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***Rock Solid: How the Philippines Won Its Maritime Case against China*. By Marites Dañguilan Vitug. Quezon City, Metro Manila: BUGHAW. Softcover: 315pp.**

The main title of Marites Vitug's account of the Philippines' maritime rights case against China does this book justice. The Philippine case against China was rock solid and the Philippines won a comprehensive legal victory on 16 July 2016. Vitug's book itself, at the risk of a bad pun, is also rock solid. It is an authoritative account, with lots of colour and character, of the history of the maritime rights dispute between the Philippines and China in the South China Sea, the decision by President Benigno Aquino to take China to court in 2013 and how the case itself unfolded.

The book's subtitle though does not do the book justice. Certainly, using access and interview skills as one of the Philippines' leading investigative journalists, Vitug provides a compelling account of how the Philippines won the case. However the structure of the book allows it to do much more than the title claims.

The first part looks at the history of the bilateral dispute from the Philippine standpoint going back to 1968. This part, which takes up about a third of the book, shows how China's approach to its claims in the South China Sea has been very consistent. International maritime law and the desire for good relations with the Philippines have not influenced this maximalist approach. On the other hand, different Philippine administrations, and different key actors within those administrations, have taken very different approaches to the dispute with China.

The author effectively shows that the desire for cordial and economically beneficial relations with China was a strong motivating factor for President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo to take a softer approach to the dispute with China. Jose Almonte's suggestion on page 18 that during the administration of President Fidel Ramos, Foreign Secretary Domingo Siazon's opposition to a planned Philippine Navy mission to Scarborough Shoal may have been influenced by his eagerness to gain China's support for his bid to become UN Secretary General, shows that the desire for good relations with Asia's most powerful country can serve personal interests as well. The first part of the book also clearly shows that China's claims to Scarborough Shoal, its interest in Reed Bank and its military plans for Mischief Reef were longstanding positions and

not a response to the Obama administration's pivot/rebalance to Asia and US freedom of navigation operations.

The second part of the book looks at three factors that the much weaker Philippines could possibly leverage to strengthen its position against China: its alliance with the United States, membership of ASEAN, and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). This part presents a convincing argument for why the alliance with the United States has been a source of disappointment for successive Philippine administrations from the 1970s onwards in relation to the country's maritime disputes with China. In a similar manner, membership of ASEAN, and ASEAN's efforts to discuss the dispute with China, have been of limited benefit to the Philippines. UNCLOS, as shown by the resounding July 2016 legal victory, is the only factor to have provided more benefit than disappointment. As former Foreign Secretary Alberto del Rosario states in reference to the 2013 filing of the case against China, "We were down to our last resort, absolutely our last resort" (p. 146).

The third part, The Main Actors, is where Vitug's profession comes to the fore. She has a chapter on each of the four main players on the Philippine side: Justice Antonio Carpio, Foreign Secretary del Rosario, President Aquino, and the American lawyer at the heart of the Philippine case, Paul Reichler. This part expounds on the strong moral and legal principles behind the Philippine's decision to file the case and its prosecution, and the justified doubts that President Aquino faced in his decision to take China head on. The chapter on Justice Carpio brings home how the shadow of China's might and long history acted as a strong cognitive barrier to Philippine legal actions that Carpio helped overcome. Vitug explains that even after the case was filed, the conventional legal wisdom in the Philippines was that China could not lose. Likewise, the local history community was sceptical about Carpio's marshalling of historical maps due to the pessimistic view that China would have a bigger arsenal of maps to draw on. In the end, the Philippines won and Carpio's collection of maps featured prominently in the Philippine case.

The fourth part of the book provides useful insights into how the Philippine side constructed and argued its ground-breaking case and ended up with a comprehensive victory. As Vitug notes, the victory reaffirmed that "the Law of the Sea was this small country's anchor and, at the same time, weapon" (p. 127). This part of the book highlights one of the ironies of the case. China's statements about the dispute prior to, and for the duration of, the case were

effectively marshalled by the Philippine legal team to bolster their arguments. Public silence and participation in the case, rather than public denunciation and a refusal to accept the tribunal's award, may have better served China's interests.

The final section, the Epilogue, is very poignant. On the very first page of the book's Preface, Vitug cites a *Foreign Policy* article published in August 2016 on the Philippine victory which argued that "Manila must hang onto it … the Philippines must … tell its story and tell it often."[1] The Duterte administration came to power at the end of June 2016, two weeks before the arbitral tribunal handed down its historic award. This Duterte administration, led by a man who has professed the Philippines' dependence on China, has chosen to stay silent.

Rock Solid tells an important story about Philippine politics and foreign policy, China's exercise of its growing might in the region and international maritime law. For lawyers and optimists, it reaffirms the levelling power of international law. For the sceptical and realists, it does the opposite.

NOTE

[1] James Holmes, "Here's How the Philippines Can Win in the South China Sea", *Foreign Policy*, 16 August 2016.

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