

***On Dangerous Ground: America’s Century in the South China Sea.* By Gregory B. Poling. New York City, New York: Oxford University Press, 2022. E-version: 305pp.**

Greg Poling has written a book that anyone serious about understanding the background, status and implications of the South China Sea dispute will need to read carefully and retain for further reference. Using analytical skills to support judgements based on behaviour rather than rhetoric, Poling discerns prevailing trends involving US policy and the often-tortuous path followed by successive US administrations to preserve Washington’s interests in this critical waterway. The stakes today, with escalating Sino-US rivalry and Beijing’s ever more commanding control over the South China Sea, are seen as more important than ever.

The author’s history of American policy and practice provides ample treatment of the various claimants in the South China Sea since the nineteenth century. China’s policy and behaviour get special attention. Also highlighted is the role played by the Philippines America’s former colony and strategic ally in US policy calculations.

The book depicts US interests in the South China Sea over the years focusing on two areas: first, “freedom of the seas”; and second, balancing commitments to allies involved in the South China Sea disputes with its interest in avoiding entanglement in the arguments of various allies and other claimants. Thus, out of the five chapters on the history of US policy in the South China Sea, two chapters, Two and Five, are related to freedom of the seas. They cover evolving American positions on maritime issues during the protracted international negotiations and debates culminating in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) signed in 1982.

Chapter One provides a review of US policy and actions in the South China Sea in the 150 years prior to the main focus of the volume, “America’s Century”, beginning in the 1950s. It also analyses the vagueness of China’s claims in the South China Sea prior to the end of the Second World War. In particular, it reveals the idiosyncratic circumstances reflecting limited knowledge and flawed understandings that led to the Republic of China’s creation of a map in the late 1940s, complete with the dashed lines, that continue to provide the basis for China’s current claims to most of the South China Sea.

The subsequent chapters discuss developments in more detail in chronological order since the Second World War and highlight a shift in US concerns. Washington's longstanding approach was to remain neutral in a dispute that involves US allies such as French-ruled Vietnam and the then Republic of Vietnam, the Republic of China and the Philippines. America's involvement increased as the number of US allies dwindled, leaving only the Philippines as a formal US ally; as the threat of violence grew, notably with China's coercive behaviour threatening much weaker claimant states; and as new maritime claims emerge, again prompted by China's growing assertiveness.

The account depicts China's carefully calculated efforts to gain greater control of the South China Sea at the expense of the other weaker claimants. China's paramount leader Deng Xiaoping is seen as in charge of the Chinese attack that drove out South Vietnamese forces from the Paracel Islands in 1974. Under Deng's leadership, Admiral Liu Huaqing led efforts in the 1980s to build maritime capacities designed to expand China's control within the first island chain along its maritime rim, with the goal of challenging US power in the second island chain. China's determination and ability to control its expansive maritime claims grew. Its increased military capacity allowed it to begin building outposts in disputed reefs that ran up against Vietnam's claims, leading to a clash at Johnson Reef in 1988 that claimed 64 Vietnamese lives.

Driven by what Poling sees as hubris and revanchism, by 2009 Chinese leaders had sought to take advantage of the country's rapidly improving naval, coast guard and maritime militia capacities, and a perceived decline in US power and resolve, to gain greater control over the South China Sea. The administration of President Barack Obama repeatedly failed to deal successfully with China's growing assertiveness in several incidents, including the standoff between Philippine and Chinese forces at Scarborough Shoal in 2012 and Beijing's artificial island-building campaign which began in the Spratlys in 2013.

President Donald Trump's administration confronted China and offered greater clarity on US resolve to defend Philippine security forces if they came under attack by Chinese forces. But Trump avoided personal involvement and proved erratic, leading to continued US decline. In contrast, China substantially strengthened its coast guard and maritime militia fleets and made effective use of the seven artificial islands it had constructed and militarized in the Spratly Islands.

In the concluding chapter on the possible outcomes of US-China rivalry in the South China Sea and recommendations for US policy, the author warns that President Joe Biden's administration should fully recognize the implications of China's control of the South China Sea for longstanding US interests in freedom of the seas as well as the critical role of a strong US-Philippines alliance for Washington's efforts to build security coalitions to counter challenges posed by China. He forecasts three possible scenarios: first, China's long sought dominance in the South China Sea at the expense of regional claimants, marginalizing the United States and endangering interests of regional and other states in sustaining freedom to the seas; second, US-China military conflict in the South China seen likely to escalate and "get out of hand"; and third, stronger US efforts to leverage China towards a compromise with its neighbours that the international community could accept. Poling prefers the third option. He seems correct in judging that with enough sustained and effective US involvement in the region, the United States can strengthen resolve among allies and partners against Chinese expansionism and thereby compel Beijing to compromise with its neighbours over the South China Sea disputes.

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