

Book Review
By
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Robert D. Kaplen, *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and Future of American Power*

(New York: The Random House Publishing Group, 2011) pp.331

"Europe defined the 20th century; the Indian Ocean will define the 21st" argues Robert Kaplan. The events happening around the greater Indian Ocean will shape the future course of geopolitics at the global level. Booming economies of India and China are at the core of shifting patterns of global trade and commerce, hence making sea lanes along the ancient East-West trading routes crucial to the grand strategy of the United States, if it has to retain its great power status.

To make his case, the author traverses from west to east following the monsoon winds, threading the storyline with perspectives of three powers– the United States, India, and China and Islamic countries. Kaplan provides broad strategic overview of the region. He examines India and China from dual perspectives as both influencing each other. In his world, India is expanding horizontally across the Indian Ocean, whereas China vertically into it as well as across it. This expansion is the result of growing trade in goods, raw materials, energy resources and religious ideas.

Kaplan articulates how critical Indian Ocean region has become to American strategy in the 21st century and eloquently describes the "New Great Game" unfolding across the Indian Ocean. China has set this game in motion, as its tankers now ply the waters from Western Pacific, down through narrow Strait of Malacca, across the Indian Ocean to Persian Gulf. Struggling to break "Malaccan dilemma"– as this narrow passageway can be blocked by outside powers anytime, and denying ship movement to China– China has responded by pursuing its "strings of pearls strategy". It is building naval power and seeking alternate supply routes that are less susceptible to interruption by U.S or other hostile powers.

Kaplan posits that the Indian Ocean region will be the "center of gravity" of world powers and a zone of conflict in the future. It is here that interests and influence of India, China and United States converge and diverge, thus setting in motion changes in international system beyond the control of these nations. It is in these crucial regions that battles for democracy, energy resources and religious freedom will be fought and it is here, that the U.S. must direct its foreign policy focus.

This active and more visible engagement by China in a region considered its "backyard" by India, has led New Delhi to compete with China, as Indian planners are

now looking beyond their immediate neighborhood. India is now competing with China for influence in Myanmar and to counter its initiatives around the Bay of Bengal by strengthening ties with Vietnam and Indonesia in the South China Sea. Additionally, India is investing in its naval power by developing a blue water navy, which will give it the means to defend its own energy routes and perhaps in future it may threaten China in case of a confrontation.

The futuristic thesis put forward by Kaplan, is rooted in realism and history. At each point along his long journey the varying mixtures of fast spreading capitalism, cultural diversity, ethnic tensions, ecological strains and political turmoil shape the evolving story. These factors along with strategic moves and counter moves by the various powers add critical weight to the Kaplan thesis. The author admits that U.S. cannot avoid its own decline, and it is not the question of preventing China and India from rising, but it is about managing the transition from a uni-polar world to a multi-polar international system.

This book is a mix of first-person travel reporting, brief historical sketches, and deep and wide-ranging strategic analysis. Kaplan provides an on-the-ground outlook of most volatile countries in the region, beset by weak infrastructures and young populations attracted to extremism. The text contains few but critical short-comings. Kaplan makes sweeping conclusions or generalizations on occasion, without backing these statements with concrete evidence or logic of argument. Among many others, these generalizations include the idea that for the West, democracy is an end to itself, while in the Middle East the goal is justice (not democracy) through religious and tribal authority. While in another chapter, he opines that to resolve issues in Afghanistan or Pakistan, U.S. must solve for both Afghanistan and Pakistan to implement a solution for either. On various occasions he portrays states such as Pakistan, as ‘artificial constructs’ of colonial powers.

One crucial shortcoming of a book, written from a realist perspective is that it offers too much hope and optimism about the future of India; while it ignores socio-economic challenges besetting Indian state and society. The possibility of close naval cooperation between declining America and rising India and China, for pursuing their shared interests in trade, development and opposition to piracy in the ocean is also an exaggerated notion considering the fact that, these states are also locked in intense security competition across the wider Indian Ocean region.

Though primarily written as a wakeup call for U.S. foreign policy establishment, it also awakens the ordinary reader to the monumental changes awaiting us.