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Book Review

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Bill Hayton, *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia*, London, Yale University Press, 2014, 289 pp., US $35, ISBN 978-0300186833

Bill Hayton's book, *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia*, gives a clear picture to a pressing issue that poses a threat to the region. A journalist by profession and Southeast Asia specialist, Hayton utilises his trade craft to put together an interesting book packed with narratives, historical characters and eyewitness accounts. Few of the countries involved are untouched: the US is a domineering hegemonist, the Philippines bumbling and puerile, while Vietnam faces issues similar to China.

In the beginning, the book captures the readers with the sensational and disturbing situation of a worldwide blaze that begins with a pair of Philippine fishing boats sailing out to a shoal in the South China Sea and ends with someone in Delhi deciding that "this would be the perfect moment to regain some lost territory in the Himalayas". Just on the off chance that the incidents aren't instantly self-evident, the writer, in a tongue-and-cheek manner, asks a paragraph later: "What happens in the event that somebody shoots an Archduke?"

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With attention secured, whatever is left of the book is particularly less incredible. The author calmly sails us through the South China Sea's numerous riddles. He begins with history, indeed prehistory. The motivation behind these parts is to expose Chinese claims that the South China Sea is "truly" China's.

China's far-reaching claims are maybe best known from nine dashed lines that take up a limited piece of the South China Sea and infringe into the regional waters of Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei. China's irksome behavior with its little neighbours over the issue is likewise remarkable. Less well known, maybe, is the recorded history for China's claim or the lack of it. Hayton indicates how the South China Sea was generally obscure or uncharted by the Chinese up to this point. Once the Chinese resolved to claim possession little over a century ago, they obtained names from European outlines, as opposed to utilising ones that might be from a domain with chronicled claims on the region.

James shoal, called Zengmu Tan by the Chinese, is the southernmost territory claimed by China and lies about 22 m below the sea, but the international law does not provide territorial claims on submerged features. Indeed, as Hayton shows, the majority of the land features in the area do not generate much of a claim to the surrounding sea, where the disputes were put to international arbitration. This explains why China refuses to submit to external adjudication of these claims.

China's objections can seem childish and baseless, although Hayton places the disputes in the context of China as an emerging maritime power, constrained by international rules drawn up to ensure the dominance of European trading nations and their free-trade successor, the US.

The US has its own "uninfringeable" position that the South China Sea must stay open to international shipping and, consequently, no country has sovereign rights over it. The monetary significance of the oil tankers and vessels that fuel the global economy far exceed the estimation of the worth of the islands, their angling grounds or any potential hydrocarbons that may lie underneath them, which are unlikely to consist of large reserves. The US likewise does not embrace the Chinese claims, so the US Pacific Fleet consistently cruises through these waters as an indication to facilitate commerce.

Between these two tussling "giants" are the region's "ants", which have either a direct claim on the area or an advantage to be gained by playing China and the US against each other. Cambodia's leader has been particularly skillful at this game, Hayton says, sprinkled by the retaliatory permissiveness of superpowers jostling for

influence. While China flexes its muscle, the US cannot be seen doing the same. The US "pivot" to Asia helps act as an opposition to China's showcasing of power in the South China Sea. But it is also seen as a destabilising factor that generates military tensions in the region.

Hayton observes that Chinese scholars interpreted English or French names for different shoals and islands that China now claims were known to them for almost 100 years. He presents a decent defence that the chronicled contentions, whether from China or alternate petitioners for power over the South China Sea, are not so convincing. However, the opinions based around universal law fare better.

Sadly, in the South China Sea, the law is a long way from being clear. There are two set of laws to fight with: an older form governs "historical claims" to a territory, and a different method, defined by United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea 1982 (UNCLOS), can be measured by territorial claims. The South China Sea is the place where the two structures converge and, maybe, collide. Hayton's book covers the question from all angles and brings out the intricacy in each point as being authentic, lawful, political and vital. The author spins a fairly decent yarn, especially when the theme is as dry as the UNCLOS. In reality, he may be the first individual ever to have composed an invigorating record of a meeting of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN). The book is regardless calming, since it observes that there are no trustworthy answers to the questions.

The Chinese nine-dash line is asserted likewise by Taiwan, as the descendant of the "Republic of China" whose map makers created it. It brushes through the "Exclusive Economic Zones" of Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam. The Philippines is, however, testing its lawful legitimacy. But regardless of that fact, even if the Philippines wins, UNCLOS can't arbitrate on sovereignty over islands, shoals or reefs. Furthermore, China will sideline it for evident reasons.

Islands and overall appaling rocks in the ocean have been transformed into smaller-than-normal posts to reinforce regional cases. China and Vietnam fought a battle in 1988 in the Spratly Islands, named after the commander of a British cruising barque who went there in the 1840s in the hope of filling her hold with whale oil. What's more, a year ago, an alternate kind of oil incited water-cannon skirmishes and boat-rammings, when a Chinese rig drilled in waters near another set of islands claimed by Vietnam, the Paracels.

Yet it may not be the assets that are fuelling dispute. Hayton reports that oil-industry specialists are incredulous of cases that the ocean's hydrocarbon reserves will

make it "the next Persian Gulf". The majority of the recoverable oil and gas stores are under undisputed waters, regardless. What's more, the oceans' once-remarkable fish stocks are, without any system to oversee them, shockingly depleted.

What makes the question so hazardous is a poisonous blend of geopolitical issues. In China, the nine-dash line has been given a symbolic stature to cover up past humiliation. In Vietnam, for instance, about which Hayton notes with precise insight, the government faces pressure from opponents eager to seize on any instance of "softness" towards China. Criticism of China has become a proxy for criticism of Vietnam's own ruling Communists.

The author adds the caveat, in the end, that in the last leg of his research, he altered his opinion. At the point when Hayton began writing the book, he accepted that a contention over the sea was up and coming. While researching, he was convinced that the Chinese comprehend that they would lose a war and are frantic to keep away from it, utilising rather what they call "the period of strategic opportunity" to develop China's power. Since they realise that others will grasp this, in any case, they need to seem confrontational. This is a captivating argument. But this strategy is so vulnerable to inaccuracy, misunderstanding and absolute bad luck that it is not a very calming one.

The author contends that China's position on the different regional questions is not built with respect to the potential riches that lie in or underneath the sea. Hayton finds many if not most Chinese activities and articulations to be critical; however, he is not dismissive of the hidden issues. The longer second portion of the book details more recent developments as well as the issues of nationalism and military security that bedevil attempts to move any discussion forward. These last few years of the story will be familiar to those who follow the recent developments. The book provides a good summary of the ongoing debates on the South China Sea, providing adequate anecdotes and factual documentations. The writer has his own biases but the personal experience helps enhance the book and keeps the reader captivated.