Journal of Contemporary Asia, Volume 47, Issue 5, 2017, pp. 845-847
DOI:10.1080/00472336.2017.1296175

BOOK REVIEW

THE SOUTH CHINA SEA: A CRUCIBLE OF REGIONAL COOPERATION OR CONFLICT-MAKING SOVEREIGNTY CLAIMS?

Edited by C.J. Jenner and Tran Truong Thuy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

The South China Sea is the setting for a number of conflicting sovereignty claims, which have heightened tensions between China and regional Southeast Asian states such as Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam. These waters are a primary route for a large proportion of world trade and are abundant in natural resources. Stability is therefore an important pre-condition for continued domestic and international trade and regional development. With the potential for conflict ever-present, scholars from a variety of disciplines have increasingly attempted to enhance public awareness of the crisis, clarify the nature of the disputes and recommend a variety of solutions to mitigate the tension. This edited collection joins this debate, aiming to enhance knowledge of the South China Sea sovereignty disputes. Multi-disciplinary in nature, the volume is divided into four parts: Part I addresses the global dimensions of the South China Sea dispute; Part II focuses on interests at the subnational, national and regional levels; Part III looks at sovereignty disputes through the prism of international maritime law; and Part IV considers the prospects for conflict or cooperation in the region.

The edition includes chapters from a host of renowned scholars. Those familiar with the maritime and regional security literature will recognise Rodolfo C. Severino, Renato Cruz De Castro, Alice Ba, Ian Storey, Bonnie Glaser and Carlyle Thayer, to name but a few. The book works on two distinct levels. At an individual chapter level, the contribution of regional experts makes it an important contribution to the field. All chapters are clearly articulated and thought provoking. Standout chapters include Renato Cruz De Castro's "The Obama

Administration's strategic rebalancing in Asia: from a diplomatic to a strategic constrainment of an emergent China?" (42-58), and Alice Ba and Ian Storey's "Continuity and change in the South China Sea" (71-96). Where these chapters succeed is that they provide detailed assessments of the South China Sea dispute, as one would expect from a book of this nature, whilst also exploring connections and drivers that are probative and insightful; offering potential future scenarios or new opportunities for the dispute. On a second level, the book also works as a collection of essays. The multi-disciplinary nature enhances its overall appeal, with the section on maritime law sitting nicely alongside other chapters. Non-legal experts will find these chapters eminently accessible. In addition to the various legal arguments there is a clear awareness of the various geo-political factors, as evidenced in Stein Tønnesson's chapter "The Tonkin Gulf Agreements: a model of conflict resolution?" (151-170). This helps bind this section into the overall theme of the book.

Despite these achievements, the book is not without its flaws. Jenner and Thuy (3) state that the book's "governing aim is to enhance its readers' knowledge of the South China Sea sovereignty disputes." With such a broad aim, it is perhaps unsurprising that the book at times reads more like a textbook than an edited collection. It is not clear whether this was the intention of the editors from the outset. Varying levels of in-depth analysis in the individual chapters compounds this. Vijay Sakhuja and Pankaj Jha's chapter "India and the South China Sea" (118-132) helps to illustrate this point. The authors provide a detailed assessment of India's often over-looked interests with regards to the South China Sea, including information regarding India's regional security and defence cooperation. Undoubtedly, this provides an interesting perspective to the book. Where the chapter stops short is that it fails to analyse the potential repercussions of India's policy on the South China Sea, particularly as it

pertains to regional security. Considering the book's governing aim, this feels like something of a missed opportunity.

Arguably, the book would benefit from some additional detail in the "Introduction" to help drive the overall narrative. As mentioned, Jenner and Thuy divide the collection into four parts. However, they do not explicitly confirm their reasoning behind this designation. It is not until the final chapter, "Conclusion: history, strategy and the South China Sea," that author Jenner (295) states that "history and strategy provide the analytical frames for the chapter's first and second parts." It would strengthen the narrative if this were clearly articulated from the outset. As it stands, the book's four parts seem rather arbitrarily selected, with chapters not necessarily reflecting the section in which they have been placed. There is also no clear argument as to why international law should feature in favour of other applicable disciplines, such as political economy. This is not to say that the international maritime law chapters are out of place. It is unfortunate however, that the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) ruled on the South China Sea Arbitration case so close to the book's publication. Two chapters, Nguyễn Thị Lan Anh's "UNCLOS and maritime security in the South China Sea" (171-185), and Robert C. Beckman and Leonardo Bernard's "Disputed areas in the South China Sea: prospects for arbitration or advisory opinion" (202-219), discuss the potential merits of UNCLOS as a dispute settlement mechanism. In the aftermath of the July 2016 UNCLOS ruling, which found in favour of the Philippines and was ultimately rejected by Beijing, it is left to the reader to decide whether the UNCLOS is still a viable option for the resolution of the dispute.

While the book is a useful primer on this topic, those readers already familiar with the complexities of the South China Sea dispute may be disappointed that the book lacks a

clearly articulated narrative to help set it apart from others in the field. These concerns do detract from the book to a certain degree. However, the book has plenty of positive attributes that, on balance, outweigh the negatives. These include the book's multi-disciplinary nature, engaging chapters and impressive list of contributing authors. In sum, the book succeeds in its overall governing aim, which is to enhance reader's knowledge of what is a deeply complicated and intractable regional issue.

Laura Southgate
Centre for International Security and Resilience
Cranfield University Shrivenham Campus
Swindon SN6 8LA
United Kingdom
Email: l.e.southgate@cranfield.ac.uk

DSPACE

https://dspace.org/

Book Review: The South China Sea: A Crucible of Regional Cooperation or Conflict-Making Sovereignty Claims?

Southgate, Laura

2017-03-02
Taylor and Francis
https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2017.1296175
Southgate L. (2017) Book Review: The South China Sea: A Crucible of Regional Cooperation or Conflict-Making Sovereignty Claims? Journal of Contemporary Asia, Volume 47, Issue 5, pp. 845-847

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/