



***Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power*** by Robert Kaplan. Random House, 2010, 384 pp., \$28.00.

Those familiar with Robert Kaplan's work will know that he has a reputation for unorthodox analysis that is rooted in his broad and deep study of history and supplemented by his extensive travels through the countries about which he writes. I have always found Kaplan to be provocative and thoughtful, and his articles and books are more than worth the time it takes to work through them. One of his latest works, *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power*, does not disappoint in this regard and provides a well-written analysis of the region and how it could shape America's future in the world.

While the lens through which Kaplan views the Indian Ocean is more maritime-centric than air- or land-centric, he nonetheless provides all military professionals with a rich collection of hypotheses about how economic, political, military, religious, and social factors will interact in a region that he believes will, along with the western Pacific, "truly be the strategic heart of the world."

True to form, Kaplan bases his analysis on his extensive travel through the Indian Ocean region, from Oman ("shows that something Americans believe is a bad thing—absolute monarchy—can produce good results"), to Afghanistan and Pakistan ("our struggle to separate Afghanistan from Pakistan may be in

vain if geography, history, and culture are any guide”), to Burma (“provides a code for understanding the world to come . . . China’s drive southward and India’s drive both westward and eastward—to keep it from being encircled by China’s navy—means that both powers collide in Burma”), and most of the other states that make up the region, Kaplan provides an excellent overview of the complex issues at stake in this dynamic and increasingly important region.

A consistent theme running through the book is the interplay between India, China, and the United States, whose fortunes and futures come together in the Indian Ocean. Kaplan sees India as a key player:

India will emerge as a key “swing” state in international politics . . . The story of a rising India is, at least in military terms, the story of its navy. Hemmed in on land by a combination of the Himalayan Mountains and failing states from Pakistan and Nepal to Bangladesh and Burma, India can best project power at sea. . . . India can play the role of chief balancer vis-à-vis China . . . one cannot caution enough how subtly this game will have to be played, for India will never officially join the United States in any anti-Chinese alliance the way Japan joined the United States in an anti-Soviet one during the Cold War.

Kaplan concludes that “China’s move into the Indian Ocean constitutes less an aggressive example of empire building than a subtle grand strategy to take advantage of legitimate commercial opportunities wherever they might arise in places that matter to its military and economic interests. China is adroitly riding a wave of economic history rather than plotting it out in the first place.” As for China being a military threat, he observes that “there is nothing illegitimate about the rise of the Chinese military. China’s ascendancy can fairly be compared with that of the United States following its own

consolidation of land-based power in the aftermath of the Civil War and the settlement of the American West, which culminated at the turn of the twentieth century with the construction of the Panama Canal. Strong American-Chinese bilateral relations going forward are not only plausible, but might be the best-case scenario for the global system in the twenty-first century, allowing for true world governance to take shape.”

The author offers his own solution for relations with a rising China: “Therefore, the most likely scenario in my mind for relations with China is something quite nuanced: the United States will both compete and cooperate with China. The American-Chinese rivalry of the future could give new meaning to the word ‘subtlety,’ especially in its economic and diplomatic arrangements. Yet, if this relationship has its hard edges, I expect one of those will be where the two countries’ navies interact: in the Greater Indian Ocean and western Pacific.”

In terms of a US strategy for managing relations with India and China, Kaplan advises that

leveraging allies like India and Japan against China is responsible in one sense only: it helps provide a mechanism for the US to gradually and elegantly cede great power responsibilities to like-minded others as their own capacities rise, as part of a studied retreat from a unipolar world. But to follow such a strategy in isolation risks unduly and unnecessarily alienating China. Thus, leveraging allies must be part of a wider military strategy that seeks to draw in China as part of an Asia-centric alliance system, in which militaries cooperate on a multitude of issues.

While I do not agree with all of Kaplan’s points, having spent most of the last six years in the Pacific I find that a significant portion of his analysis rings

true, especially his point that “the real lesson of the Indian Ocean world [is] nuanced relationships rather than overt alliances and basing arrangements.”

In sum, I highly recommend this book to anyone who desires a greater understanding of the complex issues the United States will confront in the Indian Ocean region through the first part of this century and likely well beyond. The prose is easy to digest, and even if only for the history lesson, the book is well worth your time.

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