



Fire on the Water - a book review

By CMDR Max Muller

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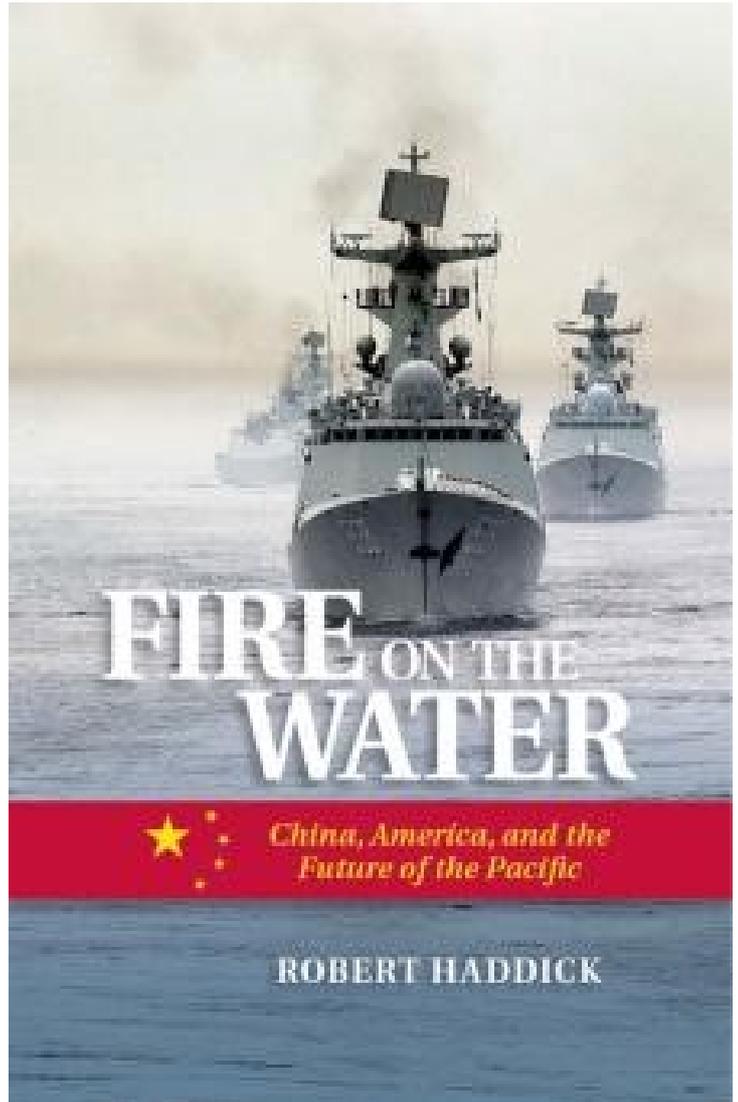
Although Robert Haddick's book 'Fire on the Water' is now a few years old, its subject matter continues to dominate the strategic outlook of the Indo-Pacific region. Haddick adeptly compares and contrasts the diplomatic and military strategies of the US and its allies against that of China. He observes that the current setting in East and South East Asia is similar to the situation in 1914 Europe, prior to the outbreak of WWI.

Haddick served as a US Marine Corps officer and is currently an Independent Contractor with the US Special Operations Command. His literature has been published in the New York Times, Wall Street Journal and other highly reputable publications.

Since the post WWII unification of China under the communist party regime, China has re-asserted herself as a powerful economic heavyweight that has sought to gain further global influence, commensurate with this rise. Haddick argues that in order to ensure China's ongoing growth and development is undertaken in a positive manner, bounded by international rules and norms, there must continue to be a sufficient counter-balance in place to champion the interests of regional neighbours and other stakeholders. The US and her key allies remains the major counter-balance to China's rise in the Pacific. Haddick views this factor as the most vital element to the ongoing peace, stability and prosperity of the region.

Despite this effective counter-balancing arrangement to date, Haddick highlights China's persistent efforts to secure disputed territories through unconventional operations, and via diplomatic "salami slicing" style negotiations with her regional neighbours. Each minor success in this process serves to embolden China to seek further concessions from her neighbours and to potentially disregard established international norms that has helped secure long term regional peace, security and economic prosperity. Haddick maintains that if the US and its allies are unable or unwilling to adequately invest in diplomatic and military capability to provide a credible counter-balance in East and South East Asia, then it is likely that established international global norms might quickly be eroded leading to a very uncertain and potentially dangerous future for the region.

While the conventional military supremacy of the US and its allies is still significant in 2017, Haddick contends that an inflexible US defence bureaucracy and vested interests within government and industry, has helped create a military structure incapable of countering key emerging Chinese threats. Haddick surmises that the US is becoming overly reliant on relatively short range USN carrier based strike aircraft, at the expense of a sufficient long range stealth bomber and submarine deterrent. In contrast, China's ongoing significant investments in space based systems, cyber and mine warfare technology and long range surface to surface missile capability pose very significant challenges to western military planners, tasked with the protection naval task groups maintaining the freedom of navigation in the Pacific. Haddick suggests that by



Cover of 'Fire on the Water' by Robert Haddick.

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2020, during periods of heightened tension, the risk of deploying naval task groups to conduct operations within 2000 nautical miles from the Chinese mainland could pose too great a risk for any navy.

One key factor going forward is the ongoing cost of maintaining flexible and effective capabilities to secure political and military objectives in the East and South China Seas. Haddick clearly determines that this advantage now rests with China, given that China is the 'home team', while the US and many of its allies are obliged to deploy expeditionary forces with relatively few secure basing and resource sustainment options in comparison with China.

He asserts that China's cost burden of maintaining an effective sea denial deterrent consisting of advanced sea mines and long range supersonic surface to surface missiles, amounts to much less than the US and its allies cost burden of maintaining effective expeditionary forces, capable of executing their desired mission outcomes in periods of heightened tension. This combined with a broad US remit in maintaining an international rule based system, could see the US and its allies struggle to maintain the current global order; particularly in the highly contested maritime regions of the East and South China Seas.



USS Bunker Hill takes station as escort vessel for a replenishment at sea between USNS Pecos and HMAS Parramatta in the South China Sea. Photographer: LSIS Leo Baumgartner.

Through a process of thoughtful and detailed strategic analysis, Robert Haddick skilfully articulates some of the emerging challenges for ongoing peace and security in East and South East Asia. I consider this well written book to be an essential read for all Maritime Warfare Officers seeking to broaden their appreciation of contemporary maritime strategic issues in an increasingly contested and complex maritime environment.

'Fire on the Water' is available through all good book stores and as an eBook from the Defence Library via the Overdrive Application.

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