
 Review

Geir Lundestad
East, West, North, South.
International Relations
since 1945

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 Singapore, Washington DC, 2014, 340 pp.

The fact that this is the 7th edition of Lundestad's famous book in less than a ten year period of time confirms that it deserves all the superlative marks it has received. There is no need to repeat well known assessments about this brilliant textbook on the contemporary world and a masterful overview of international politics. Any attempt to assign further compliments would just reaffirm what was already said. It is enough to say that, in a way, this is an indispensable book for all students of international relations, world politics and contemporary international history.

It is amazing that all important events and developments of the Cold War and Post-Cold War era have been mentioned, described and more or less properly contextualized in little more than 300 pages. The plain, linear, omniscient narration of the book stands in bright contrast both to commonly perceived uncertainties of our time and to dominant fashionable post-modernist, post-positivist, and constructivist manners of theorizing international politics and history. For Lundestad there is no need to develop any explicit theory of international history. Also, contrary to

widespread practice in the contemporary social sciences, he does not explore the ontological and epistemological status of his assertions and historical knowledge in general. He simply tells his story on contemporary history very often without relaying on sources that would support it. It is assumed that the permissiveness of his saying corresponds to the intersubjectivity of verifiable facts.

In that respect Lundestad reminds me of Nobel Prize winner Ivo Andrić. Whichever Andrić novel you read, you feel that you are reading the same book each time. Besides the simple fact that he wrote all those books, nothing indicates that he was somehow personally interested in, or personally involved in, or intimately invested in Bosnian affairs. His neutral, calm narration provides a compelling description of Bosnia in the Ottoman Empire where life was solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short. Likewise, Lundestad's books on contemporary international history use the ubiquitous observer's objectivistic discourse to present tectonic changes of international relations system, global economic uncertainty, clashes of civilizations, political and theoretical dilemmas, and the ravages of war in our time. Needless to say, he is as successful in the realm of contemporary international history as Andrić was in literature.

One of examples of the ease by which some of the most dramatic events have been described is the section "Barack Obama and the Greater Middle East". The historical election of the first black president in the US and all the great expectations regarding fundamental changes of American foreign and internal politics are elaborated in only a few sentences. "The

need for international cooperation and negotiation was emphasized, often in the most inspiring terms. The war on terror was downplayed. A new environmental policy was introduced; Guantanamo was to be closed; torture was to end" (133). But simultaneously all those expectations and announcements are evaluated by a highly relativizing remark: "There was little reason to believe that he could live up to these expectations" (132-133). In the same style he stated that "no one could be certain what would be the political future of Afghanistan" (133). The Arab Spring "came as a surprise". Stressing the opinion that it is beyond the powers even of the United States to be the absolute demiurge of all global, regional and local affairs, Lundestad laconically ends the section: "Most conflicts had their own local causes, not always easily influenced by outsiders" (134). This implies that at least some of America's attempts to influence the internal affairs of different countries have been unsuccessful, but Lundestad does not want to try to find out why. It would be challenging to try to define what conditions should be in place for foreign interference to be deemed successful. Obviously, Lundestad was not tempted to give advice about the best possible policies.

This is perfectly in line with his reasoning on the Vietnam War. Although he elaborates on the Vietnam War in much more detail (87-93), his final conclusion is basically the same as that in the more recent case of the Arab Spring. Not the global confrontation of two superpowers nor America's military, economic and political strength, nor the personalities of America's leaders or domestic and international public opposition to the war played crucial

roles, but "local conditions proved to be decisive" (93). He lucidly notes that devastating bombings of Vietnam and neighboring countries did not seriously influence Soviet-American relations. Contrary to American expectations that Moscow would postpone the Brezhnev-Nixon summit in May 1972 "Moscow was prepared to carry out the scheduled talks, which would actually represent one of the zeniths of the policy of detente" (91). Typically, Lundestad hesitates to draw a clear conclusion. In his opinion, no one can say whether the policy of *détente* would have been carried further if there had not been the Vietnam War "but at least Vietnam did not prevent *détente* in any way" (91).

The end of the Cold War is still subject to many conflicting interpretations. Lundestad presents some of them. The triumphalist interpretation sees president Reagan with his strong anti-communist stances as the most credited for the collapse of the Soviet Union. Others put Reagan's policies in the context of the strategy of containment which was the permanent feature of American grand strategy from Truman to Reagan. Some historians see the end of the Cold War as a result of American policies, on one hand, and the internal changes of Soviet politics and economy initiated and implemented by Mikhail Gorbachev, on the other. And finally, there are the authors who give all credit for ending the Cold War to Gorbachev. His personal popularity in Western Europe was higher than president Reagan's popularity. The dissatisfaction of some Russian intellectuals with the fact that the end of the Cold War brought the dissolution of the Soviet Union, but did not bring full democracy to former Soviet republics is quite understandable. Lun-

destad comes to the conclusion that “it is too early to develop a truly historical perspective to the end of the Cold War” (112). He pleads for deeper investigation of real economic, political and social causes of historical events instead of holding a fascination with individuals. Providing a brief overview of Soviet-American summits and dramatic changes in Eastern Europe from elections in Poland to the demolition of the Berlin Wall and the fall of Ceausescu, Lundestad comes to a somewhat resigning statement: “It is easier to describe the dramatic changes in the climate between East and West than to explain them” (115). But, he certainly does not give up on any attempt to explain what happened and why. One of his interesting notes treats the importance of the Helsinki process, which encouraged human rights activists all around Eastern Europe and in the Soviet Union to seek from their governments the implementation of adopted documents. “There is a direct line from certain sections of the Helsinki Act of 1975 to the collapse of the regimes in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989” (116).

The turbulent contemporary history, especially after the terrorist attacks on 9/11 and the excessive American reaction with the launching of the global war on terror on an extremely unilateralist basis, has induced serious temptations among international relations theorists and historicists to be more interested in detecting trends and predicting the global future than in collecting and explaining facts. Traditional allies were concerned by George W. Bush’s radical shift from the previously declared – although not always truly implemented – multilateralism of all Cold War and Post-Cold War American administrations.

Adopting a strategy of preventive war has provoked further concerns about real American intentions. Numerous scholars have come to the conclusion that what the world was actually witnessing was the transformation of American hegemony into an American Empire. Neoconservative ideologists have been delighted by the fact that America has finally decided to exploit this unipolar moment. From their point of view the time has come to spread democracy all around the world even if it implies the forceful changing of undemocratic regimes. The Iraq War in 2003 was thought to only be the first stage in the implementation of their extremely ambitious plans. Liberals and realists started to warn that overstretching resources would not only compromise the American imperial ambitions, but could lead to the collapse of democracy and the American constitutional system. Lundestad is not seduced by the speculation of international relations theorists. Although in line to his conviction that it is too early to amount definitive historical judgments, he nevertheless gives some interesting interpretations of that rift among Atlantic allies. By the fact that the Cold War was over and that the terror threat could not serve as equally cohesive factor as global ideological confrontation did in the past, Lundestad explains disagreements between America and Europe: “Dominant forces of the two sides of the Atlantic had divergent views on how acute the threat was and how it should be countered. The United States had become more unilateralist, while the EU had become even more determined to define its own identity – for many also vis-à-vis the United States” (198). Europe cheered when Barack Obama was elected presi-

dent, “The United States, which have been perceived as an increasingly conservative country, had elected a black president. The negative image of the US that had developed virtually all over Europe was transformed almost overnight. Theories about a transatlantic rift were largely abandoned. The emphasis was now on cooperation” (199). Of course, it could be only a matter of speculation to try to imagine what would happen if Obama had not been elected. Would the deeper historical forces direct European-American alliance toward cooperation or further divergences? Bearing in mind the current Ukrainian crisis it is legitimate to ask the question, is the support of a violent change of government in Ukraine and the imposition of economic sanctions against Russia an expression of the American-European cooperation based on mutually recognized interests or is it the result of more or less open American pressure?

A new section on population, gender and environment has been included in this edition. In the manner of a truly competent and well informed journalist Lundestad comprises the discussion on all of those issues on little more than one page. Evidently, he is not impressed by the huge amount of feminist literature on practically all the relevant topics of social, political and international developments. Feminism *de facto* redefines the traditional forms of conceptualization of any sphere of human activity by insisting on the crucial relevance of gender for all human approaches and endeavors. Leaving aside those highly controversial ambitions of feminist authors, Lundestad just provides simple facts as, for instance, the gender disbalance in China and India “due to the treat-

ment [women] receive not only through abortions but also after they are born” (305). He simply states, without any comment, that “female illiteracy is still a major problem in some Sub-Saharan countries and in parts of South Asia” (305). He obviously does not think that any additional explanation is needed to the information that in 45 developed countries girls outnumber boys in secondary schools and in as many as 60 countries female students are more numerous than men. Some of the most difficult dilemmas of our time are briefly resolved by common sense, such as the statement that “rising living standards could create resource shortages” (305) or the opinion that “the close link between economic growth and greenhouse gas emissions needs to be severed for human development to become truly sustainable” (306). Skeptics might think that it would be too late for the Earth to wait for historicists to come to their final conclusions on those issues.

Although Lundestad insists that it is necessary to detect deeper social, economic and political structures to be able to understand historical trends, sometimes it seems that he himself is not ready to dig too deep under the surface. Where somebody would expect definitive answers, Lundestad gives presumptions, or opens new questions. But, he is consistent in his insistence that the only remaining superpower cannot establish absolute control over all local intrastate and interstate conflicts. What any foreign interference can achieve is limited by local conditions, “[a]nd the roots of the conflicts were almost always local; the problems, therefore, were not easily resolved by outsiders, not even by Obama’s United States” (199). Lundestad is fully aware that no country

can remain the number one power forever. "This would definitely appear to be against the laws of history, to the extent that such laws exist" (329). It seems that certain political divisions among American political elites could seriously contribute to a rapid loss in the US's reputation and influence in international affairs. Somehow surprisingly, in that respect Lundestad does not feel a need for historical distance to state that Republicans are permanently trying "to do almost everything they can to oppose the President, and this in the most difficult of economic times. When the President is not able to pass the mild version of gun legislation, even with 90 per cent support from the people, this leads to widespread cynicism. The outcome is clearly detrimental also to the position of the United States in the world. When the president is unable to really lead the United States, he definitely cannot lead the world" (329).

But at the same time Lundestad calls for caution toward numerous predictions based on current economic trends that China will outrun the US in the near future. He reminds us that almost nobody predicted the collapse of the Soviet Union and in the same time the 1970s and 1980s brought many apocalyptic predictions of the fall of America as a leading power. Contrary to those predictions the US has remained the sole world superpower since the end of the Cold War. Simultaneously to predictions that the US is going to lose its predominant economic position there are alternative predictions that, thanks to new technologies in the exploitation of shale oil and gas, the "United States might go back to the dominant position it had in the 1950s and 1960s" (330).

This book presents a comprehensive overview of contemporary political and economic world history. Every top-level event from 1945 to the present has found its place on the pages of this impressive book. Anybody who is interested in international politics and history can use it as a perfectly reliable manual. But, if anyone believes that this book provides a universal instrument for an unmistakable interpretation of past events and a prediction of the global future, then she or he is missing Lundestad's main message. He is constantly warning that even superpowers make mistakes by neglecting the numerous differences all around the world, and the causes and outcomes of historical events cannot be adequately understood without the detailed analysis of local conditions. There is no automatism of history, "the many different local factors will always remain crucial. In other words, we can all make a difference" (323). Such a wise conclusion together with many clever remarks scattered throughout the entire book fully confirms Lundestad's reputation as superior intellectual, a label acquired a long time ago when he came up with the expression "empire by invitation" to label European-Atlantic integration and American hegemony after 1945.

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