

BOOK REVIEW

Nine Dash Line: Deciphering the South China Sea Conundrum, By Pooja Bhatt. New Delhi: K W Publishers Pvt Ltd, 2020.

In the South China Sea (SCS), China ambiguously and arbitrarily asserts its territorial claims using the nine-dash line (NDL), covering 80 percent of the SCS waters. The book reveals China's historical use of ten-dash and eleven-dash lines to assert control over the region's waterways, islands, and resources based on perceived historic rights. It effectively illustrates that the status of the NDL is a subject of dispute, highlighting China's claims that contradict certain provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

The Chinese government's position on the NDL remains unclear and inconsistent. Moreover, Chinese students have been taught to perceive these ambiguous and controversial ideas as accurate, with potential far-reaching implications in the near future. Another critical aspect is that the SCS claims encompass both territorial and maritime dimensions. China considers it a sovereign right to establish military bases on disputed land features, and Chinese ministries have never dismissed the idea of implementing an air defense identification zone (ADIZ) in the SCS. Consequently, the responses of other players in the region to China's assertiveness, particularly considering the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' (ASEAN) prominence, will shape the future trajectory of the SCS.

The second chapter, the most nuanced and well-researched section, delves into the legal intricacies of Chinese claims in the NDL. This chapter elucidates the complexities surrounding the NDL and the challenges in resolving the issue. It encompasses multiple actors' claims and the application of different interpretations based on historic claims, international maritime laws, and conventions. Additionally, it underscores the claims of various littoral governments in the SCS and China's approach to addressing them through bilateral means. China adheres to a policy of resolving such conflicts directly with other governments, avoiding international platforms or organizations. This approach aligns with Confucian systems, emphasizing a mistrust of judicial litigation and a preference for extrajudicial methods, such as mediation and negotiation, as the primary means of conflict resolution.

The concepts of the China Dream and China's rise are interconnected. Internationally, particularly in the South and East China Sea, China aims to assert itself as a formidable maritime power. It is constructing antiaccess/area-denial (A2/AD) zones through the establishment of ADIZs in areas commonly accessed by aircraft, ships, and fishermen. This strategy poses a threat to and restricts the movement of these entities. Furthermore, China is broadening the scope of security beyond military and political dimensions to encompass the economy, science,

technology, environment, and culture, among other aspects. This expansive understanding of security is likely to be viewed with increasing concern.

China perceives the NDL in the SCS as a maritime region with conflicting claims involving itself and other states. The perpetuation of such ambiguity ultimately benefits major economies like China. Economic interdependence creates a domino effect, dissuading nations from adopting rigid stances beyond trade. Nations with economic and trade imbalances with China find it challenging to compete militarily. Another critical issue related to claims in the SCS is the lack of a common view on international norms among countries like Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam. Their selective citation of claims based on historic customs or international law on different occasions continues to impede solutions to maritime delimitation and territorial claims.

Despite the Permanent Court of Arbitration's ruling invalidating Chinese claims in the SCS, Beijing's official statement has not referenced the NDL, yet ambiguous claims have resurfaced. Deng Xiaoping's concept of "shelving differences and seeking joint development" deserves reconsideration as a model for how China interacts with other littoral governments.

It is crucial to observe how the People's Liberation Army (PLA) asserts its claims through the covert utilization of the Maritime Militia and other branches, avoiding the attention of other governments and international organizations. This military and civil collaboration, involving maritime militias trained for independent operations that disguise themselves as civilians or fishermen, serves as the PLA's clandestine eyes and ears, contributing to conflicts between China and other SCS littoral states. While this chapter outlines significant components of China's tactics, it falls short of offering remedies or counters to China's escalating use of gray-zone operations and innovative approaches in the region.

The book also delves into the strategic importance of the NDL for China's rise and its role in fulfilling China's future energy needs. This region, often referred to as the Second Persian Gulf, potentially harbors vast untapped oil and gas reserves. It aligns with China's geopolitical calculations as it could reduce its dependence on oil imports while solidifying control over SCS trade routes.

This book addresses a significant gap in the literature on climate change and environmental analysis in the SCS region. Despite China being a signatory to every major climate-related convention and treaty, its activities in the SCS raise suspicions. Examples include island dredging, overfishing in the high seas, and concerns about China's floating nuclear facilities. The unilateral actions along the NDL by China bring into question the country's commitment to environmental conservation.

The book adopts a descriptive approach, elucidating intricate aspects of the NDJ. While it does not propose solutions to the issues at hand, it serves as a valuable starting point for understanding the complexities that have turned the SCS into a global flashpoint. 📖

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