

## **The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia**

by Bill Hayton, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014,  
pp. 288, \$35

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The South China Sea disputes have received considerable attention from international relations scholars, world leaders and policymakers in the recent decades. China's aspirations in the region are challenged by the relatively smaller East Asian countries, including Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan. The territorial disputes, mixed with the concept of sovereignty and national pride, have led to the development of geopolitical rivalry in the region. But these disputes have their origin in history and Hayton's book, divided into nine chapters, offers readers the historical context of the twenty-first century's most discussed territorial disputes revolving around the South China Sea. Hayton argues that history can elucidate, at least partially, why control over the South China Sea is considered so significant by the claimant states. Simultaneously, he also explains the misuse of historical data in the modern era for one's own convenience. Hayton's book also clarifies the factors responsible for intensifying the conflicting interests in the region vis-à-vis the international arena. These are explained in the following paragraphs.

One reason that explains the engrossment of the modern states in South China Sea is its value as one of the busiest global maritime trade routes. This was evident even in ancient times. Hayton notes that the

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rulers of Funan (an ancient empire situated in the Mekong Delta) used to collect revenues from the passing voyagers and traders on their way to China. In fact, Funan developed itself as an entrepôt as those traders and voyagers had to stop at Funan to ensure supplies for their crews during their long sea journeys. Hayton further notes that the ancient rulers of Funan used to send a 'tribute' to the Chinese emperors. Information like this and similar citations from history have helped China in developing its claims on the South China Sea. However, this logic can be contested as those tributes were perhaps gifts from Funan to China in order to ensure that the vessels going from Funan to China could get easy access to its seaports and did not imply Funan's (or any ancient South-East Asian empire's) subjugation to China. So, this explains how misinterpretation of past helps China to base its claims on so-called historical evidences.

Another very interesting part of Hayton's book is related to the formation of artificial maps and boundaries by the Europeans to demarcate their respective areas of influences. Hayton indicates that the *Mandala* system of ancient South-East Asia allowed its people to freely commute anywhere and the concept of a sovereign power was a fluid one. However, the Europeans transformed the 'fluid frontiers' into 'fixed frontiers' during the colonial period (p. 47). By the middle of the twentieth century, China started showing new lines and maps to demonstrate its claims on the South China Sea as well. Hayton argues that this actually testifies to China's sensitivity to the accusation that its rulers could not protect its own territories from the Europeans and even from a fellow Asian power like Japan. Hayton opines that this sensitivity of China was combined with the sense of national pride and, therefore, gaining sovereignty over most of the South China Sea islands became an essential part for China's foreign policy. As a result, in order to protect its national interests, China, under Deng Xiaoping, started developing a blue-water navy. This was the period when reserves of oil and natural gas were discovered in the South China Sea. So, China intended to prevent its smaller neighbours from acquiring monopolies over the newly discovered natural resources. The rising regional tension was evident in the early 1990s when China, Vietnam and the Philippines began hiring foreign companies for surveying, drilling and exploration activities in the South China Sea.

Subsequently, Hayton proves that China's assertive behaviour can be explained through its sense of deprivation as well. For instance, China feels threatened as the United Nations Convention on the Law

of Sea (UNCLOS) gives privileges to its smaller neighbours in a way that its own exclusive economic zones are hindered by those of Japan and the Philippines. In this way, Hayton ensures that the book not only demonstrates the ever-growing enthusiasm of China but also identifies the stimulants responsible for its assertive behaviour.

In the twenty-first century, especially after the Lehman Brothers bankruptcy incident, China was sure about establishing an alternative world order led by China and not the United States (US). This partially explains American involvement in the disputes. The rivalry between China and the US became more evident as the latter signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and became a member in the East Asia Summit in 2009. This was the year when China, for the first time, submitted a map along with the 'U-shaped line' to delineate its territory in an international forum, the United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf. So, Hayton rightly argues that now the tension in the South China Sea has taken an international structure and the smaller South-East Asian countries are just playing relatively limited roles. These countries are, in fact, divided on the question of claims on the islands and often take sides either with the US or China in order to safeguard their own interests. For instance, in 2012, Cambodia won the hearts of the Chinese leaders by not allowing the ASEAN foreign ministers to issue a communiqué, mandatory for the ASEAN summits. At the same time, the incident made the US realise that isolating Cambodia would further facilitate its harmony with China. By the end of the book, Hayton suggests that China needs to compromise on its 'U-shaped line' in order to avoid warfare in South China Sea islands.

The book offers a consistent account of the rows over the South China Sea and their convergence with the larger, global, conflicting interests between the US and China. In brief, Hayton's book would be enjoyed by those who are looking for historical background behind the South China Sea territorial disputes as well as for all interested in studying the Asia-Pacific region from a security perspective.

The limitations of the book primarily derive from the fact that the subject chosen by the author is vast in nature and hence, it is difficult to address all the relevant issues. For instance, at the end of the book, Hayton notes that Taiwan can play an important role in the entire scenario. However, this point could have been explained in a more detailed manner. The book also lacks a review of the existing relevant

literature, thereby not providing a complete picture to the readers. Finally, the author has not explained the future implications of the intensifying tension in the region.