

Beijing's Power and China's Borders: Twenty Neighbors in Asia.
Edited by Bruce A. Elleman, Stephan Kotkin and Clive Schofield.
Armonk, New York and London, England: M.E. Sharpe, 2013.
Softcover: 371pp.

A veritable cottage industry has emerged which tries to assess China's rise by examining how the country deals with border issues with its neighbours. This book is a welcome and timely addition to that debate. Along with its exemplary timing, one of its strongest qualities is its overall ambition. By adopting a comprehensive approach to China's border issues and policies with twenty countries, the book attempts to examine "where future border disputes might arise" (p. 10) and "the likelihood and character of future border conflicts so as to address this book's central question: can China truly become a global power, much less the world's next superpower, if the Chinese government has to worry about so many boundary disputes..." (p. 10). While the editors do not attempt to test an overall hypothesis, they do endeavour to identify general trends and patterns.

The primary thesis of this book is that geography still matters, and in the case of China, resolving territorial disputes is an ongoing process. Despite the fact that Beijing asserts that it has resolved territorial disputes with most of its neighbours, and signed a number of border demarcation agreements, this volume highlights that there are still some unsettled issues. This is especially important as these countries are literally on the front line of a rising China. Ongoing border claims and counter-claims — both on land and at sea — will have a major impact on China's national security policies, which, in turn, will greatly affect both China's immediate neighbours and other countries beyond.

The book's approach is to devote roughly ten to fifteen pages per neighbour as an independent case study. Each neighbour profile generally has a history of its relations with China, some geographical information, a description of bilateral relations and an assessment of border issues and the challenges they present to bilateral relations. As stated earlier, one strength of this book is its comprehensive view: the book rightly looks beyond China's land border neighbours and examines maritime borders with neighbours such as Brunei, the Philippines, Malaysia and even Indonesia. This is welcome due to the dearth of analysis on Brunei-China relations. The volume also takes the interesting step of including the Republic of China (Taiwan) as

a neighbour with border disputes with China. This seems counter-intuitive given the “One China” policy that Beijing insists on, and is a bold step by the editors.

As with any edited volume, inevitably the quality of the chapters varies. For this reviewer, the ones that stand out in terms of quality and elucidation are the chapters on China and Japan, which captures the differing legal disputes in the East China Sea with great clarity; China and Kazakhstan, which receives high marks for great writing and excellent analysis; and China and Afghanistan, which has a particularly strong history section. Other chapters that stand out are those which examine China’s borders with Brunei and Mongolia.

Another common problem with edited volumes is the variation of style and structure of the chapters, which is the case with this book. While each neighbour does have its own unique relationship with China, and this volume does not test a hypothesis, the overall quality of the book would have been improved if the structure of the chapters had been a bit more uniform. Some chapters focus heavily on history at the expense of other elements of the relationship, while other chapters take the opposite approach. Some chapters are frustrating because they focus less on the two countries at hand and devote too much space to outside entities such as international organizations. My concerns over the different emphases is seen in each chapter’s conclusion — reading them it seems that the authors were given different guidance about what their chapter should be about. While a one-size-fits-all approach would not be helpful in performing proper analysis of how China grapples with the border issues with its neighbours, a greater degree of structural consistency would have allowed the reader to perform a better compare and contrast analysis on this important issue of China’s relationship with its neighbours.

The conclusion consolidates the countries into the geographic categories of the South China Sea, South Asia, Central Asia, the Northern Borders and the East China Sea, a device which coherently summarizes the volume very well. One aspect of the book that is especially prevalent in the conclusion is the implicit disagreement among the various authors. Not that anyone would expect complete concurrence, but the authors’ differing assessments begs for a more active role by the editors to weigh the merits of the differing arguments. For example, there is variance of optimism regarding whether and how China will resolve the disputes in the South China Sea with its neighbours. The editors do not attempt to reconcile this difference of opinion though they do mark it in the conclusion,

where they subtly take the side of the pessimists on this issue. It would have been more elucidating, in my view, if the editors had highlighted the authors' arguments more explicitly where there were differences.

Overall this book makes an important contribution to the debate over China's rise and its implications for regional relations. The book raises many thought-provoking and important questions, and is a concise and useful addition for any class on China's foreign policy.

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