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## BOOK REVIEW

### *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*

**Author:** John J. Mearsheimer

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John Mearsheimer, in his book “The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities,” presents a provocative thesis for scholars, policymakers, and general readers, challenging them to adopt a realistic approach to understanding global politics. He reinforces his arguments with real-world case studies for critical analysis, prompting readers to reevaluate their understanding of the complexities and limitations of liberal internationalism. He emphasizes the importance of realism, including power dynamics and national interests, over liberal idealism as the guiding principle for great powers’ Foreign Policy (FP). The book provides a three-level analysis: the individual level considers human nature in politics and the limitations of reason; “domestic politics” examines how internal political factors within a country shape its FP decisions; and “international politics” focuses on how global structures, the distribution of power, and interactions between states influence FP.

The author acknowledges the positive aspects of liberal ideals but criticizes their global applicability by highlighting the

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failed attempts to promote democracy in Iraq and Afghanistan. Mearsheimer also critiques liberal internationalism and the hypothesis of the “democratic peace theory,” which posits that democracies ultimately go for cooperation and are less likely to engage in wars, leading toward liberal internationalism and a more peaceful world. He argues that liberal democracies are delusional to operate under this illusion because historical evidence contradicts this notion. In fact, despite liberalism’s idealism, democracies often engage in aggressive FPs, leading to increased rather than decreased international conflict. The author refers to this as “endless wars,” which exacerbate issues such as nuclear proliferation and terrorism.

Therefore, Mearsheimer examines the consequences of prioritizing an “ambitious strategy” to convert as many nations as possible into liberal democracies, known as “Liberal hegemony,” instead of traditional balance-of-power politics. “Liberal democracy” involves the aspiration of establishing an “open international economy” and building “international institutions” to spread its own values globally. This approach is morally justified and strategically supported by many in the West because it may protect human rights that are often violated by authoritarian regimes, promote peace, as “liberal democracies do not want to go to war with each other”, and defend liberalism against “illiberal forces.” “Liberal Hegemony,” nevertheless, has several limitations.

In a multipolar world order, multiple states vie for dominance, leading to inevitable security competition and potential conflicts among the great powers. It impedes their ability to pursue a liberal FP exclusively. Instead, they prioritize their security and influence in the international system, challenging cooperation. Under such a structure, they often adopt a pragmatic or realist approach focused on strategic competition, maintaining balance, and protecting their interests. “Liberal democracies” cannot fully control the anarchy of the international system. He terms this misguided idealist approach a “tragedy of liberalism,” leading to poor policies. One of the examples he cites of failed liberal intervention is the poor policy of the Iraq war because the goal of spreading democracy, i.e., cooperation and promoting human rights on the global stage, was not achieved. Instead, Iraq further descended into sectarian violence that destabilized its social fabric.

A liberal state can only practice “Liberal Hegemony” entirely if it is the sole great power in a unipolar world, as it would not face security threats from other powerful states and can focus on the “crusader mentality” of spreading its liberal values internationally. Hence, in a multipolar world with multiple powerful states, especially with China’s growing military and economic strength, liberal hegemony becomes unsustainable. The liberal state is forced to adopt a more realistic approach to FP in such a scenario. Additionally, the militaristic behavior of liberal states abroad can threaten their own liberal values domestically. The book argues that “liberalism abroad leads to illiberalism at home.” Even if the liberal state achieves its goals of spreading democracy and fostering international cooperation, it does not necessarily result in peace.

Mearsheimer uses the Ukraine crisis to demonstrate how the notion of liberal internationalism led to Russia’s offensive actions, such as asserting control of Crimea’s annexation and supporting secessionists in eastern Ukraine. He argues that these moves do not reflect Russia’s repudiation of liberal values but rather a response to protect its security and regional interests from Western encroachment and expansionism through institutions like the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the European Union (EU). These examples underscore the limitations of liberal internationalism in addressing complex geopolitical issues; instead, power dynamics and security considerations are more pertinent in the real world, which requires a more power-based and pragmatic approach to international relations. The author also argues that nationalism undermines the idea of cooperation and a democratic, liberal international order. It influences state behavior accordingly and often leads to conflicts and competition between them. He exemplifies the rise of nationalistic leaders in the US and Europe as a significant challenge to the concept of liberal international order. These nationalistic leaders prioritized sovereignty and autonomy as their national agenda at the expense of global cooperation, multilateral liberal internationalism, and integration. They held their reigns by advocating populist policies and asserting their country’s sovereignty as supreme over supranational institutions. Either way, forming governments through populist narratives signals an intent to sustain national sovereignty, national interests, and national identity in a globalized world while challenging the

traditional norms and institutions associated with the liberal international order.

Nationalistic populist movements reject economic liberalism, including trade agreements like the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Mearsheimer contends that globalization and free trade agreements can exacerbate economic inequalities and lead to resentment and protectionist measures. Criticism is also directed at international institutions, with the claim that they are ineffective. He posits that institutions like the United Nations (UN) and NATO are seen as ineffective in enforcing norms and preventing or resolving conflicts. The international institutions failed to address the complex geopolitical issues, such as the ongoing Syrian crisis, despite numerous diplomatic efforts and peace initiatives. Not only did the conflict persist, but it also increased humanitarian suffering and regional instability. Mearsheimer discusses different perspectives on liberalism to highlight the flaws in the liberal edifice and challenge the assumption that liberal values can be universally applied in the international sphere, particularly in a multipolar world where great power competition remains central. He argues that the realpolitik has led to the failure of liberal hegemony, which began with the emergence of Trump, China's rise, and Russia's resurgence. In the post-Cold War period, the US operated as the sole great power in a unipolar world, allowing it to pursue liberal hegemony without competition. However, the rise of China and the resurgence of Russian power have transformed the global system. In this multipolar world, the US is forced to adopt realism in its FP. China has the potential to dominate, particularly in Asia, and the US FP will need to focus on balancing power to prevent unchecked dominance or the rise of a regional hegemon, which is a key realist principle.