

Interview: Samuel Dodges (JTMS) and David Scott (Author)

Date: 21 May 2021

Transcript:

SD: Greetings, I am Samuel Dodge with the *Journal of Territorial and Maritime Studies* [JTMS], and I have the pleasure to be speaking today with Dr. David Scott. Dr. Scott is a prolific author in fields of international, inter-cultural, and inter-faith relations, having a publishing career that spans several decades with countless research articles and three books with a fourth on the way, and having delivered lectures at government agencies throughout the world as well as in his former position as a lecturer at Brunel University, in the UK. Dr. Scott is now with us today to discuss his recent article on the Indo-Pacific Small Island Strategies of Large Powers published in the Winter/Spring 2021 issue of JTMS. First off, Dr. Scott, welcome and thank you for taking the time to speak with us.

DS: *Thank you.*

SD: That being said, before we get into questions regarding the content of your article, for those of our readers who may not be familiar with your research, could you give us a quick introduction to your background as a scholar and author and how that background plays into your particular approach to IR analysis, and perhaps you might also be willing to share quick summary of the scope of research and importance of this article.

DS: *Okay, I think the article reflects two converging interests in a sense. One interest that I have is in geopolitics and geoeconomics in general and then the second strand is the rise of strategic areas and in particular the shifts in global importance of particular areas.*

In this respect the earlier or the current rise of India and China has become entwined regionally with the construction of new regions and in this case the Indo-Pacific. So, the talk of the "Pacific Century" has given way to the "Indo-Pacific" as a strategic construct by various powers. Returning to the geography, the Indo-Pacific is of course the site for the interaction for various significant powers who have all adopted various Indo-Pacific strategies, with the exception of course of China who doesn't particularly like the term 'Indo-Pacific' precisely for the reason that it sees it as a construct aimed against China. The irony here, of course, is that China itself is a thoroughly Indo-Pacific power geopolitically and, sure, economically with its Two-Ocean navy maritime doctrine pushing into the Indian Ocean and the Pacific and of course the Maritime Silk Road [initiative]. So, looking at the convergence of those two themes the Indo-Pacific is a zone for geopolitical and geoeconomic encounter, reaction, and response. It was then interesting that this is a primarily maritime zone, maritime stretches of waters, in which islands have a rising geopolitical and geoeconomic significance.

It was then further interesting the way in which islands combine aspects of territorial features and of course maritime features, which is the very title of the journal - "Journal of Territorial and Maritime Studies." Islands, in a sense, have features of both land territoriality and maritime consequences; last but not least of which is entitlement to Exclusive Economic Zones, arising under UNCLOS from properly designated "islands".

Which of course then raises the interesting issue of when are islands "islands", together with the very basic geography of the situation, which is in the 21st century islands are both disappearing but also appearing. Islands as state constructions, in terms of literally being constructed [built], of which China's activities are the most obvious, and in terms of islands being legally constructed, legally recognized, or in fact not legally recognized. So, it's really the interaction of the geopolitics and the geoeconomics and the construction of regional strategies; but of course the perception of the region being very much itself a question of construction, and hence an interesting bit of constructivism generally alongside the hard politics of geopolitics and geoeconomics.

SD: You mentioned the rising importance of islands and the changing nature of States' Indo-Pacific strategies regarding small islands, what are some of the commonalities between the small island strategies that are observed across all the Great Powers, and what primary points of differentiation have you observed?

DS: *There are two common features. One is the recognition of the value of islands for bases and for basing facilities. In that sense, be it under their own sovereignty or be it through arrangements with the host countries; the United States, France, Japan, and India have certainly been recognizing the values of islands in that particular basing facility setting. The other commonality would be their value or rather potential value for the Exclusive Economic Zones around them. Although, one of the points made in the article is that probably the States although recognizing the potential value of Exclusive Economic Zones, and in the case of France seeing this with a matter of some pride I would say. France repeatedly will mention when it talks about the Indo-Pacific that it has the second biggest Exclusive Economic Zones in the world and that 90% of them come from the Indo-Pacific. As I say there is probably some mismatch between the rhetoric of recognizing the importance of the Exclusive Economic Zones and actually utilizing them for those purposes, but that's perhaps another issue.*

I would say that the biggest differentiation is ... I don't see too much differentiation actually now that I reflect on it. I was going to say that the one differentiation here is that because France on the face of it is an external power, a European power, France puts great stress on its island as giving it legitimacy within the Indo-Pacific. It will constantly stress that its island possessions are Overseas Departments and as such France is a "resident" Indo-Pacific power. Other powers like Japan and India are obviously Indo-Pacific powers through their very heartlands. The United States as well, in a sense -- North America, Alaska, [and] California -- is already on the Pacific rim, although obviously its islands for the westward [Hawaii, Guam] give it further resident

power legitimacy. To return to the question, the only differentiation, I would say, is probably that for France their islands possessions [are] the only legitimacy that is generated for France as an Indo-Pacific power. The other Greater Powers that were being mentioned are already resident powers through their baseline territories, as it were.

SD: In your bio, you note a particular career focus on IR constructivism and the effect that images and perceptions have on State actions. Looking at the actions of the Great Powers regarding their island claims as laid out in your article, in what manner does the constructivist model apply when certain powers are willing to buck the conventions of the IR social structure and place higher importance on direct national interest than on how the pursuit of said interest is perceived?

DS: *Unpackaging it, in two ways, my own interest, in a sense, in constructivism was partly generated from my overlapping interest in the interaction of States, which itself arose from a wider interest in East/West interactions, full stop. If we're looking at the interactions between States, then the role of perceptions in the way that States perceive each other, can and has played an important, at time governing, role in the way that interactions then take place. Which is why constructivism and the way that States perceive, but also misperceive (so perceptions and misperceptions), has long been an interest for me, geoculturally as well as geopolitically. When we turn to the Indo-Pacific, constructivism to some extent has applications. The Indo-Pacific itself is a "construct". Chinese and Russian criticisms of the Indo-Pacific [are themselves] a counter narrative.*

So, certainly there are constructions all around the situation. For myself, I'm not too worried about any apparent clashes between constructivism and, say, hardline geopolitics, because it remains true that Indo-Pacific formulations are indeed constructs reflecting national interests, reflecting national fears, national aspirations. In that sense constructs are thoroughly political, and for me constructivism doesn't particularly cut against it. That is the nature of constructs. To focus on the particular thing with regard to the way that countries, Great Powers, use/misuse small islands, does constructivism have much insight there? In a sense, largely no because I think, to be realistic (see IR] school of realism), Great Powers are indeed dealing with small islands largely from geopolitical and geoeconomic imperatives.

As such, at first view constructivism does not have [many] insights to offer [However] I think there are some interesting areas within that where, in a sense, constructivism is still having something to say – which is with regard to areas where Great Powers like China are on the one hand militarizing islands, creating artificial islands in the South China Sea, which at face value alienates and puts a wedge between China and South East Asian countries and a wedge between China and ASEAN. How is China responding to that?

Now in a sense hardline geopolitics, hardline “[IR] realism” continues to show that China is very determined to reassert what it sees as its national interest, its national sovereignty, its “core interests”, and so forth So, in that sense China shows absolutely no signs of moderating its particular behavior towards small islands. Having said that though, what China is simultaneously doing is pushing its [own] Maritime Silk Road initiative, “win-win cooperation”, as a way of constructing a different message, a different image. If it pushes the Maritime Silk Road, economic cooperation with South East Asian nations, then its simultaneous Great Power politics (these are the [SCS] islands), can be sort of muted. So, what I would say is that again, the rhetoric of China’s Maritime Silk Road initiative is itself a construct that, in part, reflects strategic realism of diverting South East Asian attention away from the otherwise extremely divisive nature of China’s activity in those islands.

The other.... but it remains true that classic constructivism, particularly social constructivism of State actions being modified by gradual acceptance of particular norms, the internationalization argument, one could argue that this may be a process in the South China Sea with China/ASEAN discussion over codes of good conduct and so forth. Is this modifying behavior? If it is, then that would be a good example of social constructivism. Unfortunately, the empirical evidence is that this, so far, has not gone very far, so [the] Code of Conduct, actually signed back in 2005 [note: 2002] I think it was, although I’d have to check on that date for that. The very fact that this Code of Conduct has in a sense not been applied, has been shown by militarization and confrontations, but it has also been shown to have not been applied by the very fact they are now negotiating for a [subsequent] legal code of conduct to underpin the original Code of Conduct. But even that discussion has not actually got anywhere because they’re merely talking about principles that could be agreed upon to start negotiations about a legal code of conduct. So, this is like two decades of theoretically a Code of Conduct already agreed.*

So, in that sense, socialization, and thus social constructivism, hasn’t really sort of achieved much traction, and I think, to be quite honest, the reason for that is that Chinese State policy is governed by thoroughly empirical [SD: sic – imperial] geopolitical/geoeconomic drives, which under Xi Jinping has become very determined, and in that sense very forceful with a readiness to use force if necessary. So, to that extent social constructivism is not very evident.

An interesting situation though there, would be the extent to which the United Kingdom will face growing pressure to conform to rule of law principles and rule of law norms with regard to its important island base at Diego Garcia, which is also important for the United States, given the increasing pressure at the United Nations and under various legal frameworks there. So, in fact, the United Kingdom, which on the face of it is a norm observing State which is certainly emphasizing the importance of rule of law, is faced with a growing pressure there and that will be an interesting situation because

potentially constructivism should have more influence on a state like the United Kingdom than on a state like China, under Xi Jinping that is.

SD: (Note: Here Dr. Scott provided additional analysis into the UK/Mauritius dispute over the Chagos archipelago which JTMS plans to soon publish in a post focusing on that issue.)

SD: Thank you again for taking the time to share your thoughts with us this morning Dr. Scott. We hope that this has gotten some potential readers interested in reviewing your article and provided additional contextualization for those who have already read your piece. Do you have any final thoughts that you wish to leave us with?

DS: As I say, the interest running through in terms of the original article and the journal was in fact the way in which islands have this curious territorial nature, territorial value alongside maritime value and maritime status. It was the entwining of the two things that was of particular interest and enjoyment actually, shaping that article. Territorial and maritime – Great Powers, small islands!

* SD: note: China-ASEAN nonbinding Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea was announced in 2002. Draft guidelines to implement the agreement were announced in 2005.

Source: <https://www.journalofterritorialandmaritimestudies.net/post/territorial-and-maritime-great-powers-small-islands>, 21 May 2021

Video: <https://www.youtube.com/embed/lqSI65JHzOk>