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## John Mearsheimer in China: Offensive Realism Resonates Amid Intellectual Rivalry

By Yao Bowen

### SYNOPSIS

*John Mearsheimer's offensive realism resonates in China, aligning with its historical narratives and strategic perspectives. His critiques of US policy bolster China's narrative of containment while exposing tensions in Western academia. This paradox underscores the cultural and academic competition between the US and China, raising questions about intellectual independence and global influence.*

### COMMENTARY

In October 2024, John Mearsheimer, one of America's most prominent international relations scholars, delivered [lectures at China's top universities](#), including Tsinghua and Renmin, drawing large audiences and engaging in high-profile debates. This warm reception in China contrasts sharply with his marginalisation in US academic circles, where his theory of offensive realism often meets criticism. This paradox raises key questions about why Mearsheimer's ideas resonate in China and what this dynamic reveals about the broader US-China intellectual and cultural rivalry, particularly the differing approaches the two countries take toward international relations.

Mearsheimer's offensive realism, which posits that states in an anarchic international system must maximise their power to ensure survival, has significant implications for great power politics. While his ideas have influenced US policy debates, particularly regarding China and Russia, they are often dismissed as overly deterministic or cynical in the American academic landscape. Yet, these very ideas find fertile ground in China, where historical, cultural, and geopolitical factors align closely with the tenets of offensive realism.

## Mearsheimer's Theory and Its Relevance to US Policy

Mearsheimer's [offensive realism](#) argues that great powers are inherently driven to seek dominance in an anarchic international system to secure their survival. This perspective sees conflict between rising and established powers as inevitable; a framework often applied to the US-China rivalry. In the United States, his work has informed debates on issues like NATO expansion, the containment of China, and military intervention.

Despite the acceptance of his ideas in China, Mearsheimer has faced growing marginalisation in American academia, where progressive ideals emphasising multilateralism and liberal values dominate. His critiques of military overreach and skepticism toward international institutions contrast with the prevailing norms. Nonetheless, elements of his thought, such as his [critique of NATO's role in provoking Russia](#) or his call for restraint in military engagements, have subtly shaped US policy discussions.

## Why Mearsheimer Resonates in China

Mearsheimer's theories align with China's historical narrative of the "Century of Humiliation", marked by imperialist invasions and exploitation. This period fostered a deep skepticism of international cooperation and reinforced a realist worldview focused on power and survival. Mearsheimer's acknowledgement of US intentions to contain China's rise aligns with Chinese perspectives, providing what many see as a rare moment of honesty from an American scholar.

Culturally, Mearsheimer's steadfast defence of offensive realism resonates with Chinese values. In traditional narratives like *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, characters who exhibit loyalty and strategic consistency, even when opposed to the mainstream, are admired. Mearsheimer's intellectual integrity and unyielding commitment to his views, despite criticism in the US, fit this archetype. For many in China, he exemplifies the kind of principled thinker who transcends national boundaries.

The Chinese government tacitly encourages Mearsheimer's popularity. His critiques of US foreign policy and emphasis on the inevitability of conflict between great powers align with Beijing's narrative of Western aggression against China. By amplifying voices like Mearsheimer's, the government reinforces its strategic messaging while maintaining control over domestic academic discourse. Ironically, his presence highlights the restrictions Chinese scholars face when engaging with similar critical topics.

While Mearsheimer's ideas find widespread acclaim, some critics view this as a symptom of intellectual dependency on Western frameworks. These analysts argue that the uncritical embrace of foreign theories risks undermining China's efforts to develop its own academic identity. Initiatives like the "Chinese School of International Relations" aim to build indigenous frameworks, but Mearsheimer's prominence complicates these efforts. His popularity reflects both an alignment with China's realist inclinations and a reliance on Western intellectual traditions that Beijing seeks to transcend.

Moreover, some critics suggest that overreliance on theories like Mearsheimer's could limit China's ability to innovate in addressing unique challenges. Without robust indigenous frameworks, Chinese scholarship risks being reactive rather than proactive in shaping global discourse. Highlighting this concern reveals a tension between adopting global insights and forging new paths. This issue is particularly critical as China seeks to position itself as an intellectual leader in global academia. The paradox of embracing foreign theorists while aiming for independence underscores a more profound struggle between emulation and originality in Chinese academic strategy.

### **Mearsheimer's Marginalisation in the United States**

In the United States, Mearsheimer's ideas face significant pushback from a polarised academic community. Realist theories, with their focus on power politics and conflict, often clash with dominant progressive ideals that emphasise global governance, multilateralism, and liberal values. This marginalisation highlights a growing intellectual narrowing in US academia, where dissenting perspectives are increasingly sidelined.

Despite this, Mearsheimer's critiques of military overreach and emphasis on restraint have subtly influenced US policy debates. His [opposition to the Iraq War](#) and calls for pragmatic, interest-driven strategies resonate with those advocating a less interventionist foreign policy. However, his marginalisation reflects broader challenges in engaging with diverse intellectual traditions within the US academic system.

### **Implications for US-China Intellectual Rivalry**

Mearsheimer's paradoxical reception highlights the broader cultural and academic competition between the US and China. As both nations seek to shape global narratives, their rivalry extends beyond economics and military power into the realm of knowledge production. China's embrace of Mearsheimer underscores its struggle to balance respect for Western intellectual traditions with the desire to assert its own academic identity.

The US-China rivalry in knowledge production risks fragmenting global academic discourse. If each nation prioritises theoretical paradigms that align with its strategic narratives while marginalising dissenting voices, the result could be parallel intellectual ecosystems with limited dialogue. This fragmentation not only deepens ideological divides but also hinders global cooperation on shared challenges like climate change and cybersecurity. Such a divergence not only affects academia but also shapes policy formulation and transnational collaboration. Intellectual fragmentation risks further polarising global governance, making it harder to address challenges that require unified responses.

### **Conclusion**

John Mearsheimer's popularity in China reveals much about the interplay between historical memory, cultural values, and strategic narratives. His embrace by Chinese audiences, juxtaposed with his marginalisation in the US, underscores the broader cultural and academic competition between the two powers. As both nations emphasise intellectual voices that align with their strategic priorities, they risk fostering

echo chambers that undermine meaningful dialogue and global understanding. Bridging these divides will require renewed efforts to prioritise intellectual diversity and cross-cultural engagement in an increasingly polarised world.

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*Yao Bowen is a Ph.D. candidate at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. His research focuses on International Relations Theory, Diplomatic History, and the international relations of China and Southeast Asia.*

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**S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore**  
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798