

Introduction

- America appeared to be the leading power in a "unipolar" world at the end of the Cold War and for about two decades thereafter.
- Now, though, many see American power as declining while that of others—China, Russia, and various regional powers—as rising.
- But other powers appear to be experiencing problems with extending their influence in their immediate vicinity. Russia in particular has hit a roadblock to its ambitions in Ukraine and Europe.
- How significant, then, is the reported decline in American power when the rise of others is encountering significant obstacles?

Mearsheimer's *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*

- In *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (2001, 2014), IR theorist John Mearsheimer set forth a standard for measuring great power strength in relation to one another: their influence in various regions of the world.
- According to Mearsheimer, great power competition—including over influence in all regions of the world—is unceasing.
- Also according to him, America is the only country that has achieved predominant influence in its own region (the Western Hemisphere) and has been able to prevent any other great power from dominating any other region.
- He saw this as being true both in the 2001 edition of his book and also in the 2014 one despite setbacks which the US had experienced by then.
- He foresaw, though, that China would attempt to become the predominant power in Asia like the US had done in the Western Hemisphere, and that the US and China would clash over this.

The Mearsheimer Test

- However much American power and influence may have declined and that of others risen, the real question is whether America can still pass what I call the "Mearsheimer Test":
- Is the US still the predominant power in the Western Hemisphere and able to prevent any other great power from dominating any other region?
- In other words: Can any great power challenge US predominance in the Western Hemisphere and/or gain predominant influence over any other region of the world?

How to Measure?

- These questions cannot be answered definitively, but something can be said about whether the conditions in the various regions of the world are propitious for the US to prevent any other great power from dominating them (or seriously challenging US influence in the Western Hemisphere).
- The US can best do this when "supply" and "demand" factors are present.
- Demand: States in a region fear that another state (either internal or external to the region) seeks dominance in it and seek US support in preventing this.
- Supply: The US must be willing and able to provide (in conjunction with others) sufficient support to those states demanding it.

Regions and Subregions

- Mearsheimer wrote about large-sized regions as arenas of great power competition (Asia, Europe, the Middle East, Africa, Western Hemisphere).
- Their size alone makes America's self-appointed task of preventing other great powers from dominating them easier since it is harder to dominate a larger region than a smaller one.
- Larger regions have more states which seek to avoid being dominated by another great power.
- Some regions—especially Asia—are so large that it makes more sense to discuss the subregions within them.
- Prospects for US preventing a power from dominating a subregion may differ from its prospects for preventing a power from dominating a larger, continental-sized region.

Asia

- Like Mearsheimer, the US Government has identified China as the greatest challenge to the US. It makes sense, then to focus first on whether the US can prevent China from dominating the region it is located in: Asia. US has other rivals in Asia, but none in a position to dominate the continent as a whole (and certainly not dominate China).
- The US not only has several allies and partners in Asia, but Asia is so large that it would appear very difficult for even a strong China to dominate all the countries and subregions bordering it, especially if the US supports countries resisting this.
- Task of dominating all Asia too immense to accomplish all at once. China could, though, try to dominate one or more subregions bordering it.

Asian Subregions

- Northeast Asia: US alliances with Japan, ROK make Chinese attempt to dominate this region unlikely. Demand for and supply of US support both present.
- Special case of Taiwan: China has repeatedly expressed the aim of reclaiming this island. No formal US commitment to Taiwan, but US (esp. Pres. Biden) has indicated intention to defend it. Demand for US support strong; supply likely.
- Southeast Asia: Some states have close ties to China, but US has both formal and informal allies here. Demand for and supply of US support present to some degree.
- South Asia: Largest state in region, India, sees China as an adversary. No formal US-India alliance likely, but India has sought and US has provided some support.
- Central Asia: Especially since US withdrawal from Afghanistan, no significant US presence here. US might be unable to supply support to Central Asian states even if they sought it.
- "North Asia": Russia not demanding US support against China. US can't help Mongolia.

Europe

- Russia the main challenger in Europe.
- NATO Europe: Demand for and supply of US support strongly present. Especially while being bogged down in Ukraine, Russia is not in a position to alter this.
- Non-NATO former Soviet Europe:
 - Ukraine: Largest of these states. No formal NATO defense commitment, but US and NATO have responded to Ukrainian demand for support with huge supply. Russian aims stymied.
 - Others: US not committed to supply support; Belarus not seeking it. What happens in Ukraine war may impact whether Moldova and Georgia can obtain US/NATO support.

Middle East

- Unlike Asia and Europe where US seeks to prevent mainly one great power (China in former, Russia in latter) from gaining predominance, the Middle East is a region where there are several powers vying for influence, including Russia, China, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the UAE.
- America's Israeli and Arab allies seek US support against Iran and/or jihadists, but not against Russia or China whom they view as partners.
- So many global or regional great powers vying for influence in the Middle East that the US may not have to do anything to prevent any of them from becoming predominant.
- But continuing US presence serves to help America's allies prevent this at lower cost to themselves. Demand for and supply of US support less certain than in Europe or Northeast Asia, but still present.

Africa

- Africa is also an arena where several powers are in contention. French influence retreating while Russian and Chinese influence have grown. But other actors also present: Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the UAE. Egypt and South Africa are within-Africa regional powers.
- Strong jihadist presence has induced several countries to turn to Russia (Wagner) for support, but Russia has been no more successful at eradicating this threat than Western powers.
- Demand for and supply of US security assistance in Africa is weak, but competition for influence among many makes it difficult for any one of them to dominate any region of Africa much less all of it.

Oceans

- Mearsheimer did not discuss competition over oceans, but these have heated up.
- Pacific Ocean: For the first time since 1945, US and its allies have faced serious competition for influence in the Pacific.
- Chinese influence growing (security agreement with Solomon Is.), but other island nations seem less amenable to Chinese influence.
- Arctic Ocean: Russia not in a position to predominate.
- Indian Ocean: Many present, but no power able to predominate.
- Atlantic Ocean: US remains predominant.

Western Hemisphere

- Mearsheimer argued that while US could prevent others from becoming predominant in other regions, the US was the predominant power in the Western Hemisphere.
- But US predominance clearly being challenged mainly by China but also by Russia. US doesn't seem to pass the Mearsheimer test here.
- Challenges to US influence in the Western Hemisphere, though, are not new. Mearsheimer himself pointed out several instances since Monroe Doctrine (1823):
 - France under Napoleon III during the US Civil War;
 - Imperial Germany during World War I;
 - Nazi Germany before and during World War II;
 - Soviet Union during the Cold War.
- Mearsheimer, then, may have exaggerated the extent of US predominance in the Western Hemisphere. Like now, it has been contested in the past. Still, most Western Hemisphere have joined Washington in seeking to prevent dominance of any other power over the region.

Conclusion

- Despite US withdrawals from Afghanistan and Iraq and the image that American power is declining while that of others is rising, America can still pass the Mearsheimer test in all the major regions of the world, even if not in all subregions.
- This should remain true so long as there are governments with demands for US support to prevent other powers from acquiring predominance in their region and so long as the US is willing to supply it.
- Russia-Ukraine war has shown that fierce local resistance combined with US/Western support for country under attack and sanctions against the invader can raise the costs for America's great power rivals to attempt to dominate even a subregion where they would appear most able to do so.

Further Information

- This presentation is a summary of Mark N. Katz, "The United States and Regional Great Power Rivalry: Can America Still Pass the Mearsheimer Test?" Finnish Institute of International Affairs (FIIA) Working Paper no. 133, April 25, 2023, <https://www.fia.fi/en/publication/the-united-states-and-regional-great-power-rivalry>
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