

Correspondence

Back to the Future, Part III: Realism and the Realities of European Security

Bruce M. Russett
Thomas Risse-Kappen
John J. Mearsheimer

T*o the Editors:*

In "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War," John Mearsheimer gives an allegedly "realistic" and certainly pessimistic forecast.¹ One definition of an optimist is "a person who says this is the best of all possible worlds." A pessimist can be defined in precisely the same terms. Mearsheimer, lamenting the passing of the Cold War, qualifies as a pessimist.

His classical "realist" proposition is that states must inevitably fight one another in the unceasing anarchic struggle for power and security. Whether that proposition is in fact accurate or *realistic*, however, is a question about which observers have profound disagreement. If we all act as though the world is an arena of raw struggle, red in tooth and claw, we can surely make it so. Mearsheimer's remedies—continued reliance on nuclear weapons and their proliferation, and on the continued deployment of American and Soviet military forces in Europe—would help to make his prophecy self-fulfilling. It is pernicious and erroneous as well as pessimistic to pretend that there is no alternative.

Mearsheimer's argument implies that institutions and ideologies are irrelevant; only the "realities" of power competition matter. Thus how we govern ourselves, and how our adversaries and former adversaries govern themselves, makes no difference to the prospects for war-avoidance. But do we really believe that about the demise of Soviet communism? Moreover, he conveniently ignores the vast and powerful network of institutions that have been painstakingly built up to help keep West Euro-

Bruce M. Russett is Dean Acheson Professor of International Relations at Yale University.

Thomas Risse-Kappen, a German, is an Assistant Professor of Government at Cornell University's Peace Studies Program, and is currently on leave at International Security Programs, Yale University.

John J. Mearsheimer is Professor and Chair of the Department of Political Science at the University of Chicago.

1. John J. Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe After the Cold War," *International Security*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Summer 1990), pp. 5–56.

International Security, Winter 1990/91 (Vol. 15, No. 3)
© 1990 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College and of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

peans at peace with one another for almost half a century. Were the founders of European integration really so ignorant?

His chain of argument has many weak links, including the arguments about the alleged stability of bipolar systems and the alleged virtues of nuclear proliferation. I will concentrate, however, on his attempt to compare the explanatory power of his theory with the theory that democracies respect the democratic rights of other peoples, and hence that democracies rarely fight each other. Like realism, this is a venerable theoretical position, dating back to Immanuel Kant. Unfortunately, Mearsheimer does not give it a fair shake empirically. It does not depend on a mere few prominent examples: from 1900 to 1939 there were as many as 28 democracies, none of which warred against each other. Since 1945 the number has often been as high as 25 and sometimes as high as 50, still with no wars, and with relatively few militarized disputes, between democracies. Mearsheimer says that there have been some almost-wars, and that's true—but just the point: democracies, whatever their conflicts of interest, have held back from full-scale wars with each other.

It may not be as absolute as a law of physics that democracies will not war against each other, but a few quasi-exceptions (and there are one or two more plausible than Wilhelmine Germany as a quasi-democracy) do not undermine the generalization or the theoretical argument. Furthermore, since World War II the evidence seems to hold up, even when controlling for possible confounding variables: e.g., that rich states, or economically growing states, or allies, or physically distant states rarely fight each other.²

Nationalism in emerging democracies can be a dangerous instrument where state boundaries and ethnic boundaries do not coincide. But nationalism can also discourage conquest by making conquered nations ungovernable by imperial powers. This, as much as the competitive pursuit of power, is a lesson to be drawn from the twentieth century.

Mearsheimer is, at heart, peddling an academic theory. That is his business, and mine too. But the market for these wares is the public and the policy-making community in much of the world for the next decade. In Marxism-Leninism we have just seen the collapse of an academic theory after it inflicted untold suffering on the real world. If we are to operate with "realism" as the dominant interpretation of world politics, realism and its competitors deserve the most rigorous evaluation of which we are capable. The shape of the world will depend on which theory we think is true, and what we do to try to make it come true. International institutions and mutual respect for other peoples' principles of governance are

2. See chapter 5 of my recent book: Bruce M. Russett, *Controlling the Sword: The Democratic Governance of National Security* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990); and Zeev Maoz and Bruce Russett, "Alliances, Contiguity, Wealth, and Political Stability: Is the Lack of Conflict Among Democracies a Statistical Artifact?" paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, San Francisco, September 1990.

as much a part of that process as are nuclear weapons and troops stationed on foreign soil.

—Bruce M. Russett
New Haven, Conn.

T*o the Editors:*

John Mearsheimer's analysis¹ has a number of problems that follow from his use of the structural realist paradigm; this paradigm ignores domestic politics as well as international institutions and is, therefore, unable to explain change in the international system. Let me point to two of these misconceptions.

Mearsheimer ignores international arrangements that try to solve the problems he addresses in a cooperative way. For example, he does not mention the European détente process which, within the limits of the bipolar structure, nevertheless has profoundly changed the level of tensions between the two blocs since the 1970s.² Détente in Europe survived a hard test during the early 1980s, when both superpowers were locked in a renewed confrontation in the aftermath of the Afghanistan crisis. Détente provided an international climate conducive to peaceful domestic change in Eastern Europe. For example, the "Helsinki process" of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) opened a window of opportunity for human rights groups in the East to raise their demands. The Mazowieckis, the Kurons, and the Havel who are now running the new democracies in Eastern Europe all became politically active during the era of the Helsinki process. Détente allowed for the emergence of civil societies in many Eastern European countries, as a result of which the communist regimes became empty shells which collapsed immediately when the Soviets withdrew their tanks. This process of domestic transformation was well underway before 1989, which explains the extraordinary peacefulness of the revolutions.³

1. John J. Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe After the Cold War," *International Security*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Summer 1990), pp. 5–56. Subsequent references to this article appear in parentheses in the text.

2. Unfortunately, no comprehensive overview of the European détente process is available in English. See, however, Jonathan Dean, *Watershed in Europe* (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1987); Raymond Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1985); and John J. Maresca, *To Helsinki: The Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, 1973–1975* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1985).

3. Therefore, I am more optimistic regarding Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary than is Jack Snyder. While taking international institutions seriously, he fears "praetorianism" in these countries, but overlooks the development of civic cultures during the last fifteen years. See Snyder, "Averting Anarchy in the New Europe," *International Security*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (Spring 1990), pp. 5–41. One should, at a minimum, not treat all East European countries alike.

Moreover, détente provided the institutional arrangements that will allow the Europeans to deal peacefully with future conflicts. As a result, and contrary to Mearsheimer's expectations, these institutions have been strengthened rather than weakened during the first year of the post-Cold War era. The CSCE, the only all-European institution that includes the two superpowers and Canada, is likely to assume a major role in crisis prevention and management. The new Eastern European democracies are particular supporters of strengthening the CSCE's decision-making apparatus. NATO, which Mearsheimer sees as nothing but a traditional alliance to contain an external threat (p. 52), has long adjusted to détente and arms control since it embraced such goals in the 1967 "Harmel Report." At present, the Western Alliance is far from disintegrating, but instead has gone a long way, at its most recent London summit, to redefine its purpose from containment to reassurance and "common security." While the number of U.S. troops in Europe will be reduced over the coming years, neither the majority of Europeans nor the Americans themselves want the United States to "abandon the Continent" as Mearsheimer predicts (p. 52). Finally, the process of European economic integration is currently accelerating towards the creation of the 1992 Single Market, rather than slowing down as one would expect if Mearsheimer were correct that the EC was held together by the Soviet threat.

Mearsheimer's fixation on military power as the sole guarantor of stability not only leads him to overlook the contribution of international institutions in maintaining peace and stability in Europe. It also lets him suggest a therapy—"modest" nuclear proliferation (pp. 38–39)—that would be bound to lead to precisely the kind of crises he wants to prevent. A united Germany going nuclear is guaranteed to provoke the worst nightmares among its neighbors, including the Soviet Union, already concerned about Germany's economic and political power. Well aware of the German past, most European states are likely to do almost anything to prevent it from acquiring nuclear weapons. Luckily, however, there is no indication that Mearsheimer's advice will be followed. United Germany has reconfirmed its adherence to the Non-Proliferation Treaty and is currently foremost among those favoring deep cuts in the nuclear arsenals in Europe.

The jury is, of course, still out on the future of Europe, and there are enormous problems to deal with in the post-Cold War environment. However structural realism, which is hardly capable of explaining the past and accounting for the recent radical changes, does not seem to be a reliable candidate for predicting the future. European events so far in 1990 mostly contradict Mearsheimer's gloomy outlook.

—Thomas Risse-Kappen
New Haven, Conn.

The Author Replies:

Professors Bruce Russett and Thomas Risse-Kappen challenge my pessimistic assessment of the prospects for stability in post-Cold War Europe, which I articulated in

"Back to the Future: Instability in Europe After the Cold War," *International Security*, Summer 1990. They make a number of interesting points, and I appreciate the opportunity to respond. I will deal with their arguments in turn.

Russett is right to argue that I believe, like other Realists, that states constantly compete for power and security. He is wrong, however, to suggest that I maintain that "states must inevitably fight one another." Peace is mainly a function of the geometry of power in the international system, and certain configurations may be very peaceful while others are more prone to war. I prefer the bipolar Cold War order precisely because it has not led to a shooting war in Europe.

Russett maintains that if the states of the new Europe act as if they live in a dangerous world, they will transform an otherwise peaceful continent into an "arena of raw struggle." But those states also risk their own destruction if they act as if they were in a peaceful world, but are actually in a dangerous one. It only takes one state to disturb Europe's tranquility, so the key question is whether *all* the states of post-Cold War Europe will have benign intentions.

Why should we expect trouble in the new Europe? At an abstract level, anarchy provides states with strong incentives to increase their power at the expense of potential rivals, thus making it virtually impossible to conceive of a Europe populated by status quo powers. The historical record supports this proposition. Since the inception of the modern state system in 1648, politics among European states has revolved around the competition for power. Military rivalry on the Continent did not start when the Soviets and Americans moved into the heart of Europe in 1945, and it is hardly likely to end when the superpowers draw down their forces. It would therefore be imprudent for states not to worry about the balance of military power in post-Cold War Europe.

Russett bases his optimism about Europe's future on two factors: the presence in Europe of a "vast and powerful network of institutions" that will keep the peace, and the belief that democracies do not fight each other. I have dealt with these arguments at some length in "Back to the Future," so I will offer very brief comments here.¹

First, it is an exaggeration to claim there is a "vast and powerful network of institutions" in place in Europe today. Furthermore, the existing institutions are a by-product of Cold War Europe; they may not survive in their present form in the new Europe, much less grow increasingly powerful with time. Second, there is no theory in the international relations literature that demonstrates that institutions can significantly alter state behavior and thus provide order in a multipolar Europe.² Third, institutions have had little impact in the past. Why should anyone believe that the world has changed and institutions will have great influence on future developments in Europe?

1. Also see my letter in "Correspondence: Back to the Future, Part II: International Relations Theory and the Future of Europe," *International Security*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (Fall 1990), pp. 194–199.

2. Robert Keohane is one of the best-known proponents of the argument that institutions matter in international politics. However, as I noted in *ibid.*, pp. 196–199, close examination of his writings reveals that even he does not claim that institutions matter very much.

Russett's main point about the theory of peace-loving democracies is that I do not give it a "fair shake empirically."³ I recognize that there were more than 20 democracies between 1900 and 1939 and that since 1945 the number sometimes has been even greater.⁴ These numbers are deceiving, however, because many of these democracies were not contiguous and thus not in a likely position to fight one another.⁵ For example, is it surprising that Canada and Switzerland, or Israel and Norway, have not fought each other? Looking at the universe of cases over time, a handful of potential conflict situations involving democracies stand out. In "Back to the Future," I zeroed in on these, arguing that there are more persuasive explanations than the theory of peace-loving democracies for why war did not occur in those cases.

Turning from the empirical record to the logic of the argument, there are good reasons for doubting Russett's claim that transnational respect for individual rights makes war between democracies highly unlikely. Nationalism can be a very powerful force in democracies, causing them to eye each other with deep suspicion. There is always the danger that a rival democracy will become an authoritarian state; this logic creates powerful incentives for democracies to fear each other.

Finally, there is some truth in Russett's observation that future European wars are less likely because nationalism can make it difficult to govern a conquered people. But even highly nationalistic states do not always rise up against invaders. The French, for example, accommodated themselves to Nazi rule in World War II. Moreover, conquering states that are willing to be ruthless—and there have been plenty of these in recent times—can usually subjugate apparently ungovernable states. The Soviet Union, after all, managed for 45 years to control Eastern Europe, an area where nationalism is a potent force. Hitler's Germany surely would have been able to impose order in Eastern Europe had it prevailed in World War II.

Thomas Risse-Kappen takes me to task for ignoring the "European détente process" of the past two decades, which he sees as a powerful force for peace in post-Cold War Europe. This particular détente, however, was a direct consequence of the bipolar order that structured inter-state politics in Europe for the past 45 years; it involved a relaxation of tensions between the two blocs that dominated the Continent. There are not going to be two blocs in a multipolar Europe, so this détente has little relevance for the future. If there is going to be détente in post-Cold War Europe, it will have to involve a different set of actors and be built on a fundamentally different foundation than the recent détente.

Risse-Kappen's optimism is predicated in good part on his faith in international institutions. I have already outlined my views on this subject, but I will add two

3. It is worth noting that democracy might not take firm hold in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, thus rendering this theory irrelevant.

4. For a list of liberal democracies between 1700–1982, see Michael W. Doyle, "Liberalism and World Politics," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 80, No. 4 (December 1986), p. 1164.

5. Melvin Small and J. David Singer write, "The incidence of geographic continuity between democratic nations is quite small. Thus if war is most likely between neighbors, and if bourgeois democracies have rarely been neighbors, this may well explain why they have rarely fought against one another." See "The War-Proneness of Democratic Regimes, 1816–1965," *The Jerusalem Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (Summer 1976), p. 67.

points. First, not only is it questionable whether key institutions, such as NATO, "have been strengthened rather than weakened during the first year of the post-Cold War era," but second, and more important, the Cold War order has *not* yet disappeared. After all, Germany remained divided until October 1990, and hundreds of thousands of Soviet and U.S. troops are still located on German territory. Thus, it is too soon to determine whether European institutions, which were by-products of the Cold War, will flourish in a multipolar Europe as he claims, or wither as my theories predict.⁶

Risse-Kappen also makes the familiar argument that a united Germany's neighbors would "do almost anything to prevent" it from acquiring nuclear weapons. Their behavior, he argues, will be motivated by remembrance of the past. This explanation is not wrong, but it is incomplete. In fact, what really motivates the fear of Germany going nuclear is the belief that the Germans can never be trusted to behave responsibly. This amounts to saying that Germans are congenital aggressors. Of course, past German behavior has helped shape this widely held but rarely stated perception.

There is an important and revealing contradiction in Risse-Kappen's analysis. He dismisses as misguided Realism my claim that security competition will define international relations in post-Cold War Europe, and instead envisions a Europe populated with trusting states enjoying the fruits of continued détente. Yet he argues that European states will not trust Germany. On the one hand, Europeans trust each other (including the Germans) and peace and harmony will prevail; but on the other hand, they do not trust a nuclear Germany, which suggests Europe will continue its rich tradition of balance-of-power politics.

If the Germans cause trouble in the new Europe, it will not be a consequence of peculiar aggressive traits. Germans are *not* born to aggress. An acute sense of insecurity is instead likely to be the source of trouble. The root causes of it will be Germany's exposed location in the center of the Continent and its non-nuclear status. Telling the Germans they cannot ameliorate their security concerns with nuclear weapons because they are not trustworthy is certain to infuriate them and will only serve to worsen relations between Germany and its neighbors. It is time to face up to the fact that permitting the Germans to acquire nuclear weapons is better than the alternative.

—John J. Mearsheimer
Chicago, Illinois

6. Also see Stanley Hoffmann's letter in "Correspondence: Back to the Future, Part II," pp. 191–192, and my response in *ibid.*, p. 195.