

On Dangerous Ground: America's Century in the South China Sea

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the logic underlying U.S. strategic and policy responses. He clearly lays out what China's leader sees as concerns and opportunities, relating what this means for other global players. Rudd is proud of not using a single footnote in weaving his extensive narrative, which is laudable for the ease of reading but disappointing for those wishing to dig deeper into the sources of Rudd's insights and information.

The book is clear-eyed in explaining China's ambitions and recent shifts in policy under Xi's leadership, hewing neither to hawkish nor to dovish arguments but simply analyzing PRC strategy and policy aims in the context of demonstrated and documented Chinese interests and behavior over time. This is as refreshing as it is uncommon and should prove particularly useful for strategists and policy makers needing to decide how to address Xi's more aggressive posture. Rudd applies a novel approach to making sense of a topic as grand as the rapidly changing modern China. He identifies a series of issues and interests and arranges them in concentric circles. While one could quibble with his ordering, the approach generally helps to organize and prioritize key issues worth exploring and understanding, from the PRC's point of view.

A hallmark of good scholarship is simplifying what is highly complex—in this case, an understanding of modern China and U.S.-China relations. Rudd succeeds in doing so, providing a useful and easily digestible capsule of where China and its most critical relationship stand at present and why. Few authors are able to take on such a complicated and wide-ranging topic with such ease. The book, therefore, serves its purpose and will prove useful to academics,

students, policy makers, historians, and anyone else seeking to understand better modern China and U.S.-China relations.

Amid a cacophony of opinions about China and what to do about it, Rudd's volume provides something rare: a thoroughly reasoned, well-articulated, easy-to-read, and reasonably comprehensive assessment of China and its leader, Xi Jinping, in the twenty-first century. And, as the book's title makes clear, understanding modern China and its leader is essential to avoiding catastrophic conflict. This reality is emphasized in the book's introduction, which includes the observation that "for policy makers in Beijing and Washington, as well as in other capitals, the 2020s will be the decade of living dangerously" (p. 2). Rudd's volume ably explains how we got here, in what ways the 2020s are a "decisive decade," and why U.S.-China relations likely are headed for rocky shores.

KATHLEEN "KATE" WALSH



On Dangerous Ground: America's Century in the South China Sea, by Gregory B. Poling. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2022. 336 pages. \$39.95.

The South China Sea (SCS) is one of the main theaters of current U.S.-China security competition, and correspondingly is the subject of an ocean of commentary spewing from Washington and Beijing. *On Dangerous Ground* offers a valuable and timely corrective to the common tendency to view strife in this vital waterway solely in terms of the great powers. Greg Poling's deep expertise as an analyst of Southeast Asia pays major dividends in his

powerful and well-informed study of the last century of geopolitical struggle in the maritime heart of the region.

The subtitle, *America's Century in the South China Sea*, underplays the impressive scope of Poling's analysis. It is in fact a remarkable global history, with special focus on a particular geography, and it is informed by rich documentary evidence from the governments of all the interested states. Poling obviously delights in telling the story of the SCS from a variety of perspectives, presenting a series of sensible, well-articulated considerations and explanations of decisions undertaken over the past century in Manila, Hanoi, Saigon, Jakarta, Singapore, and Tokyo. He paints vivid portraits of the leaders in those capitals, highlighting key domestic political dynamics as they navigated the shifting winds of the world wars and the Cold War, and tacked among European, Japanese, American, and Chinese regional powers.

By telling the story of the whole prior century, Poling also places the current maritime disputes in welcome historical context. Among important observations, he notes that the last time the Spratlys and other disputed islands were fully under the control of any power was the period 1941 to 1944, when the SCS was a "Japanese lake" (p. 26). Japan's surrender of the islands after the war—without specifying any rightful successor sovereign—set the stage for the conflicts of today, as each state has pressed its own version of the facts and the law. Decades of high-stakes drama come to life in details mined from intelligence memorandums, diplomatic cables, action reports from military commanders, and memoirs of statespersons. We glimpse fascinating vignettes of some of the colorful characters involved

in the SCS over the years, including some who busily were fabricating sovereign claims to islands and pursuing speculative resource schemes in a remote and largely ungoverned area.

Appropriately, China is a central actor throughout this careful reconstruction of events in the SCS. Poling's regional approach to geopolitics allows him to offer unique perspectives on Chinese activities and claims, casting them in terms of their reception among the littoral states and their impact on alliance relationships with Washington. This regionalized optic is refreshing and eschews the typical caricature of a rampaging, aggressive PRC. Instead, Poling portrays a self-interested China that is highly responsive to the changing regional security environment and capable of adjusting course in the face of resistance. Without downplaying the acute threats that China poses, Poling deftly portrays the choices Beijing has made and continues to make as being aimed at exploiting seams in American power, whether they come in the form of sometimes-tenuous alliances or varying levels of attention, resources, and commitment to this distant theater.

The discussions of U.S. alliance politics are especially well calibrated. The long-running bilateral negotiations over the nature and scope of U.S. commitments to defend treaty allies in Japan and the Philippines are critical issues in U.S. defense and foreign policy in the region, and it is appropriate that they play a crucial role in this analysis. The interests and concerns of Manila, in particular, recast this story in a much more complex light—one that highlights America's reticence to specify the precise conditions under which mutual defense might be triggered, rooted in

reluctance to license risk taking by the Philippines. Poling also is unsparing in his criticism of Southeast Asian leaders, showing evenhandedness and a canny grasp of the stakes at each given juncture rather than telling the familiar, overwrought story of unprovoked, undeterrable Chinese aggression.

The payoff from the book is a welcome reconsideration of the strategic stakes and diplomatic opportunities confronting U.S. policy makers. Poling offers a clear articulation of the two “abiding interests” that have informed U.S. policy over the century: securing freedom of the seas and managing alliance commitments (pp. 2–9). However, these broad objectives do not determine a coherent foreign policy. We see that sometimes the two are at odds with each other, requiring us to balance competing priorities and seek common ground with allies and partners across a complex regional landscape.

The United States, as a global maritime power benefiting from the relative openness of the world's oceans, will continue to pursue freedom of the seas as a core interest. Yet this fine principle too often has been pursued in its less inclusive incarnation: as a narrow

freedom to conduct military activities. Such activities are the near-exclusive concern of forward-deployed U.S. forces, and as such they hold only limited appeal for other nations. This makes it easy to construe U.S. policy in the SCS as aggravating China solely for the sake of American military power rather than to deliver the benefits of a “free and open” region to U.S. partners.

The book helps us see Southeast Asian nations as being understandably more interested in the kind of “free sea” that permits them to exploit rich fisheries and productive oil and gas fields. To do so, they look to the United States to uphold an international law of the sea and wider maritime order that entitles them to exclusive economic zones and continental shelf areas that secure these rights to them under treaty. *On Dangerous Ground* should be a ready reference for those seeking to understand where and why the United States has come up short in the SCS. It opens the door to creative thinking about upholding American interests in the region by strengthening and supporting U.S. allies and partners on issues of common interest.

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