

BOOK REVIEW

The politics of South China Sea disputes, by Dr Nehginpao Kipgen, South Asia Edition, New Delhi, Routledge, 2020 [PB], 135 pages, Rs 695, ISBN: 978-0-367-51206-4

The Politics of South China Sea Disputes is a rather short book, comprising just over 100 pages in actual content, followed by a detailed bibliography of books, papers and websites that the author accessed for the purpose of writing. Despite its abbreviated length, the book has ample details on the controversial topic of numerous territorial disputes manifesting in the South China Sea (SCS) involving powerful regional players, such as China, Vietnam, the Philippines and Indonesia. The author was a Professor and Executive Director at the Centre for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS), Jindal School of International Affairs, O.P. Jindal Global University. He was an expert in international studies and comparative politics.

In the capacious maritime domain of Southeast Asia, the SCS is customarily witness to activities undertaken by a host of actors, resulting in a volatile and unforgiving status quo. The many regional actors have been stymied by considerable, conspicuous ongoing conflicts that have hampered the prospects for perpetual peace and broad-ranging economic cooperation devised on liberal parameters, such as favourable trade regimes. Though the region is tightly knit, it has welcomed Chinese parlays vis-à-vis the Southeast Asian countries due to historical linkages and bonds. Kipgen puts forth his views by focusing on the liberal aspects of international relations (IR) theories vis-à-vis China, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the individual claimant states that are members of ASEAN. He states clearly that these states, while oriented towards better overall relations with Beijing, have also been (and continue to be) in conflict with China over territorial issues.

Each of Southeast Asia's diverse set of actors has played an understandably deterring role in the region's rise as a geopolitically influential arena in global politics. Its chief multilateral base, ASEAN, has strived admirably to provide a profound platform that promotes amiability and cooperation amongst Southeast Asia's nation states. However, Kipgen opines that the SCS disputes are largely centred on the IR theory of realism, with the self-interests of the states involved in the disputes ranking above the progressive economic ventures of liberalism. In this regard, he states that the ASEAN largely believes in a policy of non-interference and is inclined towards China as far as the SCS disputes are concerned. Other geopolitical actors, such as the United States (US), Japan, Australia and India, are also featured in the book.

The author begins by explaining the various theories of IR, complementing the book's maritime focus in relatively sufficient detail. He not only explicates these theories – which can serve as a useful primer for readers who can later interlink the provisions of IR theory to the book's subject matter and its core content – but also uses them for the geopolitical analysis of the SCS and its ongoing affairs. Delving into the core aspects of the literature, Kipgen's writings are evidently aligned to the prevailing security situation, in particular the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad).

The book comprises five relatively short chapters, each very technical in its approach. The author systematically analyses the SCS disputes from the purview of the many claimants; the remaining non-claimant ASEAN states; the outlying but increasingly involved and influential powers, such as the US, Australia, Japan and India; and the legal underpinnings of intertwined issues between China and the smaller claimant states. The book pays adequate attention to the views and standpoints of non-claimant states as regards the unstable and often

unpredictable affairs of the SCS dispute. This works well in regard to deeming non-SCS countries as deeply involved and infused in Southeast Asia's headline imbroglio.

The landmark July 2016 award by the Permanent Court of Arbitration (the Hague, Netherlands) in the Philippines' favour, as against China, on a dispute in the Scarborough Shoal is discussed in detail in the fourth chapter. This chapter also details the Philippines' stance regarding the 2016 judgment. The Philippines is believed to have committed to nursing a soft corner for China, in tandem with a unilateral assertion of the country's plainly legitimate claims to island territories in the SCS. It is not only evident but also certain that legal mediums, such as provisions of international maritime law and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), are tethered to the SCS disputes, which Kipgen believes is apt owing to a disinclination of the parties involved to initiate all-out conflict in achieving their desired end goals. He covers various interlinked subjects of prime relevance to the disputes, corresponding the role of history as a determining factor in the arguments posed by the claimant states against overarching Chinese claims and the contemporary arguments put forth by these states towards an ownership of the islands, islets, rocks, reefs, atolls, and banks, among others.

Towards the end of the book, Kipgen chronicles his visits to Southeast Asian universities and think tanks for the purpose of accruing scholarly opinions. He shares numerous snaps from his meetings, highlighting the research undertaken by him. He frequently refers to the insights proffered by the quizzed personalities in assessing the facets and elements of the disputes. The contents in the book are, thus, rich in perspective. All in all, Kipgen has done a fine job of putting together copious amounts of information, coupled with a sensible outlay of his views and opinions on the topic, that does make the book worth a reader's time.

The book adds timely, necessary, concise and sharp analysis to the growing interest of students, writers, scholars, researchers, academicians, policymakers, politicians, and even the lay readers, in the contentious topic of the historical SCS disputes and the role they play in not just the shaping but also the study of IR. The disputes possess the capacity to effectively shape the central Indo-Pacific region's emergent security developments, with various balances of power bearing innumerable political and military connotations resulting in a morose status quo.

However, as the book carries copious amount of detail in several instances, a reader may feel a disconnected from the underlying analysis of an important subject. Further, one is struck by the overt emphasis on the opinions of those Kipgen interviewed and connected with in the course of writing the book. Some of the book's later contents could have been provided as detailed interviews on a dedicated website owned by the author, leading to a better reading experience and also avoiding the overemphasis on their stated insights and opinions. Despite these shortcomings, the book serves a purpose to assist academicians credibly and greatly on research being undertaken that is germane to the SCS entanglement. It is also a good introduction for the informed and interested reader who seeks wide-ranging perspectives and an overview-type analysis on this subject.

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