

2021

## Empire of the Winds: The Global Role of Asia's Great Archipelago

Joshua Meeks

Philip Bowring

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

---

### Recommended Citation

Meeks, Joshua and Bowring, Philip (2021) "Empire of the Winds: The Global Role of Asia's Great Archipelago," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 74 : No. 1 , Article 22.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol74/iss1/22>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu](mailto:repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu).

negates nor even seriously calls into question Dr. Karlin's conclusion, but it does suggest that additional opportunities to test her hypothesis are available.

However, it is in the concluding chapter of her work, "Findings and Implications," that Dr. Karlin best engages those readers concerned with the current state of the U.S. national-security enterprise. In these pages, her role as scholar shares ground with, or even gives way to, her experience as a practitioner. Her voice becomes more distinct and personal. Her questions and recommendations for current and future strategists and implementers of policy are pertinent and sharp edged—as they should be. One hopes that this chapter points toward Karlin's intentions regarding future writings and research, and if these future works include more of her personal experiences, backed with her academic bona fides, they promise to be of immense interest.

RICHARD NORTON



*Empire of the Winds: The Global Role of Asia's Great Archipelago*, by Philip Bowring. New York: I. B. Tauris, 2018. 336 pages. \$31.50.

At a recent conference, I overheard several participants discussing the best terminology for maritime Southeast Asia. While *South China Sea* is partly applicable, this term not only fails to include the entirety of the region (particularly the Indonesia archipelago) but also provides titular deference to disputed Chinese claims in the region. In his book *Empire of the Winds* Philip Bowring solves this quandary by resurrecting an ancient term to define the region: *Nusantaria*.

Bowring, a journalist with over forty years of experience in Southeast Asia, makes a convincing case for Nusantaria as a coherent historical entity. He includes therein the modern-day Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam, and impressively stretches his argument back fifteen thousand years. Evidence from the fields of linguistics, genetics, archaeology, and anthropology works together to form an image of a vibrant web of maritime culture and commerce. Bowring certainly acknowledges the impact of India and China on the early history of the region, as well as the later impact of Europe, but remains anchored throughout the text to Nusantaria. This is especially refreshing in his treatments of the spread of Islam and Christianity to the region, and the more recent spread of nationalism. In each case, he appropriately traces the origins of these ideologies to external forces, all the while remaining focused on their integration and syncretization into Nusantarian culture and society.

Not only does Bowring convincingly argue for the existence of Nusantaria as a region or geographical category of analysis; he also convincingly argues that for the majority of the past it was Nusantaria—not China—that dominated the region. China is not ignored but rather is relegated to being a marginal actor—which is a welcome and powerful orientation. An example of this is chapter 9, which tells the story of Champa from a Nusantarian, sea-facing perspective, rather than emphasizing the Vietnamese and Chinese overland connection. Bowring makes this theme explicit: "Today, the history of the Cham, and before that of Sa Huynh, and their presence in the Spratly Islands provides historical

counters to Chinese claims in the South China Sea” (p. 87). China does have its place in the narrative, with chapter 13 in particular providing keen insight into the “treasure voyages” of Zheng He, and later a brief but appropriate foray into the present and future challenges of China’s extension into the region. But for Bowring, Nusantaria is not defined by its relationship to any outside force, including China, but rather stands on its own, and will continue to do so in the future.

Writing the entire history of a region while also reframing our conceptions of that region is no small task, but Bowring manages to pack an incredible amount of detail into 271 pages of text. This does leave a dense, sometimes dry litany of unfamiliar names and places, and Bowring offers little hand-holding to guide the nonexpert. Even so, the narrative never slides too far into reference-style regurgitation, and Bowring’s background as a journalist is evident in his prose style. The book is organized into twenty-seven mostly chronological chapters, with two sections of high-quality images. Each chapter has multiple subheadings to aid in categorizing the wealth of information. Bowring’s sense of humor is evident in some of these titles, with a personal favorite being “Friars Tuck In” (p. 210).

Overall, *Empire of the Winds* is Braudelian in ambition, taking as its subject a sea that is intuitively understood but difficult to define precisely. Bowring

even mirrors Fernand Braudel in his insistence on the importance of environment for Nusantaria, from its origins and into its future (one subheading is unambiguously titled “Geography as Destiny” [p. 265]). There is a level of inconsistency here as well, though, with more textual weight given to the “Empire” part of the title than that of the “Winds.” Politics and culture—or what Braudel derisively referred to as *histoire événementielle*—form the core of Bowring’s narrative as he seeks to carve out a Nusantarian history. Then he emphasizes economics, establishing the independence, and indeed the preeminence, of Nusantaria’s commercial web. Environment and geography are incorporated in a supplemental rather than foundational fashion. This is the inverse of Braudel’s understanding of how history works, with environment creating economic conditions, which in turn create politics.

This divergence is not inherently problematic, and indeed works to the benefit of Bowring. Braudel, while brilliant, is not a foolproof model for understanding the historical weft and weave of maritime regions. Bowring’s keen and layered recounting of Nusantarian history avoids determinism, instead offering a deep, refreshing dive into one of the most important and contested maritime regions in the contemporary world.

JOSHUA MEEKS

---

#### OUR REVIEWERS

*K. J. Delamer* is a professor in the College of Distance Education at the Naval War College (the College).

*Edward Erwin* is a commander in the Chaplain Corps, USN, and serves as CREDO director for Commander, Navy Region Mid-Atlantic.

*Joshua Meeks* is an assistant professor of strategy and policy for NWC's College of Distance Education.

*Richard Norton* is a professor of national-security affairs at the College.

*Terry Pierce* was chief of staff of Amphibious Force Seventh Fleet and associate dean of the Naval Postgraduate School.

*Angus Ross* is a retired Royal Navy officer and a professor of joint military operations at the College. He is a graduate of the College, received a second master's degree from Providence College, and is working on PhD studies.

*Edward Salo* is an assistant professor of history at Arkansas State University, where he teaches U.S. history and historic preservation, as well as for the Honors College.

*Pauline Shanks Kaurin* is the Admiral James Bond Stockdale Professor of Professional Military Ethics at the College and author of the recently released book *On Obedience: Contrasting Philosophies for the Military Citizenry and Community*.

*Andrew G. Wilson* is an operational representative for the Department of the Navy in Quantico, Virginia. He has written for the U.S. Naval Institute's *Proceedings* and *Naval History*, the *Journal of Military History*, and *On Point: The Journal of Army History*.