

22 December 2014

## A Reply to Mearsheimer

Is 'offensive realism', as articulated by John Mearsheimer, a useful theoretical framework for understanding international affairs? Anna Cornelia Beyer isn't convinced. She thinks the framework is wrong to prioritize relative over absolute gains and to underestimate the incentives for interstate cooperation.

By Anna Cornelia Beyer for ISN

---

*This [article](#) was originally published 5 September 2014 on the [ISN Blog](#)*

Realism is divided into defensive and offensive realism. Defensive realists, such as Kenneth Waltz, claim that states pursue only as much power as the states around them have. They don't want to dominate the international system but merely to be able to survive. Offensive realism, proposed by John Mearsheimer, challenges this perspective and maintains that states want to dominate the international system, at least to the point of becoming a regional hegemon. This is because, if they dominate, they will be secure from threats, as no other state will dare to challenge the hegemon. Defensive realists caution against this view, arguing that hegemony gives rise to balancing. Other states will do all they can to hold the hegemon in check. Power, in other words, creates counter-power. The international system strives for equilibrium. While I don't want to challenge this point of Mearsheimer's, I will address some of his other assumptions. In response to these assumptions, I will make the following points:

1. States pursue absolute gains first, then relative gains.
2. Relative gains are pursued in response to threats, not generally.
3. Acquiring latent power requires states to cooperate, making cooperation inherently necessary, even for defensive realists.
4. Balancing does take place, and not only between major powers, but also at other levels of analysis, and in other areas of international affairs.
5. Balancing will be mitigated by good relations. When relations are good, balancing does not need to occur.

I will go through these points in the order that they are presented here.

### **1. The priority of absolute gains**

I like to think of power as control. For me, control captures better what states are after. Power for me only describes the resources that states want. States want power, yes, but for what purpose? The purpose of power is control over themselves and their environment. Haidt observes in his musings on

happiness that control is a fundamental factor in happiness. I believe that this describes a normal human need, and also a need that applies to states. What do states want to control? If we apply Maslow's hierarchy of needs, we can assume that survival is the basis for control. Structural realists are therefore right to argue that the first goal of control is survival. States want to be in control of threats to their survival. For me, this is why states prioritize absolute gains in terms of the efficiency of the economy and the state. If we look at failed states, they are threatened more by internal problems and economic dysfunction than by external threats. And I believe that this holds for other states also. If the stability of the state cannot be ensured, a state won't be able to compete internationally. The Soviet Union towards the end of the Cold War provides an example of this. The Soviet Union ended its competition with the United States because it experienced severe internal economic distress. It needed to focus on absolute gains first, before it could even think of engaging in competition again.

## **2. Relative gains are pursued in response to threats.**

Relative gains are pursued when the application of force is possible, when states are under threat. They are not pursued generally. The pursuit of absolute gains is possible when no threats are posed towards the state. Realists argue that all states at any time are under threat from each other, but this is not always the case. Consider the European Union or Switzerland for example. These states are pursuing mainly economic gains, not military ones, which contradicts the predictions of realism. Economic gains cannot be understood here as latent power. Mearsheimer sees economic power as latent power. He argues that latent or economic power is solely pursued for military purposes, as the basis for military armament. But neither the EU nor Switzerland maintains a large army. So, my point is, that under threat, yes, military arms races and relative gains seeking are the norms. But when no direct threat is perceived, absolute gains might dominate the agendas of states.

## **3. Cooperation is natural**

My third point is that, in order to gain latent power, states will need to cooperate. This contradicts the logic of realism, which considers the possibilities of cooperation to be limited. However, it assumes that states are fundamentally interested in latent power, economic wealth, and pursue this along with military armament. However, in today's world economic growth is not possible without significant international cooperation. Wealth depends on being integrated into the international system. China, for example, would not have attained its current position, nor will it realize the future that many predict, without relying substantially on exports and hence trade cooperation with other countries. It also has substantial financial ties to other countries. The same goes for the US, the EU, and all other great powers in the international system. Isolated states cannot build latent power, and thereby undermine their position in international power competition. This means that the realist logic depends on the liberal logic of interdependence and trade. Without considering the importance of interdependence and trade, states will not be able to compete. The balance of power logic is therefore counterbalanced by a more liberal logic of interdependence that mitigates the security dilemma and creates zones of peace.

## **4. Balancing takes place at many levels.**

This point is probably the most supportive of Mearsheimer as it argues for the reality of balancing. I argue that balancing takes place not only between great powers, but also at many other levels in the multidimensional chessboard that Joseph Nye has described. For instance, states balance each other economically. The world economy is one of competition, and states want to grow at the expense of others. This competition, however, is largely contained within the economic realm. Sub-state actors such as Al Qaeda also engage in traditional military balancing. While they can never hope to equal the US in military capabilities, they seek to increase their power so that they can either be secure from

any US attack or so that they can inflict damage on the US. Indeed, balancing is a mechanism which has been described in many different areas, at the level of national politics, and even at the private level in romantic couples. Sociologists and political scientist alike are interested in the balance of power.

## **5. Balancing does not need to occur if relations are good.**

The EU does not balance against the US. It would, however, if relations with the US were to deteriorate. But, at present, it does not. It simply tries to build its economic power. Balancing does not need to occur when relations are good and when no threats are perceived. This follows from the points made above. Only when threats are perceived, and control is therefore endangered, will states start to balance.

*For more information on issues and events that shape our world, please visit [ISN Security Watch](#) or browse our [resources](#).*

---

Dr. Anna Cornelia Beyer is author of many books, most prominently: Inequality and Violence (2014, Ashgate), Counterterrorism and International Power Relations (2010, IB Tauris), Violent Globalisms (2008, Ashgate). More information on her [website](#) or on [Facebook](#).

---

## **Publisher**

[International Relations and Security Network \(ISN\)](#)

---

Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International  
(CC BY-SA 4.0)

---

<http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Articles/Detail/?id=186080&lng=en>

---

ISN, Center for Security Studies (CSS), ETH Zurich, Switzerland