

International Relations

Structural Realism

Professor John Mearsheimer:

Basically what I am is a structural realist. I'm a person who believes that it's the structure of the international system, it's the architecture of the international system that explains in large part how states behave. Another way to say that is I do not believe that domestic politics - I do not believe that the composition or the make-up of individual states matters very much for how those states behave on a day-to-day basis in international politics. And to be a bit more specific about this, I believe the fact that states live in what we call an anarchic system - that's a system where there's no higher authority that those states can turn to if they get into trouble - that fact coupled with the fact that states can never be certain that they won't end up living next door to a really powerful state that has malign intentions - all of that causes states to do everything they can to be as powerful as possible. And again, the reason that you want to be very powerful, that you want to pursue power, that you want to dominate your region of the world, is because in that situation, there is no other state that is capable of hurting you. If you're small and you're weak in the international system, that means you're vulnerable. If you don't have a lot of power, what happens is that the big, the powerful state is in a position where they can take advantage of you. And again, because the system is anarchic, because there's no higher authority that sits above states, there's nobody that you can turn to. There's no night watchman that you can call on the telephone to come and help you. So you're in a very vulnerable situation, and the way to avoid that is to be very powerful. And to give you a good example that really highlights this, think about the United States of America in the Western hemisphere. The United States is by far the most powerful country in the Western hemisphere. It has the Canadians on its northern border. It has the Mexicans on its southern border. It has fish on its eastern border and fish on its western border. No American ever goes to bed at night worrying about another country attacking it, and the reason is because the United States is so powerful. So the ideal situation for any state in the international system is to be as powerful as possible, because that's the best way to survive in a system where there's no higher authority, no night watchman, and where you can never be certain that you won't end up living next door to another country that has malign intentions and a lot of military power. In the world of realism, there are basically two sets of theories - what one might call the human nature realist theories and the structural realist theories. The human nature realists - Hans Morgenthau, of course, would be the most prominent example of this school of thought - believe that human beings are hardwired with what Morgenthau called an *animus dominandi*. To put this in slightly different terms, Morgenthau was saying that all

human beings are born with a Type A personality, and when they get into power, what they want to do is pursue power as an end in itself. So in that story, it's human nature - it's the way human beings are born that causes all this conflict in the international system. That's a very different way of thinking about the world than the structural realist argument. Structural realists like me and like Ken Waltz believe that it is the structure of the international system - it is the architecture of the system, not human nature - that causes states to behave aggressively. That's what causes states to engage in security competition. It's the fact that there's no higher authority above states, and that states can never be certain that another state won't come after them militarily somewhere down the road that drives these states to engage in security competition. So although both realist schools of thought lead to the same form of behaviour, which is a rather aggressive kind of competition, the root causes are different in the two stories. Again, on one side, you have the human nature realists who focus on the way human beings are hardwired, and on the other side, you have the structural realists, who focus on the basic way that the system is organised. My view is that the most important questions in international politics are what a theory should be concerned with, and there are really only a few big questions out there that matter. And these questions largely involve war and peace. And I think one of the great advantages of realism is that it has a lot to say. It doesn't provide perfect answers, but it has a lot to say about the big questions in international politics. And one of the attractions of realism is that it is a parsimonious theory, which is a sophisticated way of saying it's a simple theory. Realism is easy to understand. A handful of factors are said to describe why the world, or to explain why the world works in particular ways, why you get these very important events like World War I and World War II. And I think that that's the most important thing that a theory can do, is to provide simple explanations for very important events. This is not to say that we shouldn't have theories that explain minor actions or minor considerations or peripheral situations in the international system. But the most important theories, by definition, are going to be those theories that deal with the big questions. And the theories that are going to matter the most - and I believe this is why structural realism matters so much - are those theories that are nice and simple, that are parsimonious. I believe that if China continues to rise economically, that it will translate that economic might into military might, and that it will try to dominate Asia the way the United States dominates the Western hemisphere. I think that China, for good realist reasons, will try to become a hegemon in Asia, because I believe the Chinese understand now and will certainly understand in the future that the best way to survive in the international system is to be really powerful. The Chinese understand full well what happened to them between 1850 and 1950 when they were very weak. They understand what the European great powers, the United States and the Japanese did to them, and they want to make sure in the future that they're going to be very powerful. So I think they'll try to dominate Asia. The United States, on the other hand, does not tolerate what we sometimes call peer competitors. The United States does not want China to dominate Asia, and the United States will go to enormous lengths to prevent China from dominating Asia. And of course China's neighbours - this

includes Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Vietnam, India and Russia - will not want China to dominate Asia. So they will join with the United States to try to contain China much the way our European and Asian allies joined together with us during the Cold War to contain the Soviet Union. The same thing, I believe, will happen with China. So you will have this intense security competition between China, which is trying to dominate Asia, and the United States and China's neighbours, which are trying to prevent China from dominating Asia. So with regard to this question that lots of people are talking about today, can China rise peacefully? My answer is no, and my answer is based on my theory, because there's no way you can predict the future without a theory.