



Book Review: Indian Ocean In The Balance

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Book Review: Indian Ocean in the balance

By Matthew Kustenbauder

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MONSOON: THE INDIAN OCEAN AND THE FUTURE OF AMERICAN POWER

By Robert D. Kaplan

Random House, \$28, 366 pages

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The Indian Ocean is once again at the heart of the geopolitical world map, argues Robert Kaplan in his latest book. Emerging economies in China and India are shifting the global axis of trade and commerce, making sea lanes along the old East-West trade routes vital to the grand strategy of the United States as a future great power.

To prove his point, Mr. Kaplan follows the monsoon winds: touring from Oman in the Middle East, then to the Indian subcontinent and the Indonesian archipelago, and back again to Zanzibar on the East African coast. Each stop along the Indian Ocean littoral demonstrates the individuality yet interconnectedness of a regional system into which America will need to learn to fit itself or risk losing its place in the world.

History is key to this story. Considered from a long-term vantage point, the era of the North Atlantic is a transitory phase. Arab merchants plied the waters of the Indian Ocean long before the Roman period. When Vasco da Gama rounded the Cape of Good Hope and entered these waters at the end of the fifteenth century, the Portuguese were seeking an alternative route to India that would break the Venetian stranglehold on East-West trade through the Mediterranean.

It was not until the nineteenth century that the Indian Ocean was incorporated under the British into a global empire centered in the North Atlantic. The twentieth century saw the rise of America as a new world power whose fleet patrolled the seas. Now the winds of change are shifting yet again, as China and India emerge to exert influence through informal alliances and bulked-up navies.

Numbers are not perfect, but they do give a rough sketch of recent transformations. On the western end of the Indian Ocean, nearly forty percent of the world's seaborne crude oil squeezes through the Strait of Hormuz, a natural bottleneck between the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea. At the other end of the ocean, fifty percent of the world's merchant fleet anchors at the Strait of Malacca, gateway to open waters of the Pacific. The waters lying between the Middle East and Southeast Asia constitute the world's busiest and most vital artery of trade. Ninety percent of all global commerce travels by sea, half of which flows through the Indian Ocean. Here too passes seventy percent of the world's petroleum products. These routes will only become more crucial and more congested as world energy consumption is predicted to rise fifty percent by 2030.

Mr. Kaplan approaches all these facts with a heavy dose of realism. The decline of American power is inevitable. It is not a question of preventing China and India's rise, but of managing the transition from a uni-polar to a multi-polar world. In the twenty-first century, the United States will no longer act as the single hegemon but as one of several great powers who cooperatively manage global governance. This emerging multi-polar world Mr. Kaplan envisions also has the Indian Ocean at its center.

Mr. Kaplan's book is as much about the rise of the Eurasian rimlands as it is a remonstrance against the flabbiness of post-Cold War America and the pitfalls of a foreign policy dogmatically committed to ideologies of Western-style democracy, freedom, and human rights, which ultimately fail to serve the nation's best interests. The result is what Paul Kennedy has called imperial overstretch. While American troops have been mired in Iraq and Afghanistan for two decades, the U.S. warship fleet has declined by half.

Meanwhile, China's economic rise is being followed by the growth of its military. As America exhausts itself in costly land wars it cannot possibly win, China quietly stokes its economy, builds its military, and extends its trading and intelligence networks deeper into the Indian Ocean world.

For this reason, competition with China will only increase, and America's triple whammy of soaring debt, trade deficits, and unemployment makes it particularly vulnerable to radical politics. Yet conflict between the U.S. and China is not inevitable.

Rather, Mr. Kaplan sees reason to be optimistic about a future with diminished U.S. power and a stronger China. "We need not become adversaries," he consoles. Instead there are points of collaboration to be found, such as fighting piracy and terrorism. Mr. Kaplan foresees in the "elegant decline" of U.S. power an opportunity to bring China on board as part of a Eurasian maritime system. For instance, the establishment of an American-Indian-Chinese condominium in the Indian Ocean could buffer American civilizational tension with radical Islam, specifically by ceding "power and responsibilities to like-minded others in a multi-polar world."

Until then, Mr. Kaplan predicts that balance-of-power politics will dominate the Greater Indian Ocean. Here militaries will grow alongside economies, jealously guarding national sovereignty even as a network of pipelines and land and sea routes knits the region together. As Indian Ocean nations continue trade with China, they will simultaneously seek U.S. support as a counterbalance.

This is already true of India, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, all of which welcome the U.S. Navy to hedge against China's growing power. Mr. Kaplan considers India and Indonesia – both vibrant democracies – to be key U.S. allies, albeit for different reasons. India offers a military and economic counterweight to China. The Indian Navy, which has engaged in joint operations since 2007 with the U.S., Japan, Australia, and Singapore, rightly considers the Indian Ocean its own backyard.

India recently opened an \$8 billion naval base south of Goa, procured \$40 billion in weapons, and plans to float the third largest naval fleet in the near future. In the words of one Chinese analyst, “India is perhaps China’s most realistic strategic adversary.” All the more reason for a U.S.-India alliance.

Indonesia meanwhile proffers an alternative to the predicted “clash of civilizations.” Mr. Kaplan argues that Indonesians by and large already view America as it will need to be seen in a future multi-polar system: as an indispensable, benevolent outside power. A strong U.S.-Indonesia partnership will be a model of cooperation between the United States and a democratic, Muslim-majority country. Indonesia is the future of Islam, Iraq is the past.

It is worth noting that Mr. Kaplan has become one of the leading lights in national security circles, which helps explain why this work is addressed to the nation’s powerbrokers. Both his “Balkan Ghosts” and “The Coming Anarchy” were read widely in the White House, even if the results were not what the author intended. Together with “Warrior Politics,” this represents Mr. Kaplan’s most policy-orientated work.

Nevertheless, one would be hard-pressed to find a reader who won’t enjoy it. Only the most blinkered specialists will grumble at Mr. Kaplan’s wide-angle depiction of the Indian Ocean world, which weaves journalistic investigation and interviews, frank travelogue-style impressions, evocative historical background, and futuristic predictions.

Whether a global recession that highlights the decline of American clout will be enough of a shock to the system for political leaders to alter the current course of U.S. foreign policy remains to be seen. If it is, Mr. Kaplan’s “Monsoon” could end up supplying the map.

Matthew Kustenbauder is a doctoral candidate in history at Harvard University.