

A World of Regions: Asia and Europe in the American Imperium.
By Peter J. Katzenstein. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005. Softcover: 297pp.

This book is not for the faint-hearted or, indeed, for the thin-skinned. If the reader imagines him or herself to be a reasonably serious and well-read student of international affairs, this book might give rise to a demoralizing sense of inadequacy. The author provides early-warning that the book is intended as an antidote to the realist textbooks that he claims all but monopolize the teaching of international relations in US universities, and to the thinking that has captured the current political leadership: a warning, in other words, that it is not going to be an easy read. This warning is not misplaced, although the prose lightens up refreshingly as the book unfolds.

The book's central proposition is that, especially in the peerless circumstances the United States has found itself of late, the realist school of analysis that dominates both teaching and policy inclines Washington to view the world at a level of geostrategic abstraction that is likely to result in bad policy choices. More specifically, the thesis of the book is that regional differences matter greatly, not least because these differences are essential to understanding the texture of US power and influence, and the manner in which it is transmitted to shape the decisions of others. In international relations, as in politics and economics, the intellectual Holy Grail is to identify and characterize the hidden currents that flow continuously beneath the surface of the events we observe. The better the diagnosis at this level, the more likely it will be that expectations about the thrust of future events will turn out to be correct and the greater the scope to frame policies that are cognizant of these hidden currents, whether to try and shift their direction or to capitalize on the direction they already have.

Katzenstein contends that the functioning of the international system is best understood as an American imperium that works pre-eminently through two key transmission states, Germany and Japan, that are both deeply and reliably aligned with the United States and powerful actors in their respective regions. The author is at his most insightful in accounting for the striking differences between European and Asian regionalism, the consequent differences in the character of the transmission mechanisms and the implications for the management of the imperium both down from and up to the United States. Given the skill and persuasiveness of this analysis, the reader is struck by

the author's repeated claim (pp. 60, 76, 225) that these distinctive regional orders were essentially imposed by the United States in the immediate aftermath of WWII. To this reader, the message from the analysis is much closer to the US responding, sensibly, to the very different circumstances it encountered in Europe and Asia as well as to the very different lenses (strong cultural, religious, and historical bonds with Europe, none of these with Asia) through which it viewed the two regions.

This exposition on the American imperium as the pivotal mechanism of the contemporary international system naturally begs the question of how Africa, Latin America, South Asia, and the Middle East fit in to the scheme of things. All of these regions share the characteristic that they lack a powerful actor in their midst closely aligned to the United States. This deficiency has mattered most in the Middle East where vital US interests have always been at stake. Katzenstein posits the view that the US venture in Iraq was driven by the urge to create a democratic, capitalist supporter in the region through which to re-define the politics of the entire region. Readers will recall that the Bush administration injected this rationale quite overtly if very late in the piece (February 2003), but then came to lean on it rather heavily as the other rationales lost credibility. Katzenstein then throws his Sunday punch at the realists in charge of US policy: their impatience with regionalism as a distracting detail led them to overlook the very special circumstances that attended the successes with Germany and Japan (that is, Iraq was a poor strategic choice), and to adopt a simplistic strategy for creating the desired new Iraq that has been shredded by these regional details. He goes on to contend that the prevailing propensity in Washington to look upon the world through the lenses of a detached and over-simplified grand strategy "overlooks the central characteristic of the American imperium: the scope and weight of its non-territorial power" (a term the author prefers to the more colloquial "soft power"). Casual observation suggests that the author's concern is not misplaced. An America that is respected, that attracts and reassures, makes the ubiquity of things American attractive (or at least tolerable) and thus a powerful tool for the propagation of US values and the advancement of its interests. To the extent these characteristics come into question, the ubiquity of things American can start to be seen as something akin to radiation.

One has to accept Katzenstein's judgement that the dominance of realism in Washington is so pervasive that nothing less than this powerful antidote was appropriate. Katzenstein's work is indisputably the antithesis of realism and, for this reader, too much of a good thing.

The opening, theoretical chapter, in particular, dissects regionalism so elaborately and identifies so many trees that the reader is left with nagging concerns about the whereabouts and probable shape of the wood. At this point in the journey through the book, the reader gets the feeling that, on observing a fast-flowing river, Katzenstein would not be satisfied with the explanation that there is a lot of water determined to get to lower ground along the path of least resistance. He would insist that accounting for every splash, wave, eddy, and whirlpool is an indispensable part of the explanation.

For the academic as well as the policy-maker, the art form will always be the judgment about where to strike the balance between, on the one hand, reducing an issue to its essence and, on the other, injecting some detail and texture to establish confidence that the issue and its context are adequately understood to allow sensible policy settings to be distilled. One would expect readers in East Asia and Europe to be comfortable even with the extreme re-balancing that Katzenstein proposes, and to engage his analysis of the nature of the American imperium on its merits. Whether the prevailing intellectual mainstream in Washington will embrace some re-balancing is a more open question, although there have been some promising omens.

This book is the product of an accomplished and gifted scholar giving full rein to his analytical capabilities. It is truly a first-class piece of scholarship. And it could become an important piece of scholarship.

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