

*Fire on the Water: China, America, and the Future of
the Pacific*
by **Robert Haddick**

Reviewed by Kelly Vorndran

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The 21st century will be the Asian Century, characterized by a shift in the geopolitical center of the world from Europe to Asia, and an increasingly confident China. It is evident most keenly in the U.S. rebalance policy, an initiative that will likely outlast the Obama administration, as American policymakers have nearly unanimously come to recognize that the tension-filled Asia-Pacific theater is where a small conflict could escalate into a broader regional or global war, and is therefore vital to maintaining U.S. national security. Robert Haddick's *Fire on the Water* is artful account of this shift, why America and the world should care, and what these changes mean for the U.S. military.

Haddick details the impressive rise of China over the past three decades, but focuses on the modernization of Chinese military forces, the People's Liberation Army (PLA), *vis-à-vis* U.S. military capabilities. Additionally, he points out how China has become increasingly assertive in pursuing its interests, particularly territorial integrity, which is considered critical to Chinese national identity. The "salami slicing" strategy "to systematically establish legal legitimacy" (81) over disputed territory in the Near Seas, defined as the South and East China Seas, is cited as evidence of an increasingly aggressive China. Chinese action in the Near Seas has begun to cause disruptions in regional order and increase the chances of conflict. Conflicts in the Pacific will most likely involve the American military,

specifically the U.S. Navy, which has been tasked with maintaining free access to the Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs). The argument made in *Fire in the Water* is that PLA modernization programs are designed to create a force capable of defeating the United States in any military conflict in the seas or skies between China and the first island chain, and that these programs have been successful. Haddick reasons that the U.S. Navy must begin to implement programs that will counter China's new capabilities and act as a deterrent to Chinese aggression.

With his experience in the Marine Corps and with the Department of Defense Special Operations Command, Haddick's argument for focused development of the U.S. military to counter China's modernization programs, and to overcome China's increasingly effective Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) capabilities, is succinct and persuasive. Nevertheless, while *Fire on the Water* is overall a balanced account of U.S. capabilities *vis-à-vis* those of China, it has several flaws. One of the main flaws is that it presumes an inevitable conflict between the United States and China. This presumption overlooks the domestic problems that will claim China's attention and capacity and leads Haddick to propose courses of action for the U.S. Navy that are highly likely to spark an unnecessary conflict.

The biggest weakness of Haddick's argument is embodied in the very first sentence of the book: "The risk of war in East Asia is rising" (1). This statement, along with many others in the book, contend that a military conflict between the United States and China is inescapable, due to a clash over the Chinese salami slicing of contested territory, for control of the SLOCs. Furthermore, Haddick incorrectly dismisses the interconnectedness of Chinese, American, and global economic interests by pointing to the example of Germany in WWII. He uses Germany as an example of a state that went to war with its neighbors, despite massive trade and economic enmeshment with them prior to World War II. However, China is not Germany, and Haddick has failed to understand that Chinese strategic thought is oriented towards using economic rather than military means to solve most of its problems, as seen in its economic rather than military engagement with Taiwan.

The United States can, through its network of allies and partners, form a strategy that is less antagonistic towards China than increasing the U.S. military's presence in the region and deal with the territorial issues through international organizations and law. While Haddick is correct that the United States needs to plan for the development of a military that can overcome A2/AD networks, it also needs to increase cooperation and military exchanges with China. Communication and understanding, rather than blinded arms race, is the first step towards deterrence

Additionally, the U.S. military needs to understand that China is reticent about undertaking actions which would disrupt its development. The lack of attention and consideration given to China's state of development is another weakness of *Fire on the Water*. China's society is in midst of rapid urbanization, growth of a middle class, widespread corruption, environmental challenges, and the difficult transition from an export-led to consumption-driven economy. These transitions have historically proven disruptive to societies. With its current economic slowdown, China will doubtlessly suffer from societal growing pains, which often result in unrest. In his book, Haddick does not address any of these domestic issues, or the attention that the Chinese government will be forced to give them over the coming decades. The only concession Haddick makes towards China's domestic challenges is his encouragement of the U.S. military engaging in irregular warfare, through incitement of Taiwan, Xinjiang, or Tibet, all of which could exacerbate instability in society and are crucial to Chinese territorial integrity (148).

Haddick states that his book is meant to lay out a strategy for "preventing conflict in the region by bolstering deterrence" (213), but many of his proposed courses of action would result in dramatically increased tensions, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy of Sino-American conflict. He outlines the need for the U.S. military to develop a stealth bomber and long-range fighter jet, to restart the Low Cost Autonomous Attack System (LOCAAS) program, to increase U.S. naval presence in the region, and to improve the capabilities of U.S. allies and partners. While Haddick's plan of action may seem reasonable to U.S. military planners, it will appear threatening to the Chinese government as it may be perceived as an

attempt to contain China. Increasing patrols without first establishing lines of communication and rules of conduct with the PLA in the Near Seas increases the chances of confrontation that might lead to larger regional conflicts. Already, there have been safety issues between U.S. and Chinese flight and sea patrols.

While several of Haddick's proposed options increase the likelihood of conflict, his inclusion of U.S. allies and partners in any plan is a positive step. He criticizes the U.S. military's plans to deal with China's A2/AD capabilities, such as the Joint Operational Access Concept (JOAC), Air-Sea Battle Concept, and Distant Blockade Concept, as all falling short, because they lack the critical inclusion of regional allies and partners. As an expeditionary power in the Asia-Pacific, the United States needs to rely on its allies and partners to support its missions. Further, the inclusion of allies and partners in any strategy for dealing with China will increase the economic and political cost of any conflict or attempt to change the current global order.

Fire on the Water is an accomplished work, which illustrates importance of the Asia-Pacific, the expanding capabilities of the PLA – especially its missile capabilities – and what strategic changes the United States needs to make in its force planning to counteract these new capabilities. Haddick slightly overreaches in his portrayal of the inevitability of conflict. With China's growing domestic challenges, the Chinese Communist Party has minimal desire to modify a global order that currently costs it little, but allows it to reap large benefits. Overall, the book is recommended for its overview of Chinese military capabilities, compared to U.S. capabilities, but should not be taken as an accurate account of the future of conflict in the Asia-Pacific.

Haddick, Robert. Fire on the Water: China, America, and the Future of the Pacific. Annapolis MD: Naval Institute Press, 2014.