announced that it was time for American military forces to withdraw from Iraq and Afghanistan shortly after taking office, President Joe Biden signalled the end of the 20-year war on terrorism. This statement, which recalled the question of whether a new direction will be given to American foreign policy, reminds us that the rationale of US foreign policy in the Middle East and beyond needs to be elaborated. In the book, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*, John J. Mearsheimer, a prominent international relations scholar within the realist tradition, provides a comprehensive outlook regarding US foreign policy in the aftermath of the Cold War. The main question he explores in the book has to do with what happens when a global hegemon pursues a foreign policy based on the principles of liberalism, rather than realism. Accordingly, the main thesis of the author is that the liberal orientation of US foreign policy between 1994 and 2017 was a great mistake because of the very fact that the main source of this particular foreign policy orientation, namely liberalism, is a less influential ideology than nationalism and realism. In other words, if one country aspires to follow a liberal foreign policy by attempting to spread liberal democratic values through force, it inevitably faces the force of nationalism in the target country. Nationalism as a powerful ideology vis-à-vis realism puts a limit on the actualization of liberal foreign policy in the target country. Moreover, the target country acts according to realist principles. The outcomes of such a foreign policy are ultimately restricted by nationalism and the sharp dictates of realism.

The book aims to contribute to international relations theory by showing the strong explanatory power of realism vis-à-vis liberalism in the making of foreign policy choices. It consists of eight chapters and a section for notes as well as an index. In the first chapter "The Impossible Dream", Mearsheimer lays the foundations of his main question and argument and then gives a brief outline of the following chapters. The main structure of the book can be separated into two parts: (1) theoretical foundations of liberalism and human nature, and (2) supporting evidence from the US foreign policy. The second, third, and fourth chapters primarily deal with explaining liberalism and demonstrating its flaws when applied to foreign policy. The fifth chapter lays the foundations of the following

chapters by putting liberalism in the context of foreign policy. The last three chapters are reserved for case studies and some policy prescriptions. Since the main focus of the author is to criticize the liberal motivations of post-Cold War American foreign policy, most of the explanatory cases were selected from the period 1994 to 2017 when the US was deeply committed to acting in foreign policy as a liberal hegemon that aspired to replace autocracies with liberal democracies.

In Mearsheimer's account, liberalism's core idea revolves around three fundamental concepts: inalienable rights, tolerance, and the need for a state for maintaining order. He then presents two main variants of liberalism based on the extent to which they deal with these fundamental principles: *modus vivendi* liberalism and progressive liberalism. While the former focuses on the limits of the critical faculties, the latter is heavily interested in individual rights and the social engineering of the state in order to promote them. Progressive liberalism is the dominant trend in American foreign policy and intellectual milieu (p.78). Therefore, the role of the state in progressive liberalism is based on interventionism in order to expand the inalienable rights and civil liberties in society. After exploring liberalism and human nature in the second and third chapters, Mearsheimer then makes a critique of liberalism, arguing that it has a strong particularism, which causes it to underestimate the strong role of nationalism in shaping the behaviour of individuals (p.111). In the fifth chapter titled "Liberalism Goes Abroad", he starts to put liberalism into the context of foreign policy. Accordingly, he stresses that pursuing liberal hegemony in foreign policy makes policymakers and intellectual elites aspire to topple authoritarian regimes and replace them with liberal ones. In the sixth chapter, Mearsheimer gives a number of examples from American foreign policy approaches to Afghanistan, Iraq, Egypt, Libya, and Syria. Contrary to the initial rationale of spreading liberal democracies across the globe, encouraging economic interdependence, and establishing liberal institutions, the liberal militarism of the US resulted in long-term conflicts, which then posed a serious obstacle to national and regional unification of the targeted areas, aside from the innumerable casualties and material losses. Once the liberal hegemon begins to wage war against an autocratic state, it becomes addicted to war, which ultimately eliminates any possibility of diplomatic negotiations (p.163).

Considering the current Russia-Ukraine war, another important point for this chapter is that it includes Ukraine as an explanatory case for his argument. According to Mearsheimer, Russian aggression towards Ukraine is ultimately the responsibility of the West, especially the United States. Accordingly, NATO expansion and the EU enlargement towards Eastern Europe, coupled with the alleged role of the US in the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine made Russia act in accordance with the dictates of realism against a growing pro-Western power on its borders (p.184). The Orange Revolution was a series of public protests aiming for democratization and liberalization of the country. It was significantly supported by the Western countries, particularly by the U.S through official statements and funded civil society organizations. NATO expansion towards Eastern Europe started in 1999 with the inclusion of Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. However, according to Mearsheimer, the critical moment that changed the Russian attitude towards Ukraine was the 2008 Bucharest NATO Summit where the potential membership of Ukraine and Georgia was discussed. The EU enlargement towards the post-Soviet countries was another main factor that affected Russia in terms of its narrowing sphere of influence. These three factors, therefore, have had a shaping role in the crisis. Although Mearsheimer criticizes the goals of liberal foreign policy and demonstrates the strong explanatory power of realism in the context of Ukraine, there have been criticisms of his argument. For instance, the Ukrainian people themselves were involved in the public protests aimed at democratization in 2004, and the role of the Western countries in terms of assistance can be considered relatively insignificant. It is said that as long as the elections or referendums in a country legitimately reflect the will of the people per se, it becomes an unwarranted accusation to claim that Western countries were either directly involved or imposed their will. The reality is that people themselves chose to seek a more liberal democratic country through fair and free elections. Another criticism of the argument has to do with an actor-based explanation. Accordingly, the conflict has escalated and turned into war because of Putin's unalterable aggressiveness. He is the one who perceived every act of Ukraine as a prospective threat to Russia's national interests, even if there was no such intention from the side of Ukraine. Moreover, Mearsheimer's assessment of Ukraine falls short of emphasizing domestic politics, which is also

an important part of the decision-making process even in authoritarian regimes. There can be several coalitional dynamics and types of bargaining within the Russian context (i.e., generals, state officials, and bureaucrats), but all of them are overlooked in the realist explanations of Mearsheimer. In realism, one should not expect to see any genuine discussion of domestic factors shaping foreign policy. It simply reduces conflicts, wars, and every act of nation-states into the struggle of maintaining survival in an anarchic world where the balance of power and self-interest are the only driving forces.

The seventh chapter of the book aims to refute alternative theories to realism, which are democratic peace, economic interdependence, and liberal institutionalism. The author here demonstrates the main flaws in each theory from historical records and present cases. In the last chapter titled "The Case for Restraint", Mearsheimer focuses mainly on the American foreign policy establishment as a whole and underlines the necessity of cutting ties with liberalism as a source of foreign policy and, instead, acting in compliance with what realism dictates in an anarchic international system. He also touches upon the prospective international power architecture of the world with the rise of China as a growing economic power and the resurrection of Russia.

Overall, the book *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* is supportive of the claim that any deviation from the operating principles of realism will result in failure. Regarding the content, it can be easily noticed that the book was written with a very precise language that does not allow any contradiction in meaning or linguistic complexity, both of which make readers easily follow the arguments. Also, Mearsheimer successfully establishes causal connections with the theoretical framework and accompanying evidence, showing the very easily understandable characteristics of realism in the family of international relations theories. It also takes a holistic approach to American foreign policy whose features are sometimes shown differently from Democrats to Republicans. Using several excerpts from other sources and quotes from politicians and foreign policy elites, the author strengthens his arguments.

Nevertheless, it is possible to see some shortcomings of the book. Firstly, Mearsheimer does not provide

elaborate explanations for liberalism, human nature, and nationalism, all of which are subjects of sophisticated discussions in the literature. In the second and third chapters, he mentions only the basic principles of both liberalism and nationalism but does not take into consideration the fact that each theory shows peculiar trajectories of development over time. Secondly, the conceptualization of democracy is a contested issue among scholars. When he gives the Kargil War between India and Pakistan in 1999 as a counterexample of liberal-democratic peace theory, he added a footnote describing both India and Pakistan democracies. However, the relevant Liberal Democracy Index scores by the Varieties of Democracy (V-DEM) Project for these actors are very different from one another. While India has a 0.6 liberal democracy score from 1998 to 1999, Pakistan had a score of 0.2, implying that criticizing democratic peace theory necessitates an elaborate assessment of the conceptualization of democracy that is still a contested topic. A similar problem is also seen in the case of the Boer War (1899-1902) between Britain and South Africa. While Britain had a liberal democratic score of 0.42, South Africa had a score of 0.11 during the same time frame. This is one of the interpretations of the relative weakness of the way Mearsheimer refutes democratic peace theory. Unless we have a comprehensive conceptualization and operationalization of democracy as a measurable concept, it would be hard to conclude that liberal-democratic peace theory is flawed because two countries can have profound differences in democracy in terms of the degree of its liberal qualities. New approaches to the operationalization of democracy, as well as a liberal component of it, will provide us with clearer insights into the democratic peace theory as an alternative to realism. Thirdly and lastly, Mearsheimer's emphasis on China as a rising power in a prospective multipolar world that is expected to increase the likelihood of realism as a *modus operandi* is insufficient. To comprehensively discard the alternative explanations based on liberalism, more explanations regarding the possible scenarios under which China would pose a challenge for the US are fundamentally important.

Nevertheless, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* clearly reflects the explanatory power of realism with a structured way of combining theory and evidence. While it is very difficult to establish causality in social sciences due to the interplay of

innumerable factors, Mearsheimer presents readers with a logical chain of events. Considering the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine in the context of the set of foreign policy strategies followed by the US, it is not wrong to say that realism continues to be one of the explanatory international relations theories.