

Book Review: Asia's New Battlefield: The US, China and the Struggle for the Western Pacific by Richard Javad Heydarian

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In Asia's New Battlefield: The US, China and the Struggle for the Western Pacific, Richard Javad Heydarian addresses how changing relations between the US and China have impacted on their rivalry in the Western Pacific and the disputes in the South China Sea and East China Sea. Raj Verma finds that this well-researched book provides clear analysis of the varied ambitions and strategies of different states in the region, but questions whether it makes a significant contribution to the field.

Asia's New Battlefield: The US, China and the Struggle for the Western Pacific. Richard Javad Heydarian. Zed Books. 2016.

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In the foreword to *Asia's New Battlefield: The US, China and the Struggle for the Western Pacific*, Walden Bello states that the book will make a contribution to academic and policy analysis, leading to reduced tensions in the region. Bello is optimistic on all counts. Although well researched, *Asia's New Battlefield* is not without limitations; it therefore does not make a significant addition to the existing literature either on the US-China rivalry in the Western Pacific or the disputes in the South China Sea (SCS) and East China Sea (ECS).

Authored by Richard Javad Heydarian, *Asia's New Battlefield* has an introduction and six chapters. The introduction is divided thematically and does not provide a well-defined structure for the book; consequently the reader has little idea about what each subsequent chapter will focus on. Chapter One and Chapter Two are background chapters. Chapter One examines China-US relations during the Cold War until the end of the twentieth century. It states that US foreign policy with respect to China has changed since 1991. The Bill Clinton administration undertook measures to integrate China into the US-led liberal order and to transform China into a benign and responsible power that has a stake in maintaining the status quo rather than in overthrowing the existing global order. It discusses the trajectory of China's economic growth since 1949 and the reforms introduced in China under Deng Xiaoping's leadership, which led to high economic growth rates in China after 1979.

Chapter Two focuses on China and how history, rising nationalism and the ambitions of President Xi Jinping are influencing its foreign policy. According to Heydarian, Xi is China's new Mao. He is accumulating power and wants to restore China to its past glory. Thus, China is not a rising power but a re-emerging power. The chapter also discusses the various domestic challenges that China faces that might hinder its great power or hegemonic ambitions in the region. It discusses China-US relations during the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations, and states that the relationship can be described as a combination of engagement,



interdependence and competition, with China seeking to replace US hegemony in East Asia.



Image Credit: The USS *Abraham Lincoln* carrier battle group along with ships from Australia, Canada, Chile, Japan and South Korea during RIMPAC 2000 ([Gabriel Wilson, Wikipedia Public Domain](#))

Chapters Three, Four and Five discuss the territorial disputes and rising tensions in the SCS and ECS, and the rivalry between China and the US in the Western Pacific. Chapter Three traces the origins of the disputes and provides an explanation from a realist, institutionalist and legal perspective. It also discusses the geopolitical and geo-economic importance of the SCS with respect to energy resources, fisheries and China's Malacca Strait dilemma. Chapter Three also undertakes a detailed analysis of why China's claims in the SCS are legally untenable under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

Chapter Four analyses the territorial dispute between China and the Philippines in the SCS. It briefly discusses US-Philippines relations from US colonisation in the late nineteenth century to the present day. It discusses the various diplomatic efforts made by the Philippines to defuse the tensions, but the failure of diplomacy and China's bellicose behaviour has forced it into closed military and security cooperation with the US, to internationalise the issue in the ASEAN and East Asia Summit and to seek legal arbitration under UNCLOS. The chapter also examines problems in the bilateral relationship due to domestic factors in the Philippines, a lack of commitment and resources as well as the unwillingness to compromise on critical security issues on the US side. Both chapters also highlight how China has de facto voting power in ASEAN. By providing loans, aid and investment among other assistance, it has used Laos and Cambodia to create a division in ASEAN, and has been successful in ensuring that the SCS conflict is off its agenda.

Chapter Five discusses the role of regional powers and other countries in the SCS and ECS. It analyses China's relations with Japan, India, Australia, Indonesia and South Korea, and states that these countries are concerned about China's rapid rise and increasing assertiveness in the region. Consequently, they are being forced to balance China internally by increasing their military expenditures and/or externally by forging closer security relations with one another and with the US. Heydarian states that these countries have their own strategic interests and ambitions and are also playing one against the other, which is exacerbating tensions in the region.

Chapter Six outlines numerous policy measures which states can or should introduce to reduce tensions in East Asia and to ensure that a mere collision of boats does not lead to a full-blown war. However, optimism turns to pessimism when the reasons for the rising tensions are examined, such as the growth in nationalism; China's expanding regional interests; strategic complacency on the part of small powers such as the Philippines; the inability of the regional security architecture to peacefully accommodate China's rising ambitions and constrain its destabilising territorial assertiveness; and US foreign policy retaining primacy in the twenty-first century and not allowing a peer competitor to emerge in the Eurasian landmass. However, the author apports the greatest blame to China.

According to Heydarian, China's rising ambitions are due to several factors. First is President Xi's desire to restore China to its glorious historical past in East Asia. It is during his leadership that the nine-dash-line and Air Defence Zones were proclaimed by China. Second is the rise in nationalism in China, which compels its leaders to be assertive. One element of the regime legitimacy of China's Communist Party (CCP) is to protect China from external aggression and ensure that it does not face a century of humiliation again. Third is regime survival. The new leadership faces numerous domestic political, economic and social challenges which threaten its survival. The new fifth generation leadership have little legitimacy to govern or rule China, which is partly dependent on ensuring the wellbeing of the people through rapid economic growth and development. The decline in economic growth in China may provoke political and social discontent and unrest, which could lead to regime collapse and chaos in China. Thus, the present leadership is employing diversionary politics to distract people's attention from domestic problems, using nationalism and jingoism to achieve this aim.

In Chapter Two, Heydarian states that domestic factors are primarily responsible for China's assertiveness. However, in Chapter Six he does not mention their role in the rising tensions in East Asia. There is a broad consensus amongst scholars and analysts that the economic growth rate in China will continue to decline. In light of this, China will retain or even increase its assertiveness in the short and medium term, which will fuel tensions in the region, contrary to Bello's optimism in the Foreword.

Asia's New Battlefield also suffers from numerous theoretical flaws and factual errors. The use and categorisation of 'middle powers' is problematic. International Relations scholars generally agree that the definition of this term is erroneous. Additionally, the author classifies India and Japan as middle powers. Yet there is wide agreement that India is a (rising) great power and that Japan is a great power, although both possess power capabilities less than China. The author also states that the US, Japan and South Korea are part of a trilateral alliance. The US has a bilateral security alliance with Japan and with South Korea, but Japan and South Korea do not have a formal security alliance.

Nonetheless, *Asia's New Battlefield* is easy to read. It provides a good analysis and understanding of the disputes in the SCS, and of the ambitions and strategies of different states in the region. Ultimately, however, it is old wine in an old bottle.

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Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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