

Book Review

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Nian Peng and Chow-Bing Ngeow (eds). (2022), *Populism, Nationalism and the South China Sea Dispute: Chinese and Southeast Asian Perspectives*. Contributions to International Relations. Singapore: Springer. eBook-ISBN 978-981-19-1453-9.

What makes the South China Sea dispute such a fascinating research topic is not just because of its economic and geopolitical importance but also because of its impacts on the domestic politics of regional parties. Given how territorial integrity is central to state sovereignty and national identity, it is no surprise that the multilateral dispute over the islands and waters in the South China Sea has generated passionate responses among Southeast Asian states. In a latest study, Nian Peng and Chow-Bing Ngeow introduce diverse voices from claimant and non-claimant parties on how the South China Sea dispute has affected the mobilisation of collective movements and sentiments. It is a much-needed addition to the ever-growing yet geopolitics-centric literature on this topic as it expands our understanding of the dispute from the perspective of domestic populist and nationalist sentiments.

The two editors come from different backgrounds: Nian Peng is a researcher at Hainan Normal University and an assistant fellow at the Haikou-based National Institute for South China Sea Studies; and Chow-Bing Ngeow works at the Kuala Lumpur-based Institute of China Studies at University of Malaya. In eight chapters, comprising an introduction and seven country-specific chapters, the editors bring together local scholars to discuss populism and nationalism issues from their own country's perspective. Except for the chapter on Vietnam that was written by a Chinese scholar, the rest was penned by authors from the countries that they represent, namely China, the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, and Cambodia. This is perhaps where the shortcoming is most glaring: while the perspectives selected for this volume diverge from the literature for its authentic and non-Western take, they seem to be intended to serve the narratives that China prefers. These narratives include China's restraint from taking aggressive actions, the U.S. meddling in regional politics and a dispute that it should not be involved in, Vietnam's risk of uncontrolled nationalism and the high cost of blindly excluding China, and non-



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claimant parties taking on Singapore and Cambodia's examples to be neutral and not internationalise the dispute.

With that said, it is nonetheless important to acknowledge the work that goes into explaining the domestic political struggles and layers of nationalism in the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Cambodia. In one volume, readers gain intriguing insights into these countries' political orientations and public sentiments over the past decade. The first half of the book provides perspectives of four claimant states, namely China's delicate trade-off between sovereignty protection and stability maintenance (Chapter 2), former Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte's populist foreign policy (Chapter 3), the double-edged sword effect of Vietnam's nationalist South China Sea policy (Chapter 4), and the complex layers of Malaysian nationalism (Chapter 5). Meanwhile, the second half sheds light on the other non-claimant parties by exploring the limits of populism in two Indonesian leaders' South China Sea policies (Chapter 6), Singapore's soft authoritarianism and consistently neutral position on the dispute (Chapter 7), and lastly, the implications of populist and nationalist forces and sentiments on Cambodia's policy on the South China Sea dispute as a non-claimant (Chapter 8).

For a book on populism and nationalism, the authors make very little conceptual distinctions between the two. The scholarship on Chinese nationalism is rich, and readers would benefit from a more in-depth analysis of the changing substance of Chinese nationalism amid escalating tensions in the South China Sea. Is the nationalism described by Peng in Chapter 2 a pragmatic, state-led, and reactive kind or a merely situational and bottom-up response? Additionally, the book offers little clarity on the research methodology for studying the populist and nationalist sentiments. Chapter 3, contributed by Aries Arugay, on Duterte's populist pivots in foreign policy is the only study to cite findings from an online non-random survey of Filipino members of its civilian and security sectors. Meanwhile, authors in other chapters tend to rely on media reports and qualitative analysis. For example, in Chapter 2 on the different Chinese tactics in manipulating nationalism for its South China Sea cause, Peng examines reports and commentaries from Chinese official media and leading social media concerning China's use of nationalism in three major standoffs with the Philippines and Vietnam in 2012, 2014, and 2019. Maritime incidents are notoriously hard to study because of the different accounts by parties present at the scene. By examining only Chinese sources, Peng ends up with the expected conclusion that Chinese authority has been manipulating nationalism to serve its internal and external goals (p. 7).

As pointed above, the book is flawed mainly because it apparently cherry-picks the narratives that China wants to put forth about the South China Sea dispute. One of the editors, Peng, writes in Chapter 2 that "the reality is China used military coercion in the 1990s, when it was weaker than in other periods, but chose not to use military coercion when it grew stronger" (p. 6), all the while deliberately ignoring the Chinese gray zone tactics in recent years. Peng argues that China takes a hardline stance on the issue of territorial sovereignty, that is, the occupation of the islands and reefs in the disputed waters, but adopts a moderate and flexible policy to address the conflicts of maritime interests, that is, the oil and gas exploration and/or fishing activity. Yet, this has

hardly proven to be true given how many maritime incidents in the South China Sea involve fishing vessels as well as oil and gas interests. It is even arguable whether the South China Sea dispute, from the Chinese leadership's perspective, is a trade-off between sovereignty protection and stability maintenance when Peng admits himself that territorial sovereignty is non-negotiable. China's preference for regional stability lately cannot be attributed solely to its desire for status quo maintenance but also to its massive economic and military power over the Southeast Asian states.

The protracted maritime and territorial dispute in the South China Sea merits analyses from new perspectives, and this edited book certainly contributes in this regard. The chapters about each claimant and non-claimant perspective can be read on their own, and thus, are relevant for those studying the politicisation or securitisation of an issue. Overall, as dispute management and settlement will likely be a lengthy and complicated process, understanding the multi-faceted aspects and viewpoints raised by the dispute is beneficial to policymakers and scholars alike.

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