

Kuan-Jen Chen, *Charting America's Cold War Waters in East Asia:
Sovereignty, Local Interests, and International Security*

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Dr. Kuan-Jen Chen has written an impressive and authoritative book on the evolution of the United States' strategy toward the maritime domain in East Asia during the early phase of the Cold War. Issues that receive only a passing reference (if any at all) in standard histories of the period, such as the role of China in American strategic thinking pertaining to the Eurasian continent during the immediate postwar years, are here considered at length. Although the subject matter that Chen examines is familiar in broad outline, it receives a treatment that is so rich with detail and nuance that even those well-versed in the history will discover much that is new and valuable. It speaks to military history (especially naval history), strategic studies, American foreign relations, political science, public international law, and the international relations of East Asia. Written in a lively and engaging style and yet with copious footnotes, this is one of those rare books that is admirably both learned and accessible, and one that appeals to an interdisciplinary audience while being firmly rooted in historiography.

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One of Chen's critiques of the conventional wisdom is his rebuttal to the belief "[...] that the winds of the Cold War did not begin blowing in Asia until the Korean War broke out in 1950" (p. 12), a view that he associates with John Lewis Gaddis (p. 77). Chen's emphasis on the pre-1950 origins of the Cold War in Asia has the effect of changing the reader's experience of the history as he narrates it: events that appear suddenly in general treatments of the Cold War in Asia (such as the collapse of the Nationalist position on the mainland) are richly detailed episodes in *Charting America's Cold Waters in East Asia*, and Chen's extensive citations of primary source materials enable readers to understand how American officials adapted and responded to a volatile strategic environment. Chen fills in many of the important details of how the United States transitioned from one phase of the Cold War to another, and the different proportions with which he presents the history makes the experience of reading his work refreshing and enlightening.

A sense of these proportions is readily apparent from an overview of the book. Following an introductory chapter, Chen accounts for how the United States became a naval power in the Pacific in the course of the Second World War and then pursued naval cooperation with the Republic of China in the immediate postwar years. In the second chapter, Chen describes the United States' "mainland-based forward strategy," essentially explaining how the United States thought about containment when there still seemed to be a realistic possibility of mainland China remaining under the control of an ally. In chapter 3, Chen accounts for how the inter-service rivalry between the US Army and the US Navy shaped American maritime strategy in the Pacific. Chapter 4 examines how the United States adapted its maritime strategy to the defeat of the Nationalists in the Chinese Civil War, pivoting from the "mainland-based forward strategy" to an "island-based strategy." In chapter 5, the origins of the United States' naval role in the security of Taiwan and South Korea

are examined. Chapter 6 explains the expansion of the US Navy and the evolution of the United States' command structure under the Eisenhower administration's "New Look" strategy, which is followed by a discussion of proposals for multilateral defense arrangements in the Pacific and the United States' commitment to Taiwan's security during the Taiwan Straits Crises. In the seventh chapter, Chen examines the United States' efforts to shape international maritime law (including the tensions that surfaced with Taiwan and South Korea as it sought to do so), prior to the 1958 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. Chapter 8 expounds the 1958 and 1960 maritime conferences and proceeds to discuss the Nixon administration's proposal for a third maritime conference and the obstacles that the PRC presented. Chapter 9 discusses competition and negotiations surrounding fisheries in East Asia, while Chapter 10 focuses on natural resources (primarily oil). Although there is a distinct shift in substantive focus between chapters 1–6 and chapters 7–10, Chen is able to examine issues of continuing relevance to the international relations of East Asia, thereby tying the two focuses together. From a purely analytical perspective, the two distinct scopes might have been more focused and coherent as two separate volumes, but readers are likely to appreciate the fact that there is so much valuable information in a single volume.

One of the limitations of *Charting America's Cold War Waters in East Asia* is how briefly it discusses the interaction between US maritime strategy and British naval power (and decolonization) in the Pacific. Missing from the references is Wen-Qing Ngoei's book *Arc of Containment* (Cornell University Press, 2019), which examines the interaction between Southeast Asian nationalism, British decolonization, and US strategy in Southeast Asia. Although Chen mainly examines Northeast Asia, the United Kingdom must have factored into US decision-making at some level. This is not to say that Chen neglects the British factor entirely (the

UK is mentioned on pp. 38–39, for example), but that the decline of British power in the Pacific receives less attention than it perhaps should. On page 38, Chen cites an entry from Chiang Kai-shek’s diary on 23 September 1945 in which the Chinese leader criticizes the British presence in Shanghai and then cites the diminishing British naval deployments and increasing American evidence over the following year, concluding that the British role in the region had effectively ended. But it seems doubtful to suppose that the UK had passed the torch to the US so quickly and decisively, especially since London retained Hong Kong as a Crown Colony. When Chen states that “the role played by maritime East Asia gradually shifted from the *edge* or *peripheral area* of Imperial China, Japan, and the United States to the heart of the Cold War in East Asia, where it became an arena for out-and-out power games between local and world powers” (p. 13; emphases in source text), the reader cannot help but wonder if the omission of the United Kingdom results in an incomplete picture.

Any book examining an interdisciplinary topic is bound to omit secondary literature that some scholars would consider significant. In the case of *Charting America’s Cold War Waters in East Asia*, some of the more notable omissions include Thomas J. Christensen’s *Useful Adversaries* (Princeton University Press, 1996) and *Worse than a Monolith* (Princeton University Press, 2011) as well as the several volumes by Nancy Bernkopf Tucker that cover US–Taiwan–China relations during the early Cold War. The omission that is arguably most significant is the lack of any apparent reference to Michael J. Green’s *By More Than Providence: Grand Strategy and American Power in the Asia Pacific Since 1783* (Columbia University Press, 2017). As its title indicates, that book examines US strategic thinking pertaining to Asia from the time of the American Revolution to the Obama administration. Since it covers such a broad historical period, it does not examine

the early Cold War in nearly as much detail as *Charting America's Cold War Waters in East Asia* does. Yet it deserves a place in the literature review, as Green's insight that US strategists throughout history have debated "Continental versus Maritime/China versus Japan" (p. 4) could have provided a particularly helpful reference point for Chen's analysis of the role of the maritime domain in US strategic thinking, especially in chapter 4, where Chen narrates the pivot from a "mainland-based forward strategy" to an "island-based" one.

Chen is a gifted writer, and the lively and engaging style of his prose is one of the many strengths of *Charting America's Cold War Waters in East Asia*; it is also one of the reasons why the book is likely to appeal to a broad audience. But there are times (especially in the early chapters) when one wonders if Chen's rhetorical flourishes come at the expense of strict accuracy. For example, was the United States really positioning itself as a "rising maritime *overlord*" (p. 21, emphasis added)? Did the United States really have an interest in "*mastering* Chinese affairs" (p. 34, emphasis added)? Was it really so straightforwardly the case "not only Chiang but also the Chinese people welcomed these American marines and demonstrated their pro-American sentiments *without reservation*" (p. 37, emphasis added)? There are also times when Chen's prose presents obstacles to the reader, employing Greek and Latinate terms such as "polemicise" (p. 118), "thalassocracy" (p. 12 and elsewhere), and "duumvirate" (p. 82); I found myself puzzling over "duumvirate" until I made the association with the First and Second Triumvirates of Ancient Rome. "Thalassocracy" appears so frequently and stands out so strikingly in Chen's prose that the reader is never quite sure if it has a technical meaning or is being used interchangeably with similar terms such as "maritime power" (p. 10) and "sea power" (p. 11). But all things considered, Chen's prose style is excellent, and *Charting America's Cold War Waters in East Asia* is a pleasure to read.

Although *Charting America's Cold War Waters in East Asia* examines the evolution of international maritime law in considerable depth, this book is primarily a work of historiography, and readers should exercise caution before drawing legal inferences from Chen's account of the history. For example, the statement that "[...] the United States ended official relations with Taiwan in 1979" (p. 16) is not technically true: the United States had official relations with the Republic of China (as the Government of China) rather than Taiwan. While using "Taiwan" and "Republic of China" interchangeably may be common practice, public international law often calls for greater precision. One should also not infer from Chen's statement (when referring to a potential US base in southern Taiwan) that "for strategic reasons, the US Navy wished to maintain a naval installation in Chinese waters [...]" (p. 129) that the United States recognized Taiwan as part of China or regarded the Taiwan Strait as Chinese waters. It is also historically inaccurate to refer to the Nationalists at the 1958 UN Conference on the Law of the Sea as the "Taiwanese delegation" (p. 217), since the Nationalists insisted that they represented China and were present in the United Nations in that capacity. I have no doubts that Chen is fully aware of these issues, but he is not always precise in his use of language. These lapses from lawyerly precision did not detract substantially from the book, but readers who are interested in the legal status of Taiwan and the ROC government should be aware that such lapses do occasionally occur.

In summary, *Charting America's Cold War Waters in East Asia* is an outstanding work of scholarship, and an equally outstanding example of how academic research can rigorously adhere to high standards while being accessible to a wide audience. It is unmistakably the work of a historian and speaks primarily to that audience; but political scientists, legal scholars, area studies scholars, and policy specialists will find much in the book that is relevant to their own interests.

Events that are narrated in rapid succession in other studies, such as the United States' postwar pivot from a continental strategy to a strategy anchored in the offshore island chains, are here examined with the care and detail that they deserve. As such, even scholars who are familiar with the postwar international relations of East Asia will find much in this book that is new and enlightening.