

## BOOK REVIEWS

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***The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia.* By Bill Hayton. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014. Hardcover: 298pp.**

One of the most vexing problems confronting anyone attempting to scrutinize developments in the intensifying dispute over the South China Sea is the lack of any single point of ultimate knowledge. As it worsens, the dispute moves across several spheres simultaneously — commerce, diplomacy, law as well as the military and strategic realms. Then there are the domestic political considerations, such as the roiling nationalism both feared and manipulated by the Communist Party leaderships of rival claimants China and Vietnam.

Whether it is an oil executive in Houston, a military analyst at the Pentagon or a lawyer in Singapore, there is no shortage of people who specialize in parts of the equation. But few can offer an absolute grasp on the whole. In presenting a long-overdue survey of the gathering storm over the South China Sea, BBC journalist Bill Hayton has, therefore, produced a fine book at an important time.

The dispute pits Beijing against smaller neighbours — Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei — but Hayton correctly places it within the evolving Great Power rivalry between a long-dominant United States and a rising China. It is a theme he returns to throughout the book. If that rivalry will define coming decades, the South China Sea is a strategic fault-line that is already exposing those emerging tensions. It is highlighting China's determination to shape its own rise, rather than be shaped by others, particularly any Western-dominated alliance. That can be seen in its strategic ambiguity towards international legal traditions that, theoretically at least, could provide solutions to the territorial disputes or its

willingness to bully smaller neighbours confronting the reality of Beijing's "peaceful rise" rhetoric.

But importantly, Hayton goes wide too, bringing to life the various issues and strands of the story with deft journalistic touches and a focus on an intriguing cast of characters. There is the foraging English whaler Richard Spratly, whose discovery of a small, sandy island in 1843 saw Britain stake a claim "initiating a process that led ultimately to the disputes of today" — tensions, Hayton repeatedly shows, will have no easy legal or diplomatic solution (pp. 90–92). The island still carries Spratly's name today, as does the hotly disputed chain of shoals, islets and reefs that straddle the waterway. Then there is the French colonial-era admiral, Georges Thierry d'Argenlieu, who refused to follow an order from Paris in late 1946 to check Chinese interests in the Paracel Islands and instead fire on his own restive Vietnamese nationalists at the port of Haiphong (pp. 60–64). The French, of course, are all gone but the Chinese are still there. And as Beijing expands a runway and port facilities on Woody Island, the best natural feature on the Paracels, d'Argenlieu's recalcitrance in the closing stages of the Second World War is still undoubtedly felt in Hanoi in 2014, as the Vietnamese struggle to keep their claims to the Paracels alive amid the Chinese build-up.

Hayton's charting of the trajectory through the closing decades of the twentieth century is some of the most compelling work in the book. Frequently overlooked in current accounts of tensions, Hayton focuses on Beijing's orchestrated move against the naval forces of the then-South Vietnam in late 1974 and its push in 1988 to occupy features in the Spratlys further south. By 1995, Beijing was rattling Manila by building structures on Mischief Reef off the coast of Palawan.

While he questions the cost of the island-grab in terms of mounting regional insecurity and stymied resource development, he notes another trend that is still playing out: "China was a latecomer to the Spratlys party but each time it has occupied a feature, Beijing's negotiating position has become stronger", he notes on page 89. In recent years, some of these negotiations — both political and commercial — have been handled by the urbane but steely Chinese diplomat Madame Fu Ying and Hayton charts her rising behind-the-scenes involvement. His description of Fu's outmaneuvering of oil giant BP over its ill-fated Vietnamese projects — efforts pursued across a string of diplomatic postings — is a fine piece of research. It will be read with alarm in boardrooms and diplomatic staterooms across the region.

The chapter on oil is one of the most interesting in the book, describing in detail China's campaign to pressure foreign firms out of deals with neighbours as well as the on-going debate about the mineral resources beneath the South China Sea. "The South China Sea is now far more important for the hydrocarbons that sail through it than for those that lie beneath it", Hayton writes on page 150, displaying a gift for colourful synthesis that is shown throughout the book. He explains that a third of the world's oil and half its liquefied natural gas pass through en route to China, Taiwan, Korea and Japan.

More broadly, Hayton's marshalling of the historical detail and crafting of the legal principles involved into the broader narrative is impressive. By contrast, the chapters on recent regional diplomatic maneuvering and the military factors are less successful. While good in parts, they do not go much further than some of the better journalism and academic analysis out there. Some fresh on-the-ground material and tighter organization would have helped both — although with both elements moving rapidly, Hayton will have plenty of room to finesse any new editions, and other authors the leeway to attempt their own approaches.

It is perhaps a reminder that Hayton jumped into the book from a standing start, having barely touched on the issues in his earlier, well-received book on Vietnam. Some key parts of the story — China's state-of-the-art submarine base on Hainan Island or the more sensitive military sites in Spratlys — remain off-limits to reporters and researchers. Hayton also says in the acknowledgements that he was denied a visa to visit Vietnam after his first book. Certainly fresh insights to the largely hidden Beijing-Hanoi relationship, and its impact on US regional engagement, would have helped.

These are relative quibbles, however. Despite some limitations, Hayton has produced an accessible, highly informative and, in parts, elegant book that will be of considerable use to specialists and general readers alike.

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