

***Asia's Trouble Spots: The Leadership Question in Conflict Resolution.* By A.S. Bhalla. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019. Softcover: 239pp.**

Few problems are more difficult for a political leader to resolve than an intractable conflict. Having expended blood and treasure, making concessions in an effort to seek a durable political settlement takes an incredibly courageous leader. The same is also true for the rebel movement, which once had maximalist demands but is now forced to make concessions. And for both leaders, the greatest obstacles to peace often come from within their own ranks, whether it be those with vested interests in the continuation of the conflict, military leaders that fear loss of budgets, or those that seek to benefit from the leader's perceived weakness. The search for a political resolution to intractable conflicts is never easy, which explains why so many fester on.

A.S. Bhalla has written a thoughtful book, *Asia's Trouble Spots*, on this topic. The author has looked at twelve different internal conflicts in seven different countries: Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India and China. These cases are varied in the hopes that they will provide a broad analysis of the “special sauce” needed to lead a country or a rebel movement into a negotiated settlement.

Though the field of peace research studies is large and growing, there has not been enough comparative research. Each conflict is *sui generis*. While looking at a diverse range of cases, Bhalla focuses his analysis on the government's leadership and their ability to mitigate spoilers.

In each case study, the author remains concentrated on four main questions: 1. “[D]id political leaders act as spoilers or succeed or fail at identifying spoilers and spoiling activity? 2. Did they take advantage of stalemates to start negotiations and seize on ‘enticing opportunity’ by offering appropriate incentives to neutralize spoilers? 3. What was the role of external leadership and NGOs in cases in which external agents were invited for facilitation mediation and conflict negotiations? Or were there any external spoilers such as cross-border terrorists and infiltration of members of regional or global networks? What role did pressures by the international community play in checking intra-state conflicts? 4. Were there any external spoilers such as cross border terrorists and infiltration of members of regional/global networks?” (p. 33). This is a very methodical

book, with each case study organized similarly: a brief background, followed by sections on the leadership issues in both the state and rebel movements, with a concluding analysis of the spoiler problem.

The case studies are short. This book is not the place to go for the definitive histories of each conflict. Nonetheless, the author provides a very concise historical overview of the roots of each conflict and its trajectory, as well as empirical evidence to add context to the motivations of the actors. The author then looks into the decision-making and leadership choices of the states at critical political junctures. Bhalla does a very good job of explaining how changing political dynamics created the context for leaders to decide whether and how to look for durable political solutions and, more importantly, stand up to spoilers within their own side, whether their own military or security forces or local elites. The third section of each case study delves into the leadership choices within the rebel movement. Unfortunately, this is by far the weakest section in each chapter. The author argues that states are the primary spoilers, when rebels often have to deal with their own spoilers. These rebel groups are not always the black boxes that many assume them to be. And perhaps this was the section of the book that was the most uneven across the different case studies. The section on Tamil Tiger leadership in the Sri Lankan case study, for example, was excellent. In the case of the Rohingya, it was barely touched on. While the author does an excellent job of spelling out the Myanmar government's complicity in ethnic cleansing, the section on the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army is weak, although the rebel group has laid out its policies and goals in a series of public announcements, press releases, media interviews and video statements since 2016. We also know some of Attullah Abu Amar Jununi's biography. And there is more to be written about the absolute folly of leading a small group of poorly trained rebels against the world's 12th largest military that has fought continuously since 1947.

Likewise, in the Aceh case study, we know that by the time the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami had devastated Aceh, the government of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono was already reaching out to field commanders. These commanders were wary of the hardline exiled leadership who, from the luxury of Scandinavia, maintained maximalist demands. When the peace process began in earnest in the midst of the internationally supported reconstruction of Aceh, Hasan di Tiro had no choice but to embrace the peace process because it was going to happen with or without him.

But what the author does so effectively is to pierce the narrative of rebel leadership such that they alone speak for their constituents. Rebel groups emerge not just in order to defend their ethnic groups' interests against rapacious or repressive states, but in competition with more moderate rivals. He does this best in the section on Sri Lanka: "the creation of the liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam needs to be examined in the context of protracted conflicts between different communities, not just between the Sinhalese state and the Tamils" (p. 126).

The final section of each case study— "leaders, spoilers, stalemate, opportunity"—ties it back to the intellectual theme of the book, namely the four conditions that must be met for a durable political settlement: state actors not spoiling the peace; a shared understanding by both the rebels and state that there is a battlefield stalemate; the international community has a greater interest in peace than pursuing their narrowly stated national objectives; and the absence of transnational terrorism.

The two Indonesian case studies, Aceh and East Timor, should have been reversed; not just because East Timor (1998) predated the Aceh settlement (2005), but more importantly because it created the political conditions in which presidents Abdurrahman Wahid and Megawati Sukarnoeputri were unable or unwilling to push harder for peace and show greater leadership vis-à-vis the military that was intent on defeating the Free Aceh Movement (GAM). After decades of military-backed rule, neither president was willing to alienate the military that was incensed over the loss of East Timor. Indeed, in describing President Habibie as "weak" in Aceh, the author overlooks what he did, inevitably ending his political career, in making the UN referendum in East Timor possible, a show of enormous political courage.

The real outlier among the case studies is China. As a totalitarian state, China has absolutely no interest in ever seeking a durable political solution to the conflicts in Xinjiang and Tibet. Any negotiation with a substate actor is a sign of weakness to the Communist Party that would send reverberations across Chinese civil society. The Chinese state can only respond in one way, with an overwhelming show of force. President Xi Jinping's "strike hard" campaign has probably done more to keep these smoldering insurgencies alive than anything else. While China has declared both Xinjiang and Tibet as "autonomous regions", that is nothing more than Orwellian doublespeak. China has systematically tried to destroy the minority cultures in both provinces through a process of cultural genocide

and large-scale Han immigration, which in urban areas have made Uighurs and Tibetans minorities in their own lands.

The book concludes with an analysis of the case studies: those that were successfully implemented (Aceh and to a lesser extent Mindanao); those in which the state militarily defeated the insurgents (Sri Lanka); and the rest that remained in a stalemate, a condition of protracted low-level violence.

This is a well-written book that introduces students to a range of case studies, each with its own history, outcomes, and different roles played by external actors, whether they be states, NGOs or individual mediators. For an upper level class on negotiations, it would be an effective resource for delving into the spoiler question.

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