

***Chinese Assertiveness in the South China Sea: Power Sources, Domestic Politics, and Reactive Foreign Policy.* By Richard Q. Turcsányi. Berlin: Springer, 2017. Hardcover: 183pp.**

Despite its title, this is not really a book about the South China Sea dispute. It is, to quote the author, “a project developing a conceptualization of power suitable for analytical use in international relations” (p. 16). It is about the relationship between China’s growing “power” — and the majority of the book is devoted to ways of assessing that power — and the state’s actions. Turcsányi regards the South China Sea “as an important playground” (p. 2) where China’s policy can be appraised.

Turcsányi’s book is an extension of his PhD at Masaryk University and follows a traditional thesis format with an opening chapter on research design. There is, unfortunately, no index or bibliography. He has been content to borrow his empirical understanding of developments in the region from secondary sources. The analysis is therefore dependent on the accuracy of those sources.

Turcsányi’s account of the 2012 Scarborough Shoal standoff is largely referenced to a Master’s thesis by O. Zachrisen, and his account of the 2013 siege at Second Thomas Shoal and the 2014 oil rig confrontation between China and Vietnam depends mainly upon articles from *The Diplomat* website. He does not present evidence of independent verification of those accounts nor of any supplementary investigation of the wider decision-making context. No information is sourced to personal interviews or communications. The superstructure of the book is therefore founded upon this rather thin evidential base.

Turcsányi’s argument is based upon an analysis of seven episodes in the recent history of the South China Sea — including the three mentioned above. I would compare this with, for example, Andrew Chubb’s recent PhD thesis at the University of Western Australia. Chubb constructed a detailed database of events in the South China Sea going back to 1970 and interrogated a wide range of primary and secondary sources, including those in Chinese, and came to rather different conclusions. Chubb shows a pattern of escalating assertiveness dating back decades. Turcsányi believes “China actually started to act assertively in the SCS in 2011” (p. 170).

Turcsányi’s main conclusion is that “China (most often) acts assertively only after it is given a pretext” (p. 174). “Reactive

assertiveness” was first defined in 2013 by Stephanie Kleine-Ahlbrandt of the International Crisis Group to describe when “Beijing uses an action by another party as justification to push back hard and change the facts on the ground in its favour.”¹ This is really another way of describing the Chinese Communist Party’s traditional strategy of “active defence”. Alexander Chieh-cheng Huang described its application in the maritime sphere at least as long ago as 1994. He quoted Mao, who defined his strategy as defence “for the purpose of counter-attacking and taking the offensive”.²

Therefore, the fact that Chinese forces took control of Scarborough Shoal only after a Philippine naval ship detained Chinese poachers red-handed with huge quantities of giant clams, does not mean that the Philippines was to blame for Chinese “reactive assertiveness”. It simply means that Chinese forces were waiting for a pretext to take another step forward in establishing control over the South China Sea. Too often in Turcsányi’s account the victims of Chinese assertiveness are blamed for triggering the assertion. I would take particular issue with the notion that it was the Philippines arbitration case filed in January 2013 that led China to begin construction of its artificial islands in the Spratlys eight months later (p. 152). The idea that such a vast project could have been conceived and executed in such a short period of time is not credible. It was clearly the result of decisions taken significantly earlier.

The focus on “reactive assertiveness” leads him to downplay other explanations of Chinese decision-making. Turcsányi admits that “it is not in the scope of the present research to give an exhaustive answer regarding the influence of domestic factors on China’s assertive behaviour” (p. 19). His consideration of nationalism, in particular, is “limited to the indirect role [it] might have played in influencing the leaders’ decisions” (p. 163). For Turcsányi, nationalism is something that happens in the street, rather than something that has been internalized in the leadership’s mindset. In this reviewer’s opinion, there are many reasons for Chinese actions in the South China Sea, but they are all underpinned by the sense of nationalist entitlement generated through the use and misuse of historic evidence.

Instead, Turcsányi is focused on whether the acquisition of “power” is the trigger for acts of Chinese assertiveness. He defines power as the “ability to achieve and/or sustain a desired goal” (p. 75) but also notes that it “cannot be objectively and effectively measured and quantified” (p. 66). Undaunted, he devotes chapters two, three and five to trying to find ways of assessing various forms

of power: military, economic, “national performance”, international and societal. His verdict is that there is no simple link between China acquiring power and using it (p. 171).

This analysis of China’s power leads Turcsányi to some strange conclusions. He states that “no overall ‘power shift’ in the global or regional politics has happened or is happening” (p. 175). This reviewer does not think many people in East Asia would agree with this assertion. He also concludes that “the results of Chinese assertiveness are not positive from China’s perspective” (p. 177), suggesting that it has damaged the country’s soft power and geopolitical position. This does not seem to be supported by the evidence. China has completed its island building and transformed the balance of power in the South China Sea while maintaining healthy economic growth and promoting ever-deeper cooperation with neighbouring states. The fact that the region neither likes nor trusts Beijing is somewhat irrelevant. The leadership has achieved its objective. And that, according to Turcsányi, is what power is.

NOTES

- ¹ International Crisis Group, *Dangerous Waters: China–Japan Relations on the Rocks, Asia Report No. 245* (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 8 April 2013).
- ² Alexander Chieh-Cheng Huang, “The Chinese Navy’s Offshore Active Defense Strategy”, *Naval War College Review* 47, no. 3 (1994).

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