

***The South China Sea Disputes: Past, Present, and Future.* By Nalanda Roy. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2016. Hardcover: 161pp.**

Nalanda Roy, a political science professor at Armstrong State University in Savannah, Georgia, has compiled a compact volume chronicling the maritime quarrels convulsing the South China Sea. Indeed, Roy packs so much information into so few pages that her account has an almost jittery feel to it. Her method of presenting the material makes an impression on readers, or on this one at any rate. It is unsettling. She touches on some episodes such as China's occupation and fortification of Mischief Reef, furnishing only the barest of details. She then moves on to the next episode, then the next and the next. Veering back and forth in this manner reveals much about the political and strategic setting in Southeast Asia.

More precisely, Roy's approach conveys several impressions. First of all, Southeast Asia is a busy place. This will come as no secret to inhabitants of the region, but events at home and elsewhere in the world commonly obscure the importance of the South China Sea for Western readers. Barring some drama — revelations about China's constructing and arming artificial islands, or Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte's latest antics, or another US Navy freedom-of-navigation cruise — the region tends to fade from view. It then bursts into the popular mind anew when the next newsworthy event transpires. Roy applies a damper to this cycle, helping observers avoid overreacting — or underreacting — to recent events.

Second, wrangling over islands, atolls and reefs and the adjacent seas and skies is nothing new for Southeast Asian contenders. As Alastair Iain Johnston pointed out in *International Security* some years ago, depicting China's behaviour over the past decade or thereabouts as “new assertiveness” — a common phrase deployed for encounters such as those at Scarborough Shoal or Fiery Cross Reef — overstates the magnitude of China's departure from past practice. For many years Beijing has acted at opportune moments to advance its maritime claims. Its navy and maritime militia fought the South Vietnamese Navy in the Paracels in 1974, for instance. It timed the battle well: the Saigon regime was nearing destruction at North Vietnamese hands, while a war-fatigued United States had no appetite for new Southeast Asian ventures. Roy thus situates recent clashes as part of a longstanding pattern.

Third, China is the common denominator among virtually all of the territorial disputes. Her chapter on “Clashes in the South China Sea” (pp. 33–58) reiterates the point by its very arrangement. Each section of the chapter reviews a bilateral dispute. Each has China as one of the contenders, featuring subtitles like “Indonesia and China” or “The Philippines and China”. In part this is because China’s claims encompass the entire Spratly and Paracel island groups and the adjoining seas and airspace. That puts China in contact with rival claimants. In part, however, it is because — for all the criticisms levelled at it — the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has helped its member states resolve their controversies more or less amicably. Roy pays tribute to ASEAN’s contribution to regional tranquility.

And fourth, Roy tacitly admits there is no easy way out of these imbroglios. She sprinkles findings and recommendations throughout the text, but she phrases them rather diffidently. China’s island-building project, for example, raises “serious questions” about the leadership’s intentions (p. 51). In the wake of last year’s Arbitral Tribunal ruling in Manila’s favour, “it is very important for all the claimants to remain calm and restrain themselves from taking any immature steps that might disrupt peace and harmony in the region” (p. 51). China and the United States “should vow to respect each other’s rights” to forestall close-quarters encounters such as the 2001 EP-3 incident (p. 49). Actionable advice, clearly, is hard to come by.

My major quibble with Roy’s treatise is that it slights the non-material dimensions of South China Sea diplomacy and strategy. From reading it one gets the sense that the wrangling among Southeast Asian states is wholly about territory and undersea natural resources — about quantifiable material things, in other words. There is no question that turf and resources are important. They might even be the most important motives impelling the contenders. But philosophers and historians remind us that not-strictly-rational factors also drive states’ and individuals’ behaviour. One thinks of Thucydides’ famous claim that “fear, honor and interest” rank among the strongest of these drivers.

Roy gives material interests ample coverage but says little about the historical animosities that colour disputes about territory, or about oil and gas deposits in the seabed. China, for instance, wants to banish bad memories of its “century of humiliation” by seaborne conquerors. Vietnam has a fraught past with China. And on and on.

It will prove difficult indeed to disentangle conflicts over material objects from old enmities and suspicions that give regional politics its impassioned character. Yet Southeast Asian stakeholders must find a way to do so. Otherwise the “road to peace” Nalanda Roy implores them to tread may elude them.

JAMES R. HOLMES is a former US Navy surface warfare officer and a Professor of Strategy at the US Naval War College, Rhode Island. Postal address: 686 Cushing Road, Newport, RI, 02841-1207, United States; email: james.holmes@usnwc.edu.