

US' competitive policy needed in South China Sea (Book Review)

Robert Haddick's "*Fire on the Water: China, America and the Future of the Pacific*" gives readers in-depth knowledge of the present strategic landscape in the Asia-Pacific and the dilemma that the status quo superpower is facing over there.

There is little doubt that US–China bilateral relations has always been a focal point of the scholarship on international affairs over the last decade. More specifically, the implications of the China's rise and what the US should do in East Asia have been endlessly debated among scholars, analysts and policy makers. With the aim to bring a new angle for this debate, Robert Haddick published a thought-provoking book titled *Fire on the Water: China, America and the Future of the Pacific*.

This 272-page book's central argument is that the US has not had an effective response to China's maritime assertiveness and its military build-up in the South China Sea. To support this line of argument, Haddick extensively discusses the sources of conflict in Asia and explains why it is in America's interests to maintain forward presence in the region in the first three chapters. Then, in the next two chapters, he points out the reasons why China's naval modernization is posing a severe threat to the US and why the current US responses remain ineffective. And the rest of the book proposes in a new strategy for the US in East Asia, including measures to cope with China's expansions in the maritime domain.

Firstly, Haddick asserts that Washington has a broad range of stakes in East Asia, which are at risk as China adopted an assertive posture. Under such circumstances, maintaining forward

presence remains the best option to defend these interests. According to the author, the US is highly connected to the region economically, with a large share of US productive output and employment dependent on trade with the region. Strategically, the US has a vested interest in defending the rule-based international order it helped establish since the end of the Second World War.

Most crucially, the author advocates that the US needs to maintain the credibility of its security commitments to allies, not just in Asia, but also elsewhere in the world. Should China be viewed as a successful revisionist power, the reliability of the United States as an ally and security guarantor would be called into question. Though this idea is not new, Haddick's analysis stands out in a way that it is comprehensible to non-strategists while still compelling to strategists and policy practitioners.

Secondly, Haddick critically argues that the current US responses to China's military challenge are incomplete, uncompetitive and impractical. In simulative mid-ocean showdowns between Chinese and US fleets, the US firepower would undoubtedly prevail thanks to its advantages in terms of submarines, aircraft carriers, and inter-operational experience. But that is not the fight China is preparing for. Using salami-slicing tactics, China aims to slowly but surely change the status quo in the South and East China Seas to its advantage. Should the United States and its allies attempt to roll back China's expansion, they would have little choice but to make the first military move, which is an extremely difficult political decision.

Haddick goes further to point out the flaws of three approaches that the US strategists have presented in South China Sea including the Joint Operational Access Concept (JOAC), Air-Sea Battle, and a distant blockade. In his view, these approaches fail to take into consideration interests and potential contributions of the US' regional allies and partners and would consequently put them between a rock and a hard place.

Moreover, according to Haddick, the main factor leading to “the stumble” of US policy is that it has yet to exploit China’s vulnerabilities and weaknesses. In other words, a strategy designed to constrain China’s advantages and strengths are not likely to succeed. Most importantly, Haddick believes that the US has not articulated clearly the outcomes they want to achieve, which has hindered US strategy from achieving lasting success.

From such a vantage point, the author asserts that the US must sustain a forward presence in the region but in a more competitive way. And even when the costs of this policy rise, the US has to stick with it because, otherwise, the consequences to the United States and the rest of the world would be far worse. According to Haddick, dissuasive and cost-imposing approaches must necessarily play a major role in this competitive strategy. This course of action might include increased political and diplomatic costs on Beijing in case China continues its salami slicing tactics in the East and South China Seas. Economically, it is proposed that the US should discourage China from making assertive policies by putting assets and conditions valuable to China’s leaders at risk. In the field, the author suggests that the American perception of the Pacific as a naval theater needs to change. He argues that it is first and foremost an air and space theater, which need to be controlled in a broad, deep and persistent manner to disadvantage the range and precision of “anti-navy” weapons. Yet, Haddick opines that China would be treated with respect if its rise were not at the expense of its neighbors or the US.

Using his practical experience as a long-time member of the US Marine Corps, Haddick presents a reliable and comprehensive account of the US' strategic problems, its current Asia-Pacific posture, and new thinking in military strategy. This scholarship is helpful for those interested in maritime policies of and rivalry among big powers in Asia-Pacific. Published three years ago, the book constitutes a relevant point of reference for the Trump administration, which is struggling to find an effective approach to cope with China's assertiveness.

Interestingly, the book serves as a prelude for the current debate on the topic. The mid-2017 witnessed an intense polemic between scholars Ely Ratner and Hugh White about what the US should do in the South China Sea. Ratner suggests that Washington should stop calling for restraint and instead intensify efforts to help regional countries defend themselves against China's coercions. On contrary, White [argues](#) that it is far from clear that the Trump administration would be any more willing to go to war with China in the South China Sea than the Obama administration was. Ratner seemingly adopts Haddick's alarmist thinking and calls for stronger US responses, including alterations to the US' long-standing neutral position over sovereignty disputes in the South China Sea and consideration of economic sanctions against assertive actions. It is yet clear whether the Trump administration would follow Haddick's logic and policy recommendations. However, Washington's recent steps indicate greater emphasis on competition with China.

Though presenting a plausible case for a change in the US's security approach, Haddick's analysis is yet to discuss in full the key obstacles for a more competitive approach for the US. For example, Haddick's strategy would require Washington to spend more at the time of rising public debt on expensive, multi-purposed ships and planes with short-range tactical strength to long-range capabilities. It would also require the US' greater commitment to keeping the status quo in the South China Sea, which is important but yet an immediate concern. Since Trump took office, the South China Sea has been overshadowed by the North Korean crisis. Besides, the book has not gone a great length to discuss the concerns of regional nations, which do not want to be drawn into US-China competition. Neighbors are worried about China's growing assertiveness, but none of them have so far been willing to put all their eggs in one basket, particularly at a time trust on the US in the region is eroding. Finally, in order to achieve success, the US's regional strategy must be comprehensive, instead of focusing too much on military engagement as discussed in the book. For the long term, the US' economic engagement is as important for the region as its military presence.

Despite these deficits, this well-structured and well-written book is a worth-reading one. It would give readers in-depth knowledge of the present strategic landscape in the Asia-Pacific and the dilemma that the status quo superpower is facing over there.

Nguyen Thuy Anh is research fellow at Bien Dong Institute for Maritime Studies, Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam.