

***Order, Contestation and Ontological Security-Seeking in the South China Sea.* By Anisa Heritage and Pak K. Lee. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. E-book: 265pp.**

Why do the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the United States care about the South China Sea? Most explanations are rooted in the economic and strategic “goods” provided by control of its waters. In these accounts, Beijing desires to defend its coastline, claims to economic resources and access to sea-lanes while Washington is focused on protecting its strategic access through the sea and the autonomy of its allies and partners. The authors of this book emphasize another explanation: the importance of the South China Sea for both states to “validate their own national identities” (p. 5) in a contest between “competing order-building projects” (p. 4).

Following on from other scholars, Anisa Heritage and Pak K. Lee have borrowed the notion of “ontological security” from the realm of psychology to explain the behaviour of states. To be ontologically secure, both individuals and states must, in the view of Caterina Kinnvall and Jennifer Mitzen, “have a sense of biographical continuity and wholeness that is supported and recognised in and through their relations with others” (p. 12). From this, Heritage and Lee argue that China needs “to affirm its national identity as a ‘re-emerging power’ after suffering from a ‘collective historical trauma’ for more or less 100 years” (p. 13) while the United States “perceives an imminent existential threat to its established identity” (p. 14) if it loses its hegemonic position.

Chapter One introduces the book’s themes with brief introductions to both ontological security and the South China Sea dispute. Chapter Two delves more deeply into questions of international order formation, the recognition of orders by other states and of state-led narratives justifying particular international orders. Chapter Three addresses the domestic background to US order-building in Asia and is primarily an account of rising anxiety about communism in the United States after the Second World War. Chapter Four covers the arguments within the United States over the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the doctrine of “freedom of navigation”.

Chapter Five addresses China’s challenge to the existing order in and around the South China Sea. Sadly, it begins with an uncritical recitation of Beijing’s traditional tropes with no mention of how they have been challenged over the past few years. It is a familiar

account of PRC attitudes towards UNCLOS and the question of freedom of navigation. Chapter Six analyses the regional context in which this contest takes place. Gratifyingly, it does include the recent critiques of Chinese claims. It links this to the book's theme by arguing "The non-recognition of China's claims to the territories as well as historic rights in the South China Sea by regional states and the US exacerbates China's ontological insecurity and anxiety as to whether it can re-emerge as a well-respected great power in the region" (p. 206).

The final chapter concludes with the pessimistic view that "a grand bargain [between China and the United States] over the South China Sea is unachievable" (p. 210). Having spent most of the book up until this point describing the historical contours of the various disputes, this chapter contains the authors' rather brief ontological security-based analysis of the South China Sea disputes. It can be found on pages 219–23.

There are two major problems with this book. The first is that its main argument is based on a mistake. It asserts that at the Cairo and Potsdam conferences during the Second World War, the United States and its allies promised the Spratly and Paracel Islands to China and that they reneged on this agreement at the 1951 San Francisco peace conference (e.g., pp. 66, 68, 85 and 95). This is incorrect. As a result, the bulk of the book's analysis of this non-existent *volte face* is also wrong.

It has now been well established by scholars, such as Chris P.C. Chung, that the Republic of China (ROC) did not even begin to consider claiming sovereignty over the Spratlys until September 1946. According to Taiwanese scholars Tsung-han Tai and Chi-ting Tsai, the arguments over what the ROC should claim in the South China Sea continued until a final decision was taken in April 1947, and this decision was not made public (even to Chinese audiences) until November of that year.

The other problem is that the authors borrow the analogy from psychology too literally: treating the state as both a "person" and as monolithic. Can a state truly possess a "self-conception", an "autobiographical identity" or emotions and perceptions as the authors assert (p. 32)? The authors need to draw a distinction between (at the very least) the state, the elite that controls the state and the wider population that makes up the citizens of the state. The concept of ontological security could be immensely useful to analysts attempting to understand how opinions in society at large and among state-directing elites influence state actions. Unfortunately,

this book regards the state's ontological security and that of its population as the same thing and has nothing to say about how the two are mediated through social and political structures.

In the two "theoretical" chapters the authors discuss the state as a monolith whereas in the "practical" chapters the state's population is given separate agency. In the final chapter, they tell us "The settlement of the disputes in China's favour is tied up with the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party and the national narrative concerning the Century of National Humiliation" (p. 214). Given that this is the crux of the book, it would be useful to know how these questions are "tied up". In general, is the "national narrative"—shared by the population—the same as the "state narrative"—projected by the state elite?

There are important insights to be gained from an ontological security perspective. The authors' argument that "The way in which American officials link the ideals of American identity to danger, threat and risk, and demarcate the boundaries of American identity secured by the representation of threats are integral to the conduct of foreign policy" (p. 133) is an important one, for example. There is a great need for a study of the role of emotions and the ontological security of state elites, and the populations they claim to represent, in the South China Sea disputes, and this book shows us what needs to be done.

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