

## Kees van Dijk

*Pacific Strife. The Great Powers and Their Political and Economic Rivalries in Asia and the Western Pacific 1870–1914.* Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015, 526 pp. [IIAS Publications Series, Monographs, Global Asia 5]. ISBN 9789089644206. Price: EUR 119.00 (hardback).

As tensions in the South China Sea continue to rise, Kees van Dijk's *Pacific Strife*, a meticulous history of the great power rivalries in Asia and the Western Pacific in the age of high Imperialism (1870–1914), serves as an apt reminder that international antagonism for alleged strategic, commercial, and prestigious interests are not new to the region. To the contemporary reader, the speculation, anticipation, and colonial and nationalist discourse that characterized this geopolitical and diplomatic competition between Great Britain, France, Germany, Russia, Japan, and the United States will appear awfully familiar. Van Dijk, a highly regarded specialist in the socio-political and religious histories of Indonesia and Southeast Asia, arrived at this larger history during the research for his previous monograph, *The Netherlands Indies and the Great War* (2007), for which he mapped international developments in the Pacific to explain Dutch anxieties over their ability to hold on to their colonial possessions in Asia.

Van Dijk contends that a greater European, American, and Japanese presence in the Pacific following the opening of the Suez Canal (1869), the crowning of Wilhelm I as emperor of Germany (1871), and the completion of the transcontinental railway in North America (1869) 'made the Pacific an arena of fierce competition between the powers' (p. 16). And while the history of the scramble for Africa has received far more attention, as Van Dijk points out, it was only in Asia and the Pacific that all the established and emerging great powers sought to enhance their status, safeguard their strategic interests, and defend or expand their economic opportunities. The great prize was China and its markets 'that far outshone the commercial importance of Africa' (p. 37). According to Van Dijk, it was in the greater Pacific region that the true great power rivalries of the age played out. This period of intense competition came to an end with the outbreak of World War I, which forcefully shifted the attention of the four European powers back to Europe, North Africa, and the Near East.

*Pacific Strife* contains twenty-four chapters, most of which examine particular case studies of geopolitical competition during the period under study. In the absence of a distinct introduction, the first two chapters serve to set the stage. Chapter 1 describes the means of expansion that enabled increased rivalry in the Pacific by tracing technological developments, ranging from steamships, coaling stations, locomotives, railroads, to the telegraph, in be-

tween the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 and the inauguration of the Panama Canal in 1914. The second chapter then turns to the motives that drove the great powers to the Pacific region. While Van Dijk discusses the familiar motivations for imperialism, such as the ambition to become a world power, revanchism, commercial expectations, and strategic considerations, he specifically argues that concerns over spheres of influence were crucial in the Pacific rivalries. In addition, he emphasizes the importance of agents on the spot, such as missionaries, travelers, explorers, settlers, scholars, traders, and business owners that at times forced their governments' hands.

The remaining chapters of *Pacific Strife* can be divided according to the three distinct phases in the development of the great power rivalries that Van Dijk distinguishes. Chapters 3 to 9 deal with the first round of conflicts in the Pacific, which involved Great Britain and Germany as they competed over influence in Fiji, Samoa, and New Guinea. The second phase of international competition (chapters 10–20) began with the emergence of what Van Dijk calls the 'great Russian-French combination,' which led to conflicts between the British and the French in mainland Southeast Asia and the British and the Russians in Central and North Asia. In addition, this phase witnessed the appearance of two newcomers on the geopolitical stage: Japan and the United States. The former vied with Russia for influence in North China and Korea, while the latter sought to strengthen its position in the Pacific and "inadvertently" created an empire by colonizing Hawai'i and the Philippines. The final chapters (21–24) deal with the third phase of the narrative that commenced with the Russo-Japanese war of (1904–1905) and saw the intensification of the American and Japanese rivalry over hegemony in the Pacific.

With *Pacific Strife* Van Dijk makes a significant contribution to the existing scholarship on imperialism, turn of the century diplomacy, and Asian and Pacific histories. He successfully argues for the preponderance of the Pacific in the great power rivalries during the age of Imperialism as he emphasizes the interconnectedness of developments in the Pacific islands, mainland and island Southeast Asia, and Central and North Asia. Primarily a study of diplomatic relations, the countries and territories over which the great powers vied with one another hardly figure in this narrative, Van Dijk's book is nonetheless important for all scholars working on local, national, or regional Pacific histories. As Van Dijk himself demonstrated in his book on the Netherlands Indies in World War I, it is difficult to understand local developments without this larger international perspective.

Van Dijk's narrative is mainly based upon published primary sources and secondary literature, although some parts draw from archival research as well. However, the author primarily relied upon the extensive book collection of the

KITLV (Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies) for his sources. This collection includes many contemporary publications by pundits, scholars, and diplomats that provide an original source of information on the great power rivalries in the Pacific.

While *Pacific Strife* is a welcome addition to the field, it does leave the reader wanting at some points. Foremost, the lack of an introduction and a clear argument give the impression that the book at times lacks direction. There also is little to no conversation with existing literature and theories—for instance, on the age of imperialism or international diplomacy. This is a shame, as Van Dijk makes some important statements between the lines. And while it is understandable that the focus lies on the great powers, the narrative would have benefited from the views of the various (colonized) people who they were competing over.

In sum, *Pacific Strife* is a well-written account of the great power rivalries in the Pacific that will appeal to all scholars and students working on the region in the time period under study.

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### Reference

Dijk, Kees van (2007). *The Netherlands Indies and the Great War, 1914–1918*. Leiden: Brill/KITLV.