

Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea edited by Anders Corr.
Naval Institute Press, 2018, 327 pp.

With a series of well-researched and heavily supported chapters written by regional, political, and military experts, Anders Corr has put together a volume of work that brings together all of the important facts about the challenges in the South China Sea. As a recognized expert in Asian security issues, Corr and his assembled writers paint a clear picture of the situation that has developed in the Indo-Pacific. The confrontations unfolding now are 80 years in the making, but *Great Powers, Grand Strategies* demonstrates how the pace of events is increasing rapidly, in line with China's similar rise in diplomatic, economic, and military strength.

The book's introduction takes the time to lay out the pertinent facts to the reader, aware that despite the constant stream of current events flowing out of the South China Sea region, many readers may not be familiar with what is at stake. The seven claimants to the islands, reefs, water, and resources of the region are introduced—the People's Republic of China (PRC), the Republic of China (Taiwan), Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and Indonesia—as are the other major powers in the region: the United States, Russia, Japan, India, the European Union (EU), and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). The overarching themes of nationalism, sovereignty, freedom of navigation, force projection, and resources are introduced early on, with the scale and importance of each laid out. Additionally, the basics of each issue are provided as a reference for why the reader should continue to take interest in the views and opinions of each player in this geopolitical drama. Crucially, the book takes efforts to explain in depth what China's views, priorities, and concerns are throughout each chapter. Even when arguing against the Chinese process, the authors minimize their overall bias in this regard.

The overarching theme in this book is the need for action to counteract China if leaders believe that their current path is indeed inappropriate, though depending on the specific power or institution, that action differs. China is extremely dedicated to its goals and is willing to expend the political and economic capital required to achieve them. As Capt James E. Fanell, USN, retired, explains in one chapter, "While PRC leaders proclaim China's global aspirations will follow a path of 'peaceful development,' its actions across the South China Sea demonstrate a single-minded commitment to 'restore' the country to its rightful place in history, no matter the cost, no matter the location, and no matter the issue."¹

The interplay of localized strategies (bilateral relationships), regional strategies (across the South China Sea), and grand strategy (China's efforts to minimize American military presence in the Western Pacific) are well explained by each of the writers within the context of their chapter's great power. Perhaps most refreshing in this book are the chapters that deal with the great powers beyond the immediate sphere of the South China Sea and who are rarely discussed in the American news articles in which the disputed area is written about. India, Russia, and the European Union are each provided a chapter, and the broader geopolitical consequences of their involvement adds a fascinating layer to the strategic balance in the region.

India's fears of the Chinese "strategic encirclement theory"² weigh heavily on their international relations views, and recent adaptation of the concept of "Indo-Pacific" reflects their expanding understanding of the interconnectedness of the region.³ Russia's desire to be seen as a "great power" is handcuffed by its simultaneous desire to appeal to both China and the Southeast Asian nations and Moscow's unwillingness to offend either by taking a side, stifling its diplomatic clout.⁴ Meanwhile, the strong diplomatic leverage that the European Union can bring to bear in the dispute is heavily pushed in its chapter, both as a body that is not currently challenging China the way the United States is and as an example for ASEAN to build its political unity.⁵ All of these are novel viewpoints on the conflict, and the writers and editor go to great lengths to expand the American-centric views and knowledge of their target audience.

Altogether this book is remarkably well researched and put together; the expertise of the various authors shines through each chapter. It is a very easy read, with each chapter being well compartmentalized and roughly 10–20 pages in length. The short chapters are deceiving in their simplicity, however, as each is heavily researched and the end notes of each chapter are an additional four to seven pages in length, replete with primary sources, news reports, and scholarly articles.

This book is recommended for anyone interested in seeing how regional issues can entangle global affairs, those interested in China's views and motives, or those simply interested in the backstory of one of the world's most dynamic contemporary territorial disputes. The problems in the South China Sea are not going away because China is not going away. China's "peaceful rise" is quickly giving way to more assertive actions as it makes clear its desire to be a global player diplomatically, economically, and militarily. As the South China Sea is one of the locations most likely to spark a great power conflict, this book is an excellent primer on why great powers are taking their current courses of action,

what they might do in the future, and the likely strategies that rivals, allies, and currently nonaligned powers might follow through with if pressed to make a decisive decision.

Notes:

1. Anders Corr, ed., *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2018), 115–16.
2. *Ibid.*, 226.
3. *Ibid.*, 228, 238.
4. *Ibid.*, 249, 266.
5. *Ibid.*, 273–88.

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Why Vietnam Matters: An Eyewitness Account of Lessons Not Learned by Rufus Phillips. U.S. Naval Institute Press. 2008, 398 pp.

In a crowded field of Vietnam War memoirs, Rufus Phillips's contribution stands out in several important ways. First, Phillips, a long-time advisor on rural affairs and governance, served as one of the first Americans to advise the Ngo Dinh Diem government in August 1954. Second, he continued to work at the highest levels of both the American and Vietnamese governments until 1968. His memoir is rich with important firsthand accounts of major events as well as detailed assessments of key players in both successive US and South Vietnamese administrations. *Why Vietnam Matters* also offers enduring lessons about American military intervention abroad, though only briefly. The real value here is Phillips knowledge of South Vietnamese leaders that transcends stereotypical and shallow accounts often found in American accounts of the war.

A critical message for today's military and political advisors in Iraq and Afghanistan comes at the outset; Phillips declares, "At the highest levels we approached the Vietnam conflict with excessive hubris, convinced we knew best how to win, with little understanding of the enemy or of our South Vietnamese allies." (xii) His principal themes are familiar when it comes to the core issues—Vietnam was primarily a political contest that American leaders viewed overwhelmingly in military terms; that US leaders, especially military ones, did not understand their Vietnamese counterparts; and that American advisory efforts must send the best and most expert people available to advise and then trust them to do their work.

Phillips began his time in Vietnam working for Edward Lansdale, whose success working with Ramon Magsaysay garnered him a role as a top advisor to the new South Vietnamese president, Ngo Dinh Diem. Lansdale's unique value as an advisor to South Vietnam becomes a prominent story throughout the book—so much so that it becomes a minor distraction to the issues at hand. Phillips presents Lansdale as something of a silver bullet—according to Phillips, Lansdale's "main weapons were imaginative but practical ideas about how to make democratic self-government work and how to create conditions that fostered the emergence of effective national leadership." (13) The first third of the book documents early US pessimism about Diem, noting that in 1954 "most Americans seemed to accept the French view that the Vietnamese were incapable of running a government and lacked the will to fight." (15) In Phillips view, French bitterness and interference were behind General Nguyen Van Vinh's 1954 attempted coup and many other problems that followed for South Vietnamese leaders in the 1950s.

Phillips formed a relationship with Ngo Dinh Diem that continued until shortly before Diem's murder; he presents a more nuanced and balanced portrayal of South Vietnam's first president. This is one of the most important aspects of the book—its presents political complexity in the South and presents Diem in a balanced light. We are left with a picture of a leader embattled on all sides, who faced some early challenges with determination but squandered his early successes such as operation Giai Phong and his defeat of the Binh Xuyen by giving his infamous brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, too much influence. The American response was to tell Diem to remove his brother from power and from the country.

Phillips observes that throughout the Diem era, Americans, especially Amb. Henry Cabot Lodge, attempted to give the South Vietnamese president orders, often in front of other people, with predictable consequences. This relationship was typical of overbearing American leaders who consistently failed to build relationships with their South Vietnamese counterparts. *Why Vietnam Matters* is a valuable contribution to the literature on the Vietnam War precisely for this

reason—it depicts Vietnamese leaders with agency, who are forced to manage their international partners to the maximum extent because they need their resources, if not their advice. Phillips does however carry his argument too far in the other direction, making Lansdale into a uniquely talented hero who could have saved the war if given the chance.

The core chapters on Vietnam document the US rural affairs and pacification efforts in remarkable detail. Phillips narrative of the evolutions of the program from Rural Affairs to the United States Operational Mission to Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support, its rationale, and the descriptions of the key players involved are of significance to the historical record. Here we see how a growing U.S. military and political bureaucracy created obstacles that kept ground truth from the provinces from reaching policy makers in Saigon and Washington. The result was an ill-informed top-down approach where American leaders suffered from “a fixation on making American, rather than Vietnamese, concepts work.” (263) Pacification was a critical effort, but as with Lansdale’s role, the program is overemphasized here. No political change would last if South Vietnam could not field effective military forces.

Another major obstacle was the US leadership’s preoccupation with using vast military resources to push North Vietnam to abandon its effort to take the South, a method that alienated South Vietnamese people and left them wondering why Americans had come to Vietnam. Phillips notes that the communications breakdown between the allies was so bad that South Vietnamese leaders only discovered that the United States was inserting ground troops in 1965 at the very last minute, without any substantive consultation with South Vietnamese leaders. (247) Another problem was the impact of American military spending on the South Vietnamese economy—funds that drove inflation to the point soldiers and political leaders pay was worth almost nothing. Phillips notes that US direct military expenditures in Vietnam equaled the entire South Vietnamese government’s budget for the 1965–1966 fiscal year. (251) America went to Vietnam to help but ended up causing as much disruption as it mitigated. Phillips argues that America contributed to South Vietnam’s ultimate defeat by fundamentally failing to listen and to learn; he summarizes this view by stating that Secretary of Defense “McNamara’s attitude, lack of understanding, and managerial approach symbolized the disconnect between our top leadership in Washington and Saigon and reality on the ground.” (xiii)

For those who have already read Edward Miller’s *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam*, Phillips themes will ring familiar. However, his extensive firsthand knowledge of personalities and events make *Why Vietnam Matters* an important work for anyone interested in understanding the Vietnam War and the broader issue of American military intervention abroad. He skillfully captures an all too familiar formula where, “Our lack of understanding and miscalculations at the top led us to justify a massive commitment of American troops as the best way to achieve a quick military victory. When victory failed to materialize and stalemate seemed to set in, public support was lost. The image of American boys sacrificing their lives while, it seemed, the South Vietnamese were profiteers, refusing to fight, was corrosive. Our complicity in creating this situation by failing to mitigate the adverse impact of our overwhelming presence on the cohesion of Vietnamese society was easy to overlook.” (306) Both historians and contemporary practitioners of military assistance would do well to take note of these lessons.

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Human Rights in Thailand by Don F. Selby, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018.

In May 1992, more than 20,000 people protested the Suchinda Kraprayoon military government, which was formed after a military coup. The resulting military crackdown on unarmed civilian demonstrators has left an indelible mark on Thailand’s tumultuous flirtation with democracy. “Black May”, as it would soon be called, had the same hallmarks as past brushes with autocratic violence. When more than half a million people marched down Ratchadamnern Nok to Democracy Monument in 1973 to demand the release of political activists who demanded a more democratic constitution, the Thai military began firing on students and the general public, resulting in the deaths of more than seventy. These seminal democratic struggles form the narrative of Don Selby’s anthropological examination of human rights in Thailand. The book is an ethnographic study of human rights in Thailand, using social actors as a gauge of their implementation. The book details prominent lawyers at Thailand’s National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) as they engage in client-patron relationships; preserving and maintaining “face”, and providing legal services to disadvantaged migrant workers. More broadly, Selby argues that human rights in Thailand are not the product of political machinations, but they are granted status and authority through social norms.

While the five main chapters provide significant empirical evidence to support Selby’s exploration of social stratification, the first four chapters provide the strongest linkages. Theravada Buddhism, developed during the Sukhothai era is exalted in Thai society, and has become a symbol of national unity and is firmly intertwined in Thai politics. Buddhist

politics and human rights politics “transfigure” one another, resulting in reactionary and progressive versions. In the opening chapter, Selby explores how the official state religion of Thailand figures in the formulation and implementation of human rights. A number of teachings are unpacked drawing on the work of the late monk progressive Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, and the more reactionary Phra Kittiwuttho. While Buddhist politics can often be diametrically opposed, the teachings of Kittiwuttho are not given proper attention. In an interview with *Jaturat* magazine, he responds,

“Thai, even though we are Buddhist, should do it, but it should not be regarded as killing persons, because whoever harms the nation, religion, and monarchy is not a whole person.”

Kittiwuttho's justification, according to Jerryson (2009) was based on ideas that antagonism toward the State is a manifestation of Mara, the embodiment of moral depravity. (52) Killing a depravity is not the same as killing a human being. Thus, Kittiwuttho suggested that killing leftists was a meritorious act. These teachings gave nationalists and far-right extremist groups the rationalization for killing, which was a major justification for Buddhist violence during the anti-Communist scare of the 1970s. While the two are presented at odds, Kittiwuttho believed that a strong central, but well-governed State would be in the best position to promote the economic and social welfare of the people. Despite his conservative, reactionary leanings, he was also active in supporting local communities and farmers with labor struggles.

One of the more intricate aspects of Thai culture and sociality are the complicated mechanisms of social rank and status. Social status is determined by kamma (merit), and among Buddhists, one is expected to put in face-work as an expression of rank in the Thai social hierarchy. Social norms are organized primarily along client-patron relationships, and social classes are partitioned into among social cliques. Small acts of face-saving or loss, Selby demonstrates, can have demonstrable impacts. Selby illustrates face-work with relative ease, from the student who learns to pronounce English better than her teacher, but refrains from using the correct pronunciation to preserve the face of her teacher; the police officer who commits suicide after committing murder to avoid humiliation; or human rights organizations such as Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch shaming the Royal Thai Navy and consecutive Thai governments into dropping charges against Australian journalist Alan Morison.

While the first four chapters fit together seamlessly, the fifth and final chapter appears much less cohesive. After the May 2014, coup d'état removed the Yingluck Shinawatra government, the NHRC became vulnerable to political schemes. In the 2014 Interim Constitution, the NHRC is charged with protecting the junta from unfair reporting on the human rights situation in the country in addition to its normative duties. The maneuverings of the military government are at odds with restoring credibility to an institution that has been downgraded by the International Coordinating Committee on National Human Rights Institutions (ICC) to B status, which restricts participation in human rights enforcement bodies such as the Universal Periodic Review (UPR). Selby's account in this chapter is less an ethnography, rather a political account of events that trace coup politics, lese majesty, the detrimental effects of the interim constitution on the NHRC. Here, the author cannot provide an alternative explanation for the decline of the institution or offer insights into Thai social relationships that explain its swift unraveling. A longer ethnography would have been informative here.

Despite its brevity, Selby's arguments are compelling and his experiences with marginalized Burmese migrants are highly relevant. This is a thoroughly researched book that makes practical and academic contributions to the field of human rights. Human Rights in Thailand would find a welcome place in an undergraduate international development or human rights classroom. It should also find a willing audience with Southeast Asian scholars, particularly those in the sociology and anthropology fields. Selby's extensive fieldwork on Thai human rights in practice is impressive, and should be read by human rights practitioners and lawyers working with disadvantaged or marginalized communities. The book is a worthy and substantive contribution to the growing body of human rights literature.

References:

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