

Book Reviews

The South China Sea: a Crucible of Regional Cooperation or Conflict-making Sovereignty Claims?

C.J. Jenner and Tran Truong Thuy (eds.)

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016)

Michał Zaręba

University of Lodz
Faculty of International and Political Studies
Department of Asian Studies
e-mail: michalzareba1@gmail.com

The South China Sea carries strategic importance due to the location of oil and gas reserves. The abundance of natural resources including fish stock and strategic location create potential for conflicts which engage Southeast Asian states like Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei and China, regional hegemon in the Pacific rim. Dispute over the South China Sea and sovereignty claims are seen as a source of tensions and have impact on stability and security in the region. To find a balance for China's growing power countries like the United States or India want to be active in that region and are indirectly involved in the disputes that make this conflict one of the most complicated in the world. Complex divergence of national interests causes need for multidimensional analysis which should engage wide range of scholars from many different disciplines to specify the nature of conflict, create a room for debate, increase public awareness of this dispute, present solution and reduce tensions among all claimants.

The book *The South China Sea: A Crucible of Regional Cooperation or Conflict-Making Sovereignty Claims?* is divided into four parts. The first chapter refers to the global dimension of South China Sea conflict and its significance for

the international stage; the second part addresses to subnational, national and regional interests of states involved in the dispute. The third chapter gives a framework from the perspective of international law; and finally the last part looks at prospects of the South China Sea dispute and analyzes potential for future conflicts or cooperation.

In the first chapter the paper prepared by Renato Cruz De Castro titled “The Obama Administration’s Strategic Rebalancing in Asia: From a Diplomatic to a Strategic Constraint of an Emergent China?” elaborates on the shift of the US foreign policy and role of the “Pivot to Asia” for regional order. The author gives recommendation for the U.S. policy toward ASEAN’s countries and claims that Washington should cooperate with Southeast Asian states to rebalance power in the region, exert pressure on China and persuade Beijing to implement solution based on international law. This paper provides detailed knowledge of a nature of the South China Sea dispute, presenting possible scenarios and exploring major geopolitical factors.

In the second chapter the attention is drawn to the paper written by Alice Ba and Ian Storey entitled “Continuity and change in the South China Sea”. This paper examines three driven forces of the South China Sea conflict like strengthening maritime boundaries and claims, growing nationalism in the Asian states, the rivalry over energy resources and the impact on China–ASEAN and US–China relations. The authors conclude that all countries have become more possessive which led to the growing number of tensions among claimants. Worth mentioning is that the paper prepared by Bonnie Glaser presents and compares relations between China, the United States and the ASEAN. The author points out three reasons for a growing importance of this strategic triangle between China’s firm stance in presenting its claims, growing concern among ASEAN states regarding maritime strategy of Beijing and the U.S. rebalance in the Asia-Pacific region. Glaser states that complexity of this dispute makes impossible to find solution which could satisfy all parties but prospects concerning armed conflict and fall of the ASEAN are exaggerated.

The edited volume is composed of the articles dedicated to the issues of maritime and regional security. The wide range of academics and multidisciplinary approach are undoubtedly the main advantages of this book. Analyses embrace topics related to the global and regional dimensions of the South China Sea dispute and also issues associated with the legal perspective. The book gives potential scenarios for the future therefore the edition makes an important contribution to the field. The book is a useful overview of the conflict for the readers who want to be familiar with the problems related to the South China Sea and regional security. On the other hand lack of common denominator connected with the level of analysis causes that few articles are devoid of in-depth analysis.

In conclusion, the discussed book definitely enriches the knowledge of the reader and gives comprehensive picture of the situation in the region which is mainly determined by the dispute over archipelagos and natural resources of the South China Sea. The book presents a detailed assessment of drivers which have influence on contemporary power structure and leave the reader with wider perspective on the role of the ASEAN and regional powers involved in the politics of the Indo-Pacific region like China and the United States. The major aim of this book is to provide more information of the South China Sea dispute which is a wide objective to achieve but the edition definitely succeeds in its overall assumptions.