

***The Four Flashpoints: How Asia Goes to War.* By Brendan Taylor. Melbourne, Australia: La Trobe University Press, 2018. Softcover: 241pp.**

The flashpoints of Asia are well-known: the Korean Peninsula, the East China Sea, the South China Sea and Taiwan. All four are characterized by simmering tensions and the potential to erupt into conflict with widespread, and potentially catastrophic, consequences. There are ample books and commentaries dealing with each flashpoint, but Brendan Taylor goes further by painting a broader picture of how these four issues are collectively worsening Asia's strategic environment. Taylor sketches how tensions could play out in each flashpoint and argues that crises can only be avoided by understanding the complex relations between them. He suggests that a major war in Asia is more likely than most would assume, as the region is in the throes of a "crisis slide" (p. 177) where the cumulative pressure of the four flashpoints is pushing it closer to conflict.

An appealing part of Taylor's book is his description of the historical background to each dispute. He combines this with comprehensive research of the current situation, along with his first-hand expertise of the region, to produce what is basically a pessimistic assessment of where Asia is heading.

Taylor identifies four reasons why the flashpoints are more threatening to global order than regional rivalries elsewhere. The first is the capacity of regional states to wage war with their burgeoning defence budgets and simmering security dilemmas. Secondly, there is the centrality of Asia to the global economy and information and trade flows. Thirdly, regional inexperience in dealing with tensions and managing conflict increases the risks of an accidental war. In addition, the multilateral security framework necessary to effectively manage the risks of stumbling into a conflict is still missing. Lastly, the powerful forces of history and nationalism are increasingly evident in Asia. These forces are apparent in all four flashpoints.

The book deals with the Korean Peninsula first. This has attracted much attention recently with on again, off again predictions of conflict, the Trump administration's inconsistent policies, and North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un's game plays. It is what Taylor refers to as a "Mexican stand-off" (p. 58), a situation not conducive to a speedy solution.

Taylor then turns to the dispute in the East China Sea over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. This is the hallmark of the bitter enmity between China and Japan. It has a long history of contention. Taylor appears to see some merit in China's historical claims with the waters muddied by ambiguity in the various agreements during and after the Second World War. Nationalism in both China and Japan has hindered progress on the joint development of energy resources in the area, although in-principle agreement in December 2017 to implement a hotline mechanism between the two countries was a significant "breakthrough" (p. 91). Taylor sees the biggest danger as not a planned military campaign but a lower-level military clash.

Taylor identifies the South China Sea as the most complex and confusing of the four flashpoints. However, he also sees it as the least combustible. While an unfortunate incident at sea cannot be ruled out, a major conflict in the South China Sea is less likely than with the other flashpoints due to diplomacy's greater chance of success and a certain lack of urgency in addressing the disputes, and because Washington does not want war in this part of the region. Taylor believes that the United States would be better served by stepping back (p. 130) rather than by escalating its "largely ineffectual" freedom of navigation operations which challenge China's claims in the area (p. 127).

Lastly, Taylor turns to Taiwan which he sees as the most dangerous of the flashpoints largely because of the limited diplomatic avenues available to address the dispute. While time is on China's side, Beijing is resolutely committed to getting its way with Taiwan. Furthermore, changes in the military balance between China and Taiwan, and China and the United States, mean that China would likely be successful in a military takeover of the island. He sees President Trump's election and his generally erratic behaviour over Taiwan as adding fuel to this already combustible situation.

The common players in each of the flashpoints are, of course, China and the United States. There are few grounds for optimism here with the Trump administration becoming increasingly erratic and China's growing regional ambitions. With all four flashpoints, it is not the actual disputes themselves but the growing tensions and competition between Beijing and Washington that constitute the most serious danger. Decreasing levels of trust between these two countries impact severely on not only their own but also the region's ability to manage the disturbing geopolitical environment.

*Four Flash Points* is an easy and interesting read. While the reader may not agree that the regional picture is as dark as is painted in the book, its basic point is valid: that the cumulative impact of the four flashpoints requires more serious and urgent attention than it is currently receiving. Unfortunately, the situation has not improved since the book was published. US Vice President Mike Pence's speech on the Trump administration's policy towards China at the Hudson Institute in October 2018 elevated Washington's competition with Beijing to a new height. It highlighted a new wave of American strategic and economic policies to confront and contain China. It confirmed Brendan Taylor's worst fears about the future of the region.

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