Recording a ‘Battle for Asia’s Soul’

Asian Waters: The Struggle Over the South China Sea and the Strategy of Chinese Expansion
By Humphrey Hawksley
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Reviewed by Nayan Chanda

MILLIONS OF BBC VIEWERS are familiar with Humphrey Hawksley’s reports from across the globe — from Dakar to Dongsha — spanning decades. In Asian Waters, he brings to bear the experiences of a lifetime of watching and analyzing the transformation of Asia, where he has spent most of his career as a journalist. Despite the book’s title, it is not merely an addition to the growing collection of books on the South China Sea. To Hawksley, the contest over the rocky islets is “a battle for the soul of Asia that is already ripples across thousands of miles to challenge governments on every continent.” The South China Sea “lies at the heart of Chinese global expansion” and is a test of how far China can push the boundaries of international law and get away with it. This timely book offers a panoramic view of Asia centered around China’s attempt at regaining the hegemonic role, and concludes with thoughts on the West’s trouble coping with the Chinese challenge to the Westphalian system.

Hawksley begins with the story of a Filipino fisherman in the coastal community of Mansiloc in Luzon in 2014. The 46-year-old Jurrick Oson wanted to go to war against China. Three years later, when Hawksley met him again, he was happy to have returned to the sea. Unwilling to challenge mighty China, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, despite all of his previous bluster, had done a deal that gave China control of the shoal on condition that Filipino fishermen could keep fishing. This compromise involving economic gain at the expense of sovereignty came from Beijing’s application of a millennia-old strategy of “certainty of reward” and “inevitability of punishment,” and Sun Tzu’s doctrine of victory without war. Throughout the book, Hawksley uses “Jurrick Oson of Mansiloc” as a metaphor for a pragmatic acceptance of the reality of Chinese military might and the region’s economic dependence on the country. Thanks to Chinese largesse, “Cambodia and Laos are now regarded as little more than colonies and Chinese vassal states.”

China has achieved this overwhelming economic and military superiority in the course of a few decades, so much so that it now seeks to oust the US from the Western Pacific. In a telling interview underscoring the change of balance, retired Chinese general Xu Guangyu admitted to Hawksley that during the border war with India in 1962, the Americans let Beijing know that bombers and fighter squadrons based in the Philippines were being readied to strike “China,” the general said. “We had no nuclear weapon. We had no idea how to protect our people from a nuclear attack. Over Taiwan and then India, we were sure the Americans would strike. We had no choice but to pull back.” Now, nuclear-missile-armed Chinese submarines prowl the Pacific and keep American marine surveillance officers busy.

In chapter after chapter that reveal years of reporting, Hawksley shows how a rising China’s policy of reward and punishment backed by large coffers and ever-expanding naval power is helping to subordinate the region and increasingly keep foreign fishermen away from the South China Sea. Even in Vietnam, which has long resisted Chinese domination and is still arming itself with Russian weapons, many fishermen are giving up fishing. “Our kings used to travel to Beijing and brought them gifts so we could keep our independence. We may have to do a little of that again,” a former Vietnamese official told the author. Hawksley’s many interviews with people from all walks of life from different countries illustrate the Chinese threat and the inability of its neighbors to cope with it.

The West seems to pin its hopes on democratic India to stand up to China. But Hawksley’s gritty reporting of the country’s poverty, corruption and apathy contrast with a shining, modernizing China, showing that India may not be up to the job. “And if it is not,” he concludes, “America’s long-laid plans to retain a balance of power in Asia are at risk.” Meanwhile, Chinese investments are being put to use to build ports all around the Indian Ocean — from Sri Lanka, the Maldives, the Seychelles, and Kenya to Tanzania and Djibouti — that could eventually be used to project power.

Hawksley has sharp words for America’s lackadaisical response to China’s growing threat to the region. The US response under President Barack Obama to China’s increasing power was to declare a “pivot to Asia,” which Hawksley writes proved a “public relations disaster.” (“China is a big country and other countries are small countries,” a senior Chinese official bluntly reminded ASEAN leaders in the presence of then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton). Despite the declaration of a pivot to Asia, which angered China, actual US military deployment in the region went down, spurring Beijing to accelerate its militarization of the South China Sea. Now buoyed by China’s growing power and aided by Trumpian isolationism, Chinese President Xi Jinping is not only claiming the leadership of the world, but presenting the state-controlled economy of authoritarian China as a new model for the world. Self-serving Chinese claims aside, Beijing’s challenge to the West has raised legitimate questions about reforming the inquisitive world system. If the world does not want to see the growing confrontation over violation of international norms and military expansion erupt into war, the author argues, it is time to create a multilateral forum to examine the international architecture and its myriad financial, political and humanitarian institutions. But he points out that “If China does see itself as the new force in the world, it is up to China to get it right. The first step would be to initiate a peaceful and pragmatic end to the disputes in Asian waters.”

This breezily written book, packing decades of reporting, interviews and analysis by an astute observer of the region, is essential reading.

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