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## Hot water

Bill Hayton



USS Chancellorsville in the South China Sea. Photo: Sarah Myers/US Navy

**Asian Waters: The Struggle Over the Asia Pacific and the Strategy of Chinese Expansion**

Humphrey Hawksley

Duckworth Overlook: 2018

What does China want in the South China Sea? In short: as much as it can get away with. It is explicit about this. In its 2016 White Paper on the South China Sea disputes, the leadership of the People's Republic of China (PRC) made clear that it claims every rock and reef within the "U-shaped line" that it draws on its maps, all the rights granted by the Law of the Sea and then a lot more unspecified "historic rights" on top. The PRC leadership appears to be out for whatever it can grab: territory, fish, oil, natural gas and more. This is what a Chinese-led regional order will look like.

Back in 1982, at the end of nine years of negotiations, virtually every country in the world agreed how they should behave in the world's seas. In the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), they decided that claims to maritime territory could be made only from defined points of land, that claims to resources in the sea could be made only within certain limits and that all ships, including military ships, have the right to sail anywhere in the sea on the basis of "innocent passage". The PRC is now trying to tear up UNCLOS by circumventing it in the South China Sea, while making use of its provisions everywhere else.

In July 2017, for example, three Chinese warships sailed through the English Channel on their way to military exercises with Russia in the Baltic Sea. The Channel is so narrow that the ships had to pass through British and French territorial waters to get through. Neither Britain nor France complained since China was making use of its UNCLOS rights. Yet when British naval ships sailed through the Spratly Islands in mid-2018, the PRC government objected. Chinese military vessels, including spy ships, are popping up in the territorial waters of more and more countries; yet even as the PRC asserts its

own rights to do this, it seeks to deny the same rights to others. This should worry everyone who cares about international peace and security.

To put it bluntly, the South China Sea is a test of the PRC's commitment to the principles that have made the world richer, healthier and more peaceful than it has ever been since the evolution of Homo sapiens. The international system agreed after the Second World War is founded on the principle of states choosing to abide by commonly agreed rules. The PRC's actions in the South China Sea show us that it does not share that understanding, that it believes it has national rights that supersede international agreements. My own research has shown how China's claims in the South China Sea emerged in the early twentieth century as the result of a series of translation errors and cartographic mistakes mingled with a particular sense of historical chauvinism. While their narrative is easy to debunk, it continues to propel the PRC into confrontation with its neighbours.

There is a response to this that broadly follows the lines of: "What about Vietnam/Central America/Iraq — didn't the United States also ignore international law and do exactly what it wanted?" The only answer to that can be, "Well, if you opposed that, then surely you must also oppose what the PRC is doing." Instead, we hear ostensibly critical voices in the liberal democracies giving the PRC a free pass. There are still people who see the PRC as a symbol of hope, a welcome source of opposition to US hegemony. This seems to extend to their allowing China to trample on its neighbours (not to mention its own citizens) without eliciting more than a whisper in comment. The slow demise of international agreements to which the PRC acceded but is now undermining fails to draw criticism from even the supposed critics.

In his new book, *Asian Waters*, Humphrey Hawksley addresses these issues with the benefit of thirty years' experience reporting from Asia for the BBC.

He relates his encounters with politicians in Tokyo, Manila and Washington and describes the lives of fishermen and peasants in lonely towns, who personify the changes being wrought in Asia's regional order. His approach is like a skimming stone bouncing off the surface of the disputed seas. We fly from the Philippines to India to North Korea, backwards and forwards in time. The argument can be slippery but it makes for an eventful voyage.

The crux of the book comes in Chapter 17, aptly entitled 'The Heart of the Matter'. Hawksley sits down with Zhu Feng, a leading participant in China's new intellectual industry: South China Sea studies. Professor Zhu founded the China Centre for Collaborative Studies of the South China Sea at Nanjing University, one of a number of similar think tanks that have sprouted up at Chinese universities in recent years. Zhu opines that the world is "now moving into the Eastphalian system". This is a neat neologism intended to encapsulate what Hawksley sees as the Chinese world order. It sets itself in opposition to the "Westphalian system" — the shorthand term for the relations between sovereign states that emerged in Europe after the 1648 Peace of Westphalia.

Hawksley traces "Eastphalia" to the 1924 speech on pan-Asianism delivered in Kobe by the former president of the Republic of China, Sun Yat-sen. Sun, who by this time had long been ousted from power in China, drew a distinction between a "European civilisation [that] is nothing but the rule of Might" and a superior civilisation in the East based on "the rule of Right". Hawksley sees Eastphalia's subsequent incarnation in the rhetoric of "Asian values" espoused by Malaysia's Mahathir Mohamad and Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew during the 1990s, and in the attitudes of the PRC's current leadership.

The irony is that when these leaders talk of Asian difference, they are really only revivifying the original spirit of the Westphalian treaties. These were

mainly intended to protect rulers from outside interference in their internal affairs. After thirty years of religious war, European leaders agreed to accord the same rights to small independent states as to large ones, and not to use military force to advance their chosen beliefs beyond their own frontiers. They also committed to allowing their citizens to worship as they chose. Three centuries later, and in the wake of two murderous wars, world leaders decided that this was not enough to prevent conflict. Over the past seventy years they have instituted a system of international agreements governing the ways that states behave among themselves and also how they treat their own citizens.

What the PRC is seeking to do is to unwind the past seventy years, abandon the notion that all states are equal, and instead institute a regional order based on hierarchy. At a regional meeting in Hanoi in 2010, China's then foreign minister, Yang Jiechi, expressed this rather bluntly while glaring at his Singaporean counterpart, "China is a big country and other countries are small countries," he reminded everyone. In a reversal of Sun Yat-sen's hopes for pan-Asianism, Vietnamese fishermen are discovering that in the South China Sea, the "Right" agreed in UNCLOS is somewhat flimsy compared to the "Might" of the China Coast Guard ship ramming and sinking their wooden boats.

The real problem for the PRC's neighbours stems from the sense of superior entitlement that has emerged in China based on nationalistic readings of historical evidence. As Anthony D. Smith argued long ago, national identities are founded on historical myths. They divide believers in the myth (insiders) from non-believers (outsiders). In the early twentieth century, the urban populations of China wrestled with the problem of what it meant to be Chinese. They had never called themselves by such a name before and it was far from clear who was included in this definition. The imperial powers of Europe and Japan gave them an answer — by encroaching on territory that

nationalist advocates claimed was the rightful home of their people. To be authentically Chinese, to belong to this nation, meant being outraged by this seizure of land and seeing it as an assault on the dignity of everyone in the group. Nationalist claims to territory became the marker of belonging. Evidence played a subordinate role to emotion. We are still living with the impact of that emotional claim.

The South China Sea disputes are simultaneously a fight over nothing (disparate groups of economically useless islands) and everything (who will run the twenty-first century world). The issues can appear alternately inconsequential and overwhelming. While it might not seem to matter if a warship sails near a reef, we may actually be seeing the fate of the post-1945 international order playing out in these waters; but grappling with these issues is such a big task that most don't even try.

Hawksley's book will be a good introduction for those seeking some insights into these tiny-yet-large arguments. Arguments that are taking place openly in more liberal societies and behind closed doors in less open ones.

Hawksley shows us how the big decisions will affect our everyday lives. Will a world order with Chinese characteristics be a pleasant regime to live under? Some will welcome a new hierarchical system with its promises of skyscrapers for all, but it is clear that others are already chafing at Beijing's attempts to set the regional rules.

**Bill Hayton** is author of *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia*.



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