

***Asian Waters: The Struggle Over the South China Sea & the Strategy of Chinese Expansion.* By Humphrey Hawksley. New York: The Overlook Press, 2018. Hardcover: 287pp.**

Humphrey Hawksley's book, *Asian Waters: The Struggle Over the South China Sea & the Strategy of Chinese Expansion*, does not add much that is new to the already extensive literature on the South China Sea dispute. However, it does provide a rich and readable overview of the various dynamics that factor into the re-emergence of China as the dominant power in Asia, and the anxiety this power shift has generated among countries across the Indo-Pacific region in general and Southeast Asia in particular.

The book aims to trace the broad strategic contours of the Indo-Pacific — with the South China Sea at the epicentre — where tectonic shifts are occurring due to China's drive to reclaim its status as Asia's paramount power. At the same time, it delves into particular power dynamics, political–economic developments and the historical contexts of certain countries across the region which inform and define their varied responses to China's rise. Within 274 pages, the author can only do so with quick, broad brushstrokes, eliding important nuances and complexities. This is, however, made up for by the insightful observations and vivid descriptions of a journalist who has travelled extensively in the region. The book's main strength lies in the author's insights drawn from his multiple conversations with experts and people whose daily struggle to make ends meet has little to do with high politics but whose stories reveal the impact of China's rising power.

History, which still informs decision-making and geopolitical rivalry today, exerts a strong presence in this book. Hawksley takes the reader on a grand historical tour; from the Opium Wars in the mid-nineteenth century to unresolved disputes on the Korean Peninsula and in the Taiwan Straits; from India's wars with China and Pakistan, to the three conflicts in Indochina; from the Meiji Restoration to America's War Plan Orange and Japan's defeat at the end of the Second World War. Interesting snippets of history emerge; for instance, Australia's prescient concern in 1959 that China might build military bases in the South China Sea and that the United States would do nothing to stop it. However, the author gets so immersed in history and story-telling that the book's central theme, the South China Sea, is often neglected.

The book starts with China's determination to enforce its historical claims in the South China Sea through the construction and militarization of artificial islands and intensified maritime law enforcement operations. While this is broadly seen as "aggressive" by outside countries, the author sheds light on China's defensive narrative of the need to build a Great Wall in the South China Sea, itself a product of its innate sense of vulnerability in its southern and eastern seaboard that came under attack from European powers in the nineteenth century. The author then moves on to Southeast Asia, where the repercussions of Chinese assertive actions in the South China Sea are most strongly felt. Two countries are highlighted: the Philippines, which under President Duterte has downplayed its security alliance with America in order to appease China; and Vietnam, which is moving closer towards its former enemy America in the face of China's maritime encroachments. Both countries are simultaneously grappling to embrace and resist China while trying to maintain a fine balance between Beijing and Washington — a challenging task facing most Southeast Asian countries.

The book then looks westward, towards India, its relationship with archrival Pakistan and both countries' complicated relations with China and the United States. As Beijing makes deep strategic inroads into the Indian Ocean, Hawksley does not have much hope for India to be a credible counterweight to China — even in its own neighbourhood — due to weak governments, lack of resources and New Delhi's preoccupation with Pakistan. Returning to the Pacific, the author weighs in on East Asia, where historical animosity is alive and well between China and Japan as the two longstanding rivals contest for regional leadership, while China's efforts to reclaim Taiwan further complicate the South China Sea situation as Taiwan itself is a party to the dispute. Hawksley also compresses North Korea's nuclear and cyber warfare issues into this chapter although their connection to Beijing's broader ambitions in the Indo-Pacific remains unclear. The United States figures prominently in this chapter, not only as the security guarantor for its East Asian allies in all of these flashpoints, but also as the status quo superpower which appears to be on a collision course with China.

The final part of the book analyses the South China Sea dispute through the prism of US–China rivalry in a transitioning world order due to power shifts in the Indo-Pacific, and populism and anti-globalization in the West. Hawksley argues that the South China Sea dispute, together with China's Belt and Road Initiative and new Beijing-led institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment

Bank, “goes to the core of Beijing’s demand for an overhaul of the current global order” (p. 250). The solution he advocates is to renegotiate the world order to take into account China’s Great Power status, but also that China must “initiate a peaceful and pragmatic end to the disputes in Asian waters” (p. 264). Sound advice, but difficult to achieve since the goal posts of the returning Great Power, i.e. China, may shift as it continues to rise, and what this renegotiation would mean for the South China Sea and other Asian waters is unclear.

The South China Sea may be the starting point for Hawksley, but the book ambitiously encompasses the entire landscape and seascape of the Indo-Pacific and beyond. Many fault lines, problems and dynamics subregionally and globally are compressed into this book, which leads to occasional detours from its central theme about China’s maritime strategy and what it means for the region as a whole. Those who want to dig deep into the South China Sea dispute and China’s maritime strategy may find it too general and unfocused; but general readers will be enriched by Humphrey’s extensive knowledge of Asia’s geography and history.

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