

## Naval War College Review

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Volume 60  
Number 4 *Autumn*

Article 15

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2007

# Politics in Southern Africa: State and Society in Transition

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### Recommended Citation

Norton, Richard; Bauer, Gretchen; and Taylor, Scott D. (2007) "Politics in Southern Africa: State and Society in Transition," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 60 : No. 4 , Article 15.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol60/iss4/15>

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He provides documentary and archaeological evidence, as well as explanation of basic principles of naval architecture, to support his conclusion that the largest of the ships, the *baochuan*, or “treasure ships,” were at least three times larger than Nelson’s flagship HMS *Victory*.

While the book is not annotated, the level of academic rigor is evidenced by an impressive group of appendixes. The reader should expect nothing less from Dreyer, a leading sinologist who is well versed in not only the history but also the language of the original Chinese source materials. Much of his history comes directly from contemporary primary sources, and the appendixes include translations of the original historical material. This inspired inclusion allows readers to draw their own conclusions. There are also time lines, a valuable index, and a bibliographic essay discussing previous interpretations of Zheng He’s voyages from academic, journalistic, and Chinese government sources.

Conventional wisdom in the military-history community holds that China’s small naval heritage is of little value. Naval battles on the grand lakes and rivers of the Middle Kingdom are not afforded the consideration or importance given to Admiral Matthew C. Perry’s victory on Lake Erie or Rear Admiral David Porter’s gunboat campaigns on the Mississippi. Dreyer’s profile of Zheng He and the history of the voyages of the Foreign Expeditionary Armada provide a new view of Chinese naval heritage, one that includes interesting parallels to American naval strategy important to today’s naval professionals. The Chinese government has held up the voyages of Zheng He as

exemplars of their own future naval strategy. Dreyer’s book offers a compelling revision of past views on the Ming fleets that can help guide future discussion on China’s modern naval ambitions.

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Bauer, Gretchen, and Scott D. Taylor, eds. *Politics in Southern Africa: State and Society in Transition*. Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2005. 404pp. \$26.50

In the first few pages of this book it becomes clear that Gretchen Bauer and Scott Taylor are not Afri-pessimists. Indeed, one rather suspects that they have little tolerance for observers who look at the African continent and see nothing but misery, defeat, and despair. Such a depiction, according to the editors, relies on far too broad an analytical brush. Bauer and Taylor warn, quite reasonably, against treating Africa as some sort of political and cultural monolith and argue instead for a more regionally focused research approach.

The editors defend with convincing logic their choice to examine the region of southern Africa. Southern Africa contains some of the strongest economies on the continent and is more closely intra-linked than other African regions. If, as Bauer and Taylor contend, regional success stories are being submerged by Africa-wide studies, this work should give those stories the exposure and credit they deserve. *Politics in Southern Africa* is certainly organized to identify regional and local state success. Having made a convincing argument for a regional approach, they

examine the individual regional states: Malawi, Zambia, Botswana, Mozambique, Angola, Zimbabwe, Namibia, and South Africa. Subsequent chapters are devoted to regionwide issues of AIDS, women and politics, and “southern Africa’s international relations.” A final chapter presents research conclusions and predictions for the future.

This approach is sound, and the book’s scholarship is commendable. Each chapter is well written, carefully organized, and packed with pertinent factual data and strong analysis. All this makes the volume a useful addition to the lay reader and scholar alike.

While *Politics in Southern Africa* contributes to a deeper understanding of regional issues and forces, the book is also surprising. For the reader, after finding it easy to agree with the potential benefits of using a regional approach, is ready, even eager, for a parade of success stories and analyses that offer a counterbalance to the somber predictions and gloomy assessments of the Afripessimists. Alas, this is not what follows. Rather than a book of successes, this is a book of “ifs.” For example, it is argued that *if* Botswana can gain control of its AIDS epidemic, and *if* its diamond mines do not run dry before the country can diversify, a stunning success will ensue. In a similar vein, the book maintains that *if* South Africa can control its endemic crime wave and *if* the country can avoid a political system dominated by one party (the ANC), serious progress can be made. Similar conditional stipulations can be found in every chapter.

The editors also point out that the region is at a crossroads. There are potentially positive trends, such as the undeniable, if sometimes glacial, growth of civil

society and of ecological awareness, and these trends potentially bode well. The fact that they are observable, if only faintly, in such dysfunctional states as Zimbabwe should not be dismissed. This brings up the matter of the editors’ conclusions.

In an act of courage, Bauer and Taylor do not shy away from conclusions about the fate of southern Africa, and they deserve credit for that. However, in this process they enter the realm of rose-tinted optimism. They choose to see the southern African glass as half-full, arguing the region will see a vibrant civil society, a culture of constitutionalism, converging economies, and democratic stability. Still, that Bauer and Taylor would edge out on this predictive limb is perhaps one of the book’s strongest selling points, as their conclusions serve as both an invitation to readers for debate and a challenge to learn more about the region.

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Ghazvinian, John. *Untapped: The Scramble for Africa’s Oil*. New York: Harcourt, 2007. 320pp. \$25

John Ghazvinian, who has a doctorate in history from Oxford University and currently is a visiting fellow at the University of Pennsylvania, was born in Iran and raised in Los Angeles and London. He is a skilled journalist who takes the reader on an extensive journey in Africa to better know “more about where our oil will be coming from.” His bottom line is that “oil, far from being a blessing to African countries, is a curse. Without exception, every developing country where oil has been discovered