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(review): John J. Mearsheimer *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*

the Polish edition, Universitas, Wydawnictwo Nowej Konfederacji, Kraków – Warszawa 2021

John Mearsheimer is currently regarded as one of the most influential theorists of international relations in the United States, alongside Francis Fukuyama and the late Samuel Huntington.[2] Fukuyama became world-famous after the publication of *The End of History and the Last Man* (1996) which is now under sharp criticism as a naive prognosis that downplayed the significance of armed conflicts in international relations and expected the inevitable spread of liberal democracy as the most attractive model of socio-political life – a rather optimistic view of the future of international politics following the peaceful end of the Cold War. On the other hand, Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* (1996) made a huge impact with his concept of civilizational models, presented often in a logic of confrontation, primarily between Western and Islamic civilizations. His prognosis seemed to have been confirmed by the Al-Qaeda attacks on the United States in September 2001, followed by the declaration of war on terrorism.

Currently, after Huntington's death and the avalanche of criticism that fell upon Fukuyama, it is John Mearsheimer's diagnoses that seem to be generating

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[2] Of course, one should not underestimate the achievements of other American theorists of international relations. However, the individuals mentioned above appear to exert a particular influence on the debate within the field of international relations following the end of the Cold War.

the most intellectual ferment when it comes to the role of the United States in the international balance of power. As an offensive realist, Mearsheimer seems to be much closer to Huntington than Fukuyama, arguing that the primary goal of a state is to maximize its power and seek an advantage over other actors in international relations. This goal prevails over the concept of power balance, characteristic of defensive realism which leaves more room for international cooperation. Thus, in the world explained by offensive realism, states that aim to revise the international order are willing to take risky actions that are often contrary to their security interests (Czaputowicz, 2007, pp. 190–195; Mearsheimer, 2020).

Mearsheimer's book, *The Great Delusion. Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (2018, Polish edition 2021) starts with the description of relationships between three ideologies: liberalism, realism, and nationalism.[3] The second chapter, *Human Nature and Politics*, is an interesting attempt to link personal factors to political thinking, where Mearsheimer emphasizes the importance of socialization, emotions, and reason in shaping political attitudes, with reason being surprisingly the least significant. The following chapters deal with liberalism and its criticism, including the allegedly intolerant nature of liberalism associated with the fact that "most liberals consider liberalism superior to other types of political order" and "a sense of both vulnerability and superiority wired into liberalism fosters intolerance" (p. 79). This is undoubtedly an interesting interpretation of the essence of liberalism, it can certainly raise controversy and open up room for discussion. The book also includes a polemic with Fukuyama and his "end of history" (pp. 85–90).[4]

While in chapters III and IV Mearsheimer dwells on the main aspects of liberalism in domestic politics, later he concentrates on its influence on foreign policy. This is where a very interesting narrative begins, including multifaceted criticism of "liberal hegemony", which is "a highly interventionist foreign policy that involves fighting wars and doing significant social engineering in countries throughout the world". Mearsheimer believes that the main goal of liberal hegemony is the spread of liberal democracy and the overthrow of authoritarian

[3] Of course, one can debate the appropriateness of using the term 'ideologies' for all three concepts, especially from the perspective of an international relations theorist, for whom at least realism and liberalism are primarily theoretical paradigms aiming to describe and explain international relations (although liberalism can also be described as an ideology). However, for this review, let us set aside such dilemmas and accept this terminology.

[4] Page numbers according to the Polish edition of the book.

regimes. He presents arguments in favor of liberal hegemony that circulate in public debate and then subjects them to critical scrutiny. He emphasizes that the natural characteristic of states, especially great powers, is rivalry (as he extensively discussed a few years earlier in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, see footnote 4). In the face of anarchy in international relations, i.e., the absence of a higher regulator, states must act in the spirit of the realist paradigm, while liberal relations can only be created within states.

From Central and Eastern European perspective, Mearsheimer's views on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict can be surprising and unsettling. He refers to the overthrow of Viktor Yanukovych in February 2014 as a coup carried out with American support (pp. 219–220), although in another place he states that "the full extent of its [U.S. government's] involvement is unknown" (p. 273). The author presents Russia's well-known arguments about feeling threatened by NATO's approach to its borders and attempts to include Ukraine in the alliance. He emphasizes the Kremlin's determination to thwart Ukraine's integration with the West and its readiness for radical actions to secure control over this strategically important 'buffer zone' through which foreign armies have historically passed on their way to Russia (p. 274). Therefore, what is perceived from a Western perspective as expanding stability through NATO and the EU enlargement is seen as a serious threat by Russia, one that potentially places a hostile alliance on this buffer zone. This situation reflects a clash between liberalism (the West) and realism, supported by a hard geopolitical mindset (Russia). When discussing the crisis around Ukraine, the author states that "the United States and its allies unwittingly provoked a major crisis that shows no signs of ending" (p. 278). It is important to remember that these words were spoken several years before the full-scale conflict erupted in 2022. These Mearsheimer's ideas are undoubtedly very controversial from the perspective of Central and Eastern Europe, but their value lies in interpreting (not justifying) the motives behind Russia,s actions in the context of the conflict with Ukraine (see also an article published after the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in 2022: Mearsheimer, 2022, pp. 12–27).

One of the problems with Mearsheimer's line of argumentation is that most of his examples illustrating the significance of nationalism and national identities refer to the 19th century or the early 20th century. Strong loyalty to the nation and a willingness to sacrifice one's life for the nation is illustrated by the examples of fighting for one's homeland in the 19th century or during the World Wars. One can question the extent to which these examples are an adequate

response to the realities of the early 21st century. The current massive economic migration shows that after achieving a higher standard of living, migrants often do not return to their homelands, and their national loyalty sometimes does not extend beyond the symbolic sphere (maintaining a memory of their roots for one or two generations). There may also be doubts about whether attitudes of superiority of one's nation over others are the norm nowadays (although they are not uncommon), with the still strong memory of two World Wars. The book also lacks closer references to the relationship between nationalism and new phenomena typical of the early 21st century, such as the information and technological revolution and climate threats, among others. There are also no references to European integration, a process that could be seen as undermining the realist paradigm and strengthening the liberal one. Some of the examples of armed conflicts used to build counterarguments against the democratic peace theory are not entirely convincing for various reasons (pp. 302–306). There are also some minor factual inaccuracies. Louis XV could not have reacted to the French Constitution of 1791 because he died in 1774 (pp. 144–145). When referring to NATO expansion after the end of the Cold War, the statement that "save for the tiny Baltic countries [I assume Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia – MMK], none of the new NATO members bordered directly with Russia" does not take into account the border between Poland and the Russian Kaliningrad Oblast (p. 268).

According to Mearsheimer, liberalism inherently involves a desire to expand liberal democracy in other countries through the use of force. It seems that this assessment is heavily influenced by the American perspective. Although such interventionism did indeed appear to be a feature of U.S. policy after the end of the Cold War, European liberal democracies have hardly resorted to force to establish democratic order in non-democratic states.[5] Secondly, American willingness to forcefully promote democracy has been quite selective, which raises the question of whether the reason for interventionism was rather the pursuit of U.S. interests, with attempts to establish democracy being a secondary albeit still significant goal.

Do today's U.S. political elites really prioritize interventionism for the promotion of democracy as one of their key foreign policy objectives? While Americans do appreciate the importance of democracy and strengthening it globally

[5] In the actions conducted under the banners of humanitarian intervention or "Responsibility to Protect", such as in the cases of Serbia (1999) and Libya (2011), the objective was not democratization but rather the prevention of human rights violations.

in terms of values, equating this attitude with the principle of active interventionism to spread democracy is questionable. Nevertheless, Mearsheimer's book is certainly an excellent and insightful study of international relations. It unquestionably provides an interesting study of the critique of American foreign policy after the end of the Cold War (a trend that can also be seen in Fukuyama's *America at the Crossroads* from 2006), and, especially when combined with *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, an extremely interesting complement to the concept of offensive realism.

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