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Book Review

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Robert D. Kaplan, *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power*. Random House, 2010, p. 366, ISBN 978-1-4000-6746-6.

Sardar K.M. Panikkar, statesman, diplomat, and historian must be counted as one of independent India's unsung visionaries. In 1945 he wrote a monograph titled *India and the Indian Ocean*, read more by foreign scholars than Indians, in which he argued that the European geo-political thinkers were so fixated on the Eurasian-African ''world island'', whose political boundaries were marked by the Pacific and Atlantic, that the spatial dynamics of the Indian Ocean had consistently failed to attract their attention. After describing its seas, bays, islands, archipelagos and meteorology, Panikkar observes: ''Partly as a result of the monsoons, and partly as a result of the earlier growth of civilization, the Indian Ocean was undoubtedly the first centre of oceanic activity''.

Now, 65 years later, we have an American author, Robert D. Kaplan, who makes a determined attempt to re-focus the attention of his countrymen from the Atlantic and Pacific to the Indian Ocean; and to impress upon them, the criticality of this region to the future of US power. Kaplan takes the reader on a whirlwind voyage

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across the ''rimland of Eurasia'' to elucidate his prediction that this part of the world, where the Indian Ocean and the western Pacific intersect, will be ''a hub of the 21st century world''.

Writing for the February 2009 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, Kaplan had given advance notice of his forthcoming book, by way of an incisive and unusual piece titled ''Center Stage for the Twenty-first Century: Power Plays in the Indian Ocean''. This tract became an instant hit amongst maritime security *aficionados* on the think-tank circuit, because it viewed the Indian Ocean through a new lens, and urged a radically different US approach to our part of the world. However, written in the somewhat glib and clichéd style made popular by Thomas Friedman's *The World is Flat*, this piece provided merely a tantalizing glimpse into Kaplan's substantive and thought-provoking work, *Monsoon*, that has followed in 2010.

For most Indians, ''monsoon'' signifies the end of a long, hot, stifling summer, and a few months of welcome rains. The timing of the monsoons' arrival in India, and the quantum of precipitation they bring, bears not just on the fortune of farmers, the price of food and the economic prognosis but very often even on the fate of a government. But that is not the monsoon Kaplan is chasing.

Since five million years, seasonal winds have been blowing, with clockwork regularity, across the Indian Ocean; from the southwest from April to October, and from the north-east for the rest of the year, thus enabling masters of sailing vessels to calculate, with reasonable accuracy, the departure and return dates of voyages to and from the lands of spice. This cyclic weather-phenomenon, known to mariners as the ''monsoon winds'', is the metaphor Kaplan uses in his investigative travelogue which highlights the key role played by the Indian Ocean in propagating trade, culture, unity and progress – in other words, ''globalisation'' even before the term was coined.

Today, the Indian Ocean is where, according to Kaplan, ''the rivalry between the US and China interlocks with the regional rivalry bcetween China and India''. It is also the arena where America's struggle against Islamic terrorism, including its attempts to contain Iran, is being played out. The US Navy and Marine Corps vision statements of 2008 clearly indicate a historic shift of emphasis from the North Atlantic and Europe to the Indian Ocean and West Pacific, because they will be the theatres of future conflict and competition. The book's sub-title, *The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power*, neatly encapsulates its essential underlying concern, about US power.

Authors like Friedman, Bill Emmot and Fareed Zakaria have, for the past few years, been prognosticating a ''post-American'' world, which will see not just the rise of Asia but the ''rise of the rest''. But Kaplan has a different set of propositions to offer. The Western hemisphere and Europe, having seen many wars hot and cold during the 20th century are, according to him, losing salience, and will no longer be the focus of great-power politics. At the same time, he posits, that the ''Greater Indian Ocean'', an area extending from the Horn of Africa to Indonesia, is going to take centre-stage in world affairs, a role which had, so far, been monopolised by the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans.

In an evocative turn of phrase, Kaplan describes the Indian Ocean as ''more than just a geographic feature . . . [it] is also an idea. It combines the centrality of Islam with global energy politics and the rise of India and China to reveal a multilayered, multipolar world''. Noting the dramatic economic growth of India and China, Kaplan points to the equally dramatic military ramifications of this development, and suggests that the growth of their respective navies is attributable as much to concerns regarding security of trade and energy on the high seas, as to great-power aspirations of these two neighbours. Zeroing-in on the densely populated littorals of the IOR, ''the Eurasian rim'', as the future locale of economic and military activity, he pinpoints them as the setting where global phenomenon like population growth, climate change, fresh water conflicts and extremist politics will be played out.

The 500-year era of Western domination of Asia, which commenced with the arrival of Vasco da Gama off Calicut in 1498, says Kaplan, is now in a state of terminal decline, due partly to Europe and America's economic travails, and partly to the rise of China and India. The consequent power-shift and accompanying uncertainty, however, comes at a particularly difficult juncture for the Indian Ocean region (IOR) because of turbulence in the Islamic world from Somalia to Indonesia, the Af-Pak problems, and the volatility in Myanmar. But what truly worries Kaplan (and the USA), however, is the inexorable rise of China's economic and military power, at a time when the USA seems to be past its prime; and there is no clearer manifestation of this than the ''. . . gradual loss of the Indian and western Pacific oceans as veritable American military lakes after more than 60 years of near-total dominion . . .''.

As he compares the dwindling number of ships in the US Navy (down from a post-WWII high of 6700 to a current 280) with the PLA Navy's ambitious warship

building programmes, it is obvious that Kaplan mourns the impending demise of the six decade long *Pax Americana.* Although, by far, the world's most powerful maritime force for the foreseeable future (more aircraft-carriers and nuclear submarines than the rest of the world's navies put together), the US Navy still worries about asymmetric capabilities, and the ''creative combination of naval, economic and territorial power'' that can contribute to an adverse battle-space for it in Asia.

Paraphrased, this means that if tiny Vietnam could play havoc with a Superpower in the 1960s and 70s, just think of the menace that a billion-strong China, with a booming economy and overweening ambition can pose in the 21st century. While China's nuclear weapon and space capabilities loom large in the background, it is the steadily growing reach and punch of the PLA Navy that causes concern. But are these concerns well founded, or merely bogeys raised by Admirals seeking to eke out more defence dollars?

In Kaplan's reckoning, China's maritime ambitions have been severely constrained by ''the first island chain'' comprising Japan, the Ryukus, the Korean peninsula, Taiwan, the Philippines, Indonesia and Australia, with Taiwan threateningly poised to dominate China's bulging seaboard. Should Taiwan be absorbed into the mainland, it will not just remove the ''unsinkable aircraft carrier'' from China's doorstep, but also liberate it from a physical and psychological barrier which has constricted its freedom of action in the Pacific. China will then feel free to launch its two-ocean grand strategy in the Pacific as well as Indian Oceans, and thereafter to a stake genuine claim to great-power status.

So how should America respond when its worst fears come true, and a multipolar world re-emerges, with China as a major rival? Should Uncle Sam emulate St. George and make a frontal charge at the dragon? Or is Kaplan expressing a subliminal acceptance of the inevitable when he suggests that China's naval rise can present the US with ''great opportunities'', and that since China's interests are ''not dissimilar to America's'', their navies may be able to cautiously craft collaboration in many maritime areas. After that breathtaking leap of faith, the author provides a neat alibi for China by declaring that ''full-fledged Chinese naval bases in places like Gwadar and Hambantota would be so provocative to the Indians that it is frankly hard to foresee such an eventuality''.

Kaplan then goes on to tear down the ''string of pearls'' theory, propounded and propagated by the US intelligence community through a consulting firm, by

postulating that China neither needs nor seeks ''naval bases'' in the IOR, but merely ''access'' to friendly harbours, and this purpose may well be served by ports like Gwadar and Hambantota which will be innocuous looking ''dual-use civil-military facilities where basing arrangements will be implicit rather than explicit''.

It is tempting to accept, at face value, Kaplan's reassuring thesis that we are unlikely to witness either a cataclysmic Mahanian clash in the Pacific between the US and Chinese navies, or even a serious PLA Navy attempt to establish its presence in the Indian Ocean. One is, however, left with a nagging doubt, that the author is dissembling, and about what his bottom line is.

In the final analysis, Kaplan could well be considered a sheep in wolf's clothing. He suggests that marshalling a concord of Asian nations against China would risk unnecessarily alienating it, and since the US ''cannot take on the world by itself'', it must do all it can to placate China and find commonalities with it. This, he says, can best be done through the two navies acting as the ''leading edge of cooperation'' in an endeavour to establish a stable and prosperous multi-polar system.

How far, then, is the US willing to take such cooperative measures? According to the former Commander Pacific Command, Admiral Keating, the issue of sharing responsibility for the Pacific and Indian Oceans, between the US and PLA navies was discussed during his 2009 visit to Beijing. As Kaplan points out, the former US CNO, Admiral Mullen's, 2006 appeal for constituting a multi-national ''1000-ship navy'' was a ''realistic response to America's own diminished resources''.

Kaplan concludes on a rather intriguing note with the inchoate, if not altogether naive, suggestion that as the resources of a US Navy in ''elegant decline'' become increasingly inadequate to cope with the global challenges, the historic European/American domination of the IOR should be replaced by an ''American-Indian-Chinese condominium''. He seeks to bolster this suggestion with the unorthodox argument that since America has tensions with Islam, and an often quarrelsome relationship with both Europe and Russia, it ''must do all it can to find commonality with China''.

While one may have reservations about Kaplan's analysis of the current geo-politics of the IOR and his prognosis for the future, his investigative odyssey along this strategic coastline, from Oman to Indonesia and back again to Zanzibar with stops in Baluchistan, Gujarat, Sri Lanka and Myanmar is an impressive feat. His painstaking historical research is apparent in the manner in which he frequently cites

The Luciades while describing the advent of the Portuguese into the East. Written by Luiz Vaz de Camoes, scholar, soldier of fortune and mariner, this epic poem of Portuguese naval conquests in the Indian Ocean is mainly a panegyric to Vasco da Gama's fortitude, endurance and exploits.

Described as ''an early attempt to get around the overwhelming power of Islam in the middle-east'' the entry of the Portuguese foray into the Indies, according to Kaplan, took place at a juncture of power vacuum in ''Ottoman Turkey, Safavid Persia and Ming China''. India was no different. When Vasco dropped anchor off Calicut, the country was divided between the Lodhis in the North and Bahaminis in the south – neither of whom had a clue about sea power.

No armchair analyst, Kaplan rides nonchalantly in rattletrap sub-continental buses in the course of his journeys, and survives arrest by the Sri Lankan army as well as an illegal night crossing of the Thai-Myanmar border to enter Karen territory. His travels and travails have produced a fascinating account that provides insights into local historical perspectives as well as socio-economic and political prospects – all with an ultimate eye on their long-term impact on US interests.

On a different note, there are a few issues the reviewer considers worthy of discussion lest the Indian reader takes away some misconceptions from a reading of *Monsoon.* The first relates to the early history of navigation in the Indian Ocean region, whose inhabitants have been sadly remiss in not adequately recording their past; perhaps a result of cultural disinclination or intellectual lethargy. They have to rely on western accounts, most of which refer to the ''discovery'' of Indian Ocean monsoon winds by the ancient Greeks, an explorer named Hippalus finding frequent mention. Kaplan, too, refers to him, as he does to other explorers and seafarers like Marco Polo, Ibn Batuta, and Vasco da Gama. He also makes passing mention of Hindu traders creating a ''Sanskrit cosmopolis'' in the middle ages, throughout South-east Asia.

The lone attempt to fill this void in maritime history has, so far, been made by Panikkar. Provoked by Sir Halford Mackinder's who says: ''Modern research has made it plain that the leading seafaring race of antiquity came at all times from the square of water between Europe and Asia . . . the Aegean Sea'', Panikkar counters:

> *''Perhaps he [Mackinder] was thinking in terms of the development of seafaring traditions in Europe, but in terms of world history this statement is inaccurate.*

Long before seafaring developed in the limited Aegean waters, oceanic navigation had become common in peninsular India".

Panikkar goes on to assert that Hindus possessed the skills to construct ocean going ships, sturdy enough to venture into the distant reaches of the Arabian Sea and had in use a *matsya yantra* (magnetic compass) for accurate navigation. He clinches his extensive arguments by stating that:

"Millenniums before Columbus sailed the Atlantic and Magellan crossed the Pacific, the Indian Ocean had become a thoroughfare of commercial and cultural traffic. The close connection between the early civilization of Nineveh and Babylon and the west coast of India . . . was possible only through navigation of the Arabian Sea".

The Chinese, too, noting a similar shortcoming seem to have launched a serious public-relations campaign, by obtaining the services of a retired Royal Navy Commander, to establish their historical *bona fides* to be a maritime power. In his book *1421: The Year China Discovered the World,* Gavin Menzies launches, with a crusader's zeal, into the thesis that a massive armada of Chinese junks led by the eunuch Admiral Cheng Ho (or Zeng He) and three of his contemporaries, sailed in March 1421 on an epic voyage, at the behest of Emperor Zhu Di, and circumnavigated the globe.

In the process, Cheng Ho discovered Africa, South and North America, Antarctica, Australia, New Zealand, and Greenland. On return to China, the death of the Chinese emperor led to the total destruction of all maps, charts and records of the armada's voyages. According to Menzies' fertile imagination, these Chinese fleets blazed all the trails, and made all the discoveries for which history has subsequently given credit to Bartolommeo Diaz, Vasco da Gama, Magellan, Columbus, and Captain Cook. This far-fetched tale rests on the thesis that the Iberian, Venetian and English navigators used copies of charts that were purloined by an Italian while Cheng Ho was in the Indian port of Cochin!

Like many others, Kaplan too has obviously swallowed this sea-yarn because Cheng Ho finds frequent mention in his book. Noteworthy for Indian strategists is the thoughtful manner in which the Chinese leadership has packaged and sold the

nation's maritime build-up in the best traditions of corporate giants. It includes force-planning, hardware acquisition, doctrine formulation and strategy evolution; all underpinned by the necessary ''grand historical narrative'' created around the exploits of Admiral Cheng Ho, embellished and marketed by Gavin Menzies.

Another issue relates to the absence of an Indian Ocean identity – so much so that it requires an outsider like Kaplan to remind us that this is the only region which is not depicted in a separate map in most current atlases. One of the reasons for this is that the colonial powers did not wish to accord the Indian Ocean the status of a regional entity. The imperialists considered it their prerogative to not only draw and re-draw boundaries (many in straight lines cutting across ethnic and tribal boundaries) and create nations to suit their designs, but also to allot arbitrary geographic nomenclature like the ''Near East'', ''Middle East'' and ''Far East'' to the non-Western world.

In the post-WWII US-centric world, a new entity named the Asia-Pacific was created to facilitate America's entry into these parts. This was further sub-divided into North-east Asia, South-east Asia and South Asia. The USA then went on to apportion the world amongst the satraps or Commanders-in-Chief of its unified military commands so that its security interests in every region could be safeguarded. In this dispensation, the IOR has been neatly trifurcated between Pacific, Central and Africa Commands, so that security and even diplomatic issues can be conveniently handled by them. This single factor has militated strongly against the concept and notion of a cohesive IOR entity and is something that will need to be changed.

Even as Indians speculate and agonise over China's long-term intentions and strategies, our political establishment is unable to wrench itself away from the rough and tumble of domestic politics for long enough to plan for any future beyond the next election. The diplomats are, in any case, spread very thin on the ground and lacking higher political direction, quite happy to dispense with strategic planning and remain reactive. Evidence is available of this in Kaplan's regional survey, and I will cite just two examples here.

In Sri Lanka, Kaplan acknowledges that the strategic Hambantota seaport (just like Gwadar in Baluchistan) being financed and built by the Chinese, may one day be used as a docking and refuelling station for the PLA Navy, and remarks on the far-reaching impact of Chinese arms assistance in the destruction of the LTTE. India is mentioned only in the context of its ''disastrous military intervention'' in 1987 and

the 1998 Free Trade Agreement. In actual fact, treading a thin political line, India had rendered, on a sustained but low-key basis, crucial assistance to the Sri Lankan armed forces, in terms of hardware, intelligence, imagery and aerial reconnaissance. However, this significantly helpful and neighbourly endeavour has stayed under wraps. The Sri Lankans acknowledge it openly, but we still remain coy.

Similarly, in the case of Myanmar, it was a Hobson's choice whether to continue ignoring the repressive military regime and drive them deeper into the Chinese maw, or to take a realist approach and heed their appeals for military aid. The senior leadership gently complained that they had been driven into China's arms by India's indifference. Their requirements were not extravagant, but fulfilling them has paid rich dividends in strategic terms. For example, the Indian Navy's gift of some surplus unarmed twin-engined aircraft in 2005 broke the ice and evoked much *bonhomie* from the recipients, which must be nurtured if the door is to remain open.

Kaplan asserts in the closing pages of the book that China ''is rising militarily in a responsible manner''. For all those who have been observing China's truculent posturing in recent days – over the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, the South China Sea, the fishing incident in Japanese waters and indeed the scheduling of US-South Korean naval exercises in the Yellow sea, this statement strikes a seriously false note.

China's inexorable rise poses an existential dilemma that demands a response from India's leadership. The options before India to counter Chinese threats or coercion are stark; either we accelerate our economic growth and boost military muscle and stand up on our own, or we strike an alliance with a willing partner who has convergent aims. If neither is possible, our diplomats must do all they can to avoid a serious confrontation and seek honourable accommodation with China.

In such a context, Kaplan's extended discussion of ''neo-Curzonianism'' in India must be viewed as something of a red herring. While its steady economic growth may certainly be seen as a portent of future greatness, India needs to overcome a set of concentric hurdles before it can afford to have visions of Greater India. The innermost of these hurdles being poverty with its associated problems, after which comes domestic insurgencies and terrorism, and then India's relations with adjoining neighbours. The outermost and over-arching impediment is the absence of a coherent foreign policy underpinned by grand strategy.

Robert Kaplan is a seasoned journalist, a prolific writer and a skilled security analyst. As a member of the US Defense Policy Board, he is an influential adviser to the Secretary of Defense, providing independent counsel concerning major matters of policy and long-term strategic planning. It is possible that this book is a fall-out of his labours for the Department of Defense, and his views here reflect some of his recommendations to them.

Therefore Indian readers, especially those who see President Obama's attitude to India as ambivalent, need to take special note of the messages that this perceptive observer of the IOR scene conveys. In the ultimate analysis, Lord Palmerstone prevails: friends, and even allies, come a poor second to supreme national interest. In the emerging economic and strategic environment, Kaplan says that as the US ''cedes great power responsibilities'' it makes little sense to seek confrontation with China.

The time has come for India to stop looking over its shoulder, and imagining that ''Strategic Restraint'' can be a substitute for Grand Strategy. It is time to start looking for fresh ideas, and Kaplan's *Monsoon* can be a stimulating start point.