

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

Originally published at: <http://www.asianreviewofbooks.com/pages/?ID=2426>

Reviewed by Salvatore Babones 27 October 2015

When China upgraded its passports in 2012 to include electronic biometric chips, it quietly inserted some controversial new security watermarks to decorate their pages. Some of these watermarks show images of Sun-Moon Lake and the Qingshui Cliffs in Taiwan. No surprise there: China has always claimed that Taiwan is a province of China. For decades that was the only point on which the governments of China and Taiwan could agree.

Also included on page 8 of the new passports is a watermark map of China, including, of course, Taiwan. But not just Taiwan: the map also includes disputed territories that are under Indian administration and a ten-dash line encompassing Taiwan's offshore islands and nearly all of the South China Sea. A careful reader with a magnifying glass can just make out the Spratly Islands, a chain of hundreds of (formerly) unoccupied islets abutting Palawan and Sabah, home territories of the Philippines and Malaysia, respectively.

Formerly unoccupied, today Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and China all station troops in the Spratlys. A quick glance at the map will show that the islands are closely adjacent to the Philippines and Malaysia, if to anyone. But try telling that to China, Vietnam, or even Taiwan. Why so much passion over a motley collection of reefs and rocks? The answer, as so often, is oil. Pity the resident corals; their days are clearly numbered.

Richard Javad Heydarian, a political scientist at De La Salle University in Manila and frequent commentator on security issues, might be expected to argue the Filipino case in these disputes. He does no such thing. In *Asia's New Battlefield: The USA, China, and the Struggle for the Western Pacific* he offers a balanced, grounded, fact-based account of East Asia's many maritime disputes, including those over the Spratlys, the Paracels (off the coast of Vietnam and China), and the Senkakus/Diaoyus (in the East China Sea between Okinawa, Taiwan, and China).

*Asia's New Battlefield* is about much more than a bunch of uninhabited islands that might (or might not) sit on top of massive deposits of hydrocarbons. Heydarian frames today's East Asian maritime disputes within a wide-ranging account of the emerging great power rivalry between the United States and China. He opens his story with the collapse of the Soviet Union and ends it with a vision of a post-American Asia. In between, he analyzes the troubled relationship between China and India, the recent rapprochement between China and Russia, and the often-neglected international relations of Southeast Asian countries with each other.

As might be expected from a scholar based in the Philippines, Heydarian is especially strong on Southeast Asia. Five of the ten countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have maritime claims in the South China Sea and most of the others have been drawn in either as proxies for China (Myanmar, Laos, and especially Cambodia) or as "honest brokers" that also happen to have strong connections to the United States (Thailand and especially Singapore). Heydarian's in-depth analyses of ASEAN and its member countries are as insightful as they are informative. For those who are weary of the same old scare stories about US-China relations, Heydarian's coverage of Southeast Asia is a proverbial breath of fresh air.

His coverage of the same old scare stories about US-China relations, however, can sometimes read like a breathless recounting of page after page of news reports and online commentary. The first two

chapters of *Asia's New Battlefield* merely recount the major events of recent diplomatic history. In 1991 the US reigns supreme, China practices Deng's wise advice to "hide its strength and bide its time," the United States invades Iraq and emerges a wounded superpower, China's inevitable rise begins to threaten its neighbors, and the United States pivots to Asia—too little too late. None of this is wrong (though much if it is debatable), but all of it has been said before. Readers in a hurry might want to skip directly to Chapter 3.

There they will be amply rewarded. Heydarian's extended treatments of China's myriad territorial disputes are detailed and even-handed. Numerous maps and figures provide valuable context for what are (for most of us) obscure historical arguments underlying arcane points of international law. Heydarian focuses on the three big maritime sovereignty disputes that have raised tensions between China and its neighbors (Spratlys, Paracels, Senkakus) and led to calls from some of these for American involvement. Much of his attention is focused on interpreting America's often ambivalent positions in these disputes.

The one possible flaw in Heydarian's analysis of trans-Pacific politics is his tendency to interpret America's foreign relations in legalistic rather than realistic terms. Heydarian attributes America's strong statements that it will support Japan in the event of any military confrontation to its unconditional treaty obligation to defend Japan and what the author sees as Japan's strong legal claims to the islands. He contrasts these with America's more ambiguous treaty obligations to the Philippines and what Heydarian sees as the Philippines's weaker legal claims to the Spratlys. In Heydarian's account, the battle-readiness of Japan's well-equipped military, Japan's massive purchases of American weaponry, and Japan's hosting of some two dozen US military bases don't enter into the equation.

That said, it must be granted that *Asia's New Battlefield* is robustly argued, thoroughly researched, and engagingly written. It shines a bright light on important topics that are often obscure to all but the most studied experts. If it is perhaps a bit long-winded it makes up for that by being sharply up-to-date. Readers—even expert readers—will learn an enormous amount from this book. Useful as a primer, it is indispensable as a touchstone against which to test ideas about the region and its conflicts.

Heydarian concludes by identifying four confidence-building measures that could reduce tensions in the South China Sea. He proposes that they be applied to the East China Sea disputes as well. He advises countries to "put aside the issue of sovereignty" and focus instead on economic cooperation in the management of hydrocarbon and fishery resources. No doubt this is sage advice. But without the explicit exercise of American power there seems little reason for China to accept it. Heydarian's concerns for the "interests of smaller powers" are unlikely to be widely shared in Washington. They are certainly not widely shared in Beijing.