
Grasping the nascent international agency of regional powers with global aspirations has become a dominant topic in the study of world affairs. The rash of attention to the emergent dynamics of international interactions has been facilitated by the break-up of the Cold War order, which has allowed a number of actors to extend their international roles and outreach. In this respect, thinking about the shifting contexts of global politics has often gravitated towards the realms of fiction and fantasy. This seems to be particularly the case when grappling with the nascent international agency of the European Union (EU) and a number of Asian states – such as China, India, Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, etc. All these are actors, whose conceptualization in world politics often straddles the invention/reality divide. Thus, an ungainly but important task is to distinguish between phantoms and substance in the engagement with their foreign policy attitudes. The volume edited by Richard Balme and Brian Bridges, thereby, fills in this lacuna by offering a much-needed and an extremely erudite reconsideration of the international interactions between European and Asian actors.

The point of departure for the volume is that both Europe and Asia are subject to increasing regionalization dynamics as instanced by the ongoing enlargement of the EU and the strengthening interdependence by members of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN). Yet, both the EU and ASEAN evidence the distinct trajectories, content, and intensity that such projects for closer cooperation follow in the two continents. Thus, it is the complex interaction between similarities and differences that structures the relations between European and Asian actors. At the same time, Balme and Bridges sensibly remind that any interpretation of the interactions between Europe and Asia would be vacuous unless it takes into account the historical contexts of their relations. Accordingly, it is the dynamics of continuity and change that often influence foreign policy perceptions.

The volume is divided into two parts. The first one details the “inter-regional relations” (p. 25) between the two continents. The five chapters included in this section capture convincingly the multidimensional process
of inter-regional exchange that occurs simultaneously at several levels of social, political, and economic interaction. The collection uncovers the historical constraints of the Europe-Asia relationship and the consequent limitations that it imposes on the interactions between actors, especially when it comes to engaging and articulating their international identity.

The first part of the volume also undertakes a detailed analysis of the EU’s foreign policy in Asia. The assessment of the Asian strategy of Brussels concentrates on the ongoing tinkering with “the EU’s ‘toolbox’ of available foreign policy instruments” to make it a more effective, coherent, and credible international actor (p. 63). This constant change is often viewed as confusing by many of the Asian counterparts of Brussels. At the same time, however, the investigation demonstrates that (at least for the time-being) the mutual interest in establishing closer economic relations seems to “outpace the centrifugal forces” of conflict (p. 73). This tendency is made particularly conspicuous in the “policy-learning” evident in the interactions between the EU and ASEAN (p. 83). The first part of the volume concludes with a perceptive study of the impact of Asian migrants on European “inter-national and inter-regional migration policies” (p. 103).

The scope and depth of this overview provides the analytical background for the investigation of the “patterns of bilateralism” (p. 123). Thus, the six chapters included in the second part of the volume examine the EU’s interactions with individual Asian actors. The first two chapters in this section offer an interpretation of the EU-China relationship from the point of view of Brussels and Beijing. These analyses indicate both the “limits of integration” in the EU’s foreign policy making (p. 125) and the impact of China’s “strategic thinking” on its international roles (p. 145). The remaining chapters of this section detail the EU’s interactions with Taiwan, Japan, India and the Korean peninsula. In this respect, the analyses included in the second part of the volume sketch out a prolegomenon to the complex mosaic of bilateral relations between Europe and Asia.

Thus, the volume edited by Balme and Bridges offers a compelling perspective on the intricate pattern of inter-regional relations between Europe and Asia. The collection provides a thoughtful reconsideration of the dominant frameworks for the explanation and understanding of these interactions. At the same time, the interlocutors of this conversation offer prescient reflection on the dynamics, logics, and policies underpinning the trajectories of Europe-Asia relations. Accordingly, the volume would benefit