Grimm on Heer, 'Mr. X and the Pacific: George F. Kennan and American Policy in East Asia'

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Paul Heer has provided a thoroughly researched and detailed study of diplomat George Kennan’s views on US policy toward East Asia during the early Cold War. Certainly the father of the containment doctrine expressed his views most clearly on European topics, but he also had much to say about the western Pacific region and America’s postwar presence there. Heer traces Kennan’s involvement in policymaking on China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, at times including the Philippines, Taiwan, and other parts of Southeast Asia. While Heer examines the roots of some of Kennan’s views in the 1930s and extends the discussion, especially of China and Vietnam, beyond the early Cold War, most of the work concentrates on his stint on the Policy Planning Staff at the State Department between 1947 and 1950. This period saw rapidly changing circumstances in several East Asian nations and Kennan was heavily involved in a number of key policy discussions on the direction of US policy in the region, not least because he had Secretary of State George Marshall’s ear until the latter’s exit from the State Department in early 1949. Kennan’s views were “a combination of his doctrine of containment, his defensive perimeter idea for applying that doctrine to the region, and—within that framework—his assessment of the relative strategic importance of those countries where the United States had interests at stake” (p. 232). Overall, claims Heer, while there were “flaws and inconsistencies, Kennan’s core East Asia polices were remarkably influential where they were followed, and were proved remarkably prescient where they were not” (p. 234). Further, “Kennan was not always right—and when he was right, it was not always at the right time or for the right reasons. But he almost always focused on the right questions—the same questions that have resonated ever since in US relations with East Asia” (p. 235). Such questions especially center on how to develop accurate and useful assessments of American interests and capabilities in the region. Heer explores this ground with revealing nuance and supports well his balanced assessments.

He shows how Kennan played a key role in the Truman administration’s decision to detach itself from the Chinese mainland in the late 1940s and avoid a military commitment to Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalists as they lost ground to Mao Zedong’s communists in the Chinese civil war. Kennan did not desire a communist victory, but he deemed one acceptable because he considered China not strategically important enough for a further commitment of US resources. Heer shows how both Kennan’s close friend and fellow diplomat John Paton Davies and John MacMurray, the US representative in China during the late 1920s, influenced his views on China. One theme involved critiques of domestic constituencies, including the postwar China Lobby, which, in Kennan’s view, pushed an unhelpful and unrealistic attachment to the Nationalists based on a moralistic and
missionary zeal for China. A geopolitical realist, Kennan found these approaches detrimental to US interests in the region. Likewise, except for “a small military assistance program” to the Philippines (p. 127), Kennan usually advised against American commitments, military or otherwise, in Southeast Asia. Regarding the growing conflict in Vietnam later, however, Heer identifies a contradiction between Kennan’s desire to defend American prestige there while still opposing military escalation, especially the bombing of North Vietnam. Heer claims that Kennan’s “response to the Vietnam War reflected both the prescience of his views toward Indochina nearly two decades earlier and one of the flaws of his approach at that time” because “Kennan was never able to enunciate a policy that would have reconciled his desire to eliminate US commitments on the mainland of Asia with his belief that US credibility and prestige should not be compromised there” (pp. 199-200). These attitudes actually coalesced in early 1948 when Kennan developed what he called a “strategic-political concept” (p. 90) for the region, which included no American presence on the Asian mainland, the demilitarization and neutralization of Japan and the Philippines, and the permanent presence of American forces only on Okinawa. This “defensive perimeter concept,” as Heer terms it, was in the end not influential for very long (pp. 91-92). Neither was Kennan’s apparently contradictory push for the US military to seize Taiwan because he did not think the Nationalists could govern it well and thus keep it out of communist hands. Yet these ideas show that a regional awareness often informed Kennan’s approach to each individual nation.

As with China, Heer shows how Kennan was critically important in the American “reverse course” in its occupation of Japan (p. 88). Kennan considered Japan to be “the linchpin of Washington’s forward defense posture in East Asia” (p. 51) and he believed American interests in the region depended on preventing Soviet influence in Japan. He became worried that General Douglas MacArthur’s policies of “demilitarizing and democratizing” undermined both the economy and “political stability” of Japan (p. 51). Instead, Kennan advocated an emphasis on economic recovery that would end reparations, halt “the land reform and deconcentration programs,” provide “a long-term aid program” to Japan, and reconstitute “Japan’s foreign trade,” all with the objective of making the nation stable and eventually able to, in Kennan’s hope, resist Soviet pressure on its own (p. 74). While Kennan never achieved his goal of the complete exit of American forces from the Japanese home islands, he was still central, Heer claims, to the Truman administration’s change in its occupation policy there. On the issue of Korea, however, Kennan was not as influential and his approach to the peninsula both before and during the Korean War, for Heer, showed not only “his prescience and perspicacity but also the flaws and inconsistencies in his judgment” (p. 151). As with China and most of Southeast Asia, before the North Korean invasion of South Korea in June 1950 Kennan thought the latter to be strategically unimportant to the United States and backed the removal of US postwar occupation forces in the late 1940s. Yet, as with Vietnam later, he strongly supported the use of US combat troops to save South Korea because he considered US prestige to be at stake and feared that should America do nothing, Taiwan might be in danger of a communist takeover and communists might also gain in other parts of the world. Even so, Kennan only supported a restoration of the status quo. His warnings against reunifying the peninsula were ignored, with disastrous results when Chinese divisions drove US and UN forces back in bloody retreat from the Yalu River in late 1950. Secondary topics abound, including Kennan’s involvement with deliberations over a Japanese peace treaty as well as with the very first peace feelers regarding the conflict in Korea, but these are the major ways Heer sees Kennan’s influence waxing and waning in policy on East Asia.

While largely a study of internal policy development and bureaucratic tensions, Heer’s work sheds
light on other factors in the conduct of US international relations both during the early Cold War and now. Kennan believed the populations of mainland Asia would be unable to resist communist influence, and the United States would find only fickle allies there, at least in part because he was “fundamentally dubious about their native political capabilities” (p. 124). Thus, “some of his strategic judgments almost certainly were shaded by his ethnocentric and racist views” (pp. 125-26). In addition, Heer points out how Kennan, as late as the 1990s, never developed an ability to see China as a rising global power and Heer concludes, “It is surprising and unfortunate that Kennan’s personal disgust with the Chinese leadership—both Nationalist and communist—and for Chinese diplomacy allowed him to deny and overlook the importance of China as long as he did” (pp. 223-24). Heer likewise points out that Kennan was focused mainly on containing Soviet expansion in East Asia and usually, especially in the late 1940s and early 1950s, did not consider the Chinese communists to be an expansionary threat in the region. Heer also explores the sometimes substantial contradictions in some of Kennan’s thinking on East Asia, which can show how individual foibles, filtered through policymaking, can have real-world impacts. As noted regarding Vietnam and South Korea especially, he traces Kennan’s failure to square the belief that mainland Asia was expendable with Kennan’s arguments, in moments of crisis, that those areas must be defended to protect American prestige. Heer notes that when Kennan distinguished between a gradual growth of Soviet influence in South Korea and the North Korean invasion in June 1950, it showed that he believed “it was only a sudden and dramatic loss of US prestige that was unacceptable. The point is arguable. But even if Kennan’s logic had not been flawed, it remains unclear why he considered US prestige to be a factor worthy of more consideration in Korea than he had been willing to give it in China” (p. 164). Kennan’s realism was thus of a complicated variety.

There are some places where Heer’s analysis could have gone further to address larger issues. Since Kennan usually considered the Soviets to be the only expansionary communist threat in East Asia, at least during the time he was at the State Department, how does this aid our understanding of any constraints on his contributions to policymaking? Heer does note that “Kennan frequently overstated his case,” (p. 233) but did these blinkers undermine or dilute the influence of his assessments of US interests and capabilities in the region? Relatedly, Heer discusses how Kennan had little use for domestic public opinion, especially regarding China, but does not broaden this into a larger point about Kennan’s realism. Did Kennan’s realist ideas on East Asia, his “strategic-political concept” of disengagement from the Asian mainland for instance, undermine or increase his influence in an administration that, as any other, had to deal with domestic political pressure? Heer does cover several moments when Kennan realized his ideas would very likely not move forward because they were not palatable to public opinion, but this point could have been pursued to say something about the role of Kennan’s realism in policymaking regarding East Asia in the context of the late 1940s and early 1950s. He notes that the contradictions in Kennan’s “defensive perimeter concept” illustrated “the limits on his diehard adherence to realpolitik,” but it remains unclear what effect, if any, these contradictions had on his ability to influence policy (p. 234). Finally, Heer could have contributed to the conversation about the costs of the Cold War, the debate over which is expressed, one side at least, most clearly by Campbell Craig and Fredrik Logevall in America’s Cold War (2009). With such contrary advice given by Kennan that would have, if followed, reduced the likelihood of a lengthy war in Korea or a war in Vietnam altogether, how do Kennan’s views fit into larger explorations of the possibility of earlier Cold War thaws or ends? Heer cites numerous other historians on Kennan and East Asia, including Robert Blum, Warren Cohen, Bruce Cumings, David Mayers, Wilson Miscamble,
John Lewis Gaddis, Michael Schaller, Howard Schonberger, and others, but this would have added a welcome expansion of the discussion.[1]

These misgivings aside, Heer’s work is clearly written, widely researched, fair and balanced in its assessments, and a valuable contribution to our understanding of the influence of, and contradictory ideas sometimes held by, one of the most important foreign policymakers in the twentieth century. The organization by theme or nation works well due both to the nature of the material and to Heer’s brief yet clear reminders of how one topic fits into another when appropriate. Also, although begun in the 1990s, as Heer explains in his opening, the work is quite timely. In the current international environment, a study that examines warnings against miscalculating America’s interests, if not also capabilities, in East Asia is a welcome reminder that such miscalculations can often have serious and lasting ramifications for both the United States and the people in the region.

Note
