

BOOK REVIEW

Missed Opportunities in the South China Sea

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Nalanda Roy. *The South China Sea Disputes: Past, Present, and Future*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016. 161 pp., \$80.00 hardback (ISBN: 978-1498536233); \$76.00 e-book (ISBN: 978-1498536240).

The South China Sea Disputes examines the different aspects of the maritime disputes involving China, Taiwan, Brunei, Vietnam, Philippines, and Malaysia. It provides historical and contemporary accounts of how the disputes that center on the Spratly and Paracel Islands have evolved, along with the complex asymmetries of power and interests among the claimants. The book is divided into six chapters. The first briefly describes the different claimants' perceptions of and interests in the dispute. The second looks at the reasons behind the standoffs in the South China Sea. The third and fourth chapters examine the history and contemporary contestations in the South China Sea, including the bilateral "clashes" among the claimants. The fifth nods to the Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as the only regional organization that seeks to manage the tension in the South China Sea. The final chapter summarizes the arguments and considers the possibilities for peace.

Overall, the book synthesizes earlier research and secondary sources to provide a short and accessible account of the conflicting claims and interests in the South China Sea. Its chief value lies in its ability to balance historical contexts and contemporary challenges between the different claimants' perspectives without privileging one over another. Rather than adjudicating the claimants' positions under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), for example, the book focuses on the strategic dimensions of the dispute. It examines the South China Sea's geostrategic location, military and economic value, and hydrocarbon and marine resource endowments. Moreover, it describes how asymmetry in power and interests among the claimants has blocked the dispute's peaceful management—from track-two workshops to joint development proposals to regional and bilateral talks (96–102).

That conflicting power and interests create missed opportunities for "peaceful resolution" is not surprising. Observers have made this case since the 1990s. Roy also repeats a common refrain among regional analysts about the perils of miscalculation when incidents arise in the area (26–27). But by walking the same path taken before, the book also misses an opportunity to provide fresh insights using the broader international relations (IR) literature. Roy briefly mentions realism and constructivism as potential theories applicable to the South China Sea (100, 108, 111–12) but never develops or uses them to analyze the disputes. As Roy admits, the book was "never intended to be a book focusing on IR theory" (111).

This dismissal of theoretical engagement is regrettable because there are very few studies that systematically use insights from, or seek to develop, IR theories to

explain these disputes. To be fair, the South China Sea is undertheorized in IR literature; in fact, there exists a broader lacuna as well, in which systematic, cross-national, time-series comparisons of maritime and territorial disputes throughout the Indo-Pacific are rare. IR scholars have also traditionally focused on territorial and maritime security in East and South Asia (e.g., Paul 2010; Johnston 2012; Chan 2016), rather than Southeast Asia.

What does exist then lacks theoretical rigor. Regional analysts dive into the historical and political contexts or the rapidly changing contemporary dynamics. Policymakers, meanwhile, focus on one problem at a time but not a broader, systematic analysis. Thus, a methodologically rigorous analysis of the South China Sea using various IR theories could have provided a clearer picture of the problem and yielded fresh policy ideas. Such an analysis of the South China Sea since the 1940s, for example, might facilitate our understanding of armed skirmishes there and how to prevent them. A systematic comparison of different dispute management efforts could suggest the conditions under which international institutions (e.g., UNCLOS) and regional organizations (e.g., ASEAN) are effective. But Roy misses another opportunity in this regard by offering a one-liner methodological description—that she employs a “qualitative historical-comparative methodology” (8)—without telling us specifically what she is comparing and how.

Finally, for a book claiming to be a “policy-oriented analytical narrative” targeting academics and policy-makers (8), it misses some empirical details. For example, Roy claims that UNCLOS has only been ratified (in the region) by Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam (20). In fact, almost all Indo-Pacific countries have ratified UNCLOS, except for Cambodia and North Korea. Similarly, for a book claiming to provide “up-to-date information” (8), it is odd that the ongoing ASEAN-China Code of Conduct negotiations (since 2002) are not fully discussed, even though it is the only existing multilateral mechanism to manage the dispute.

Southeast Asian specialists may quibble with the book’s failure to analyze fully the numerous policy proposals to manage the dispute. Political scientists might bemoan the lack of theory and methodology. Yet the general reader still benefits from the book’s accessible overview of the historical and contemporary challenges in the South China Sea. Undergraduate courses on Asian security will also benefit from the book’s extensive use of secondary sources to discuss the claimants’ positions and interests. In this sense, *The South China Sea Disputes* remains a valuable contribution to the study of Southeast Asian security dynamics.

References

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