



Book Review

Priya Kumari*

Robert D. Kaplan, *Asia's Cauldron: The South China Sea and the End to a Stable Pacific*, New York, Random House, 2014, 225 pp, \$18.00, ISBN 0812999061, 9780812999068

The South China Sea (SCS) is a water body enclosed by China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei, Philippines and Taiwan. It connects the Pacific and Indian Ocean via geographic choke points through which global shipping routes need to converge and pass. Immense hydrocarbon reserves are estimated to be located offshore within the SCS. The states surrounding the SCS are entangled in conflicting maritime-territorial claims. China's maritime claim is the most extensive of all. It overlaps with that of Taiwan and Vietnam (involving the Paracel Islands), Malaysia, Philippines and Vietnam (involving the Spratly Islands, and the Scarborough Shoal in case of the Philippines). The contention becomes more complex, when one or the other disputing state is supported by external powers like the United States. Its involvement stems from the alliance commitments and special interest in maintaining freedom of navigation and open access to the Asia's maritime commons. The South China Sea has the potential to become one of the most

*Priya Kumari is a research associate at the National Maritime Foundation, New Delhi. She can be reached at priya_10_11@yahoo.com

contentious issues in international politics due to the clash of interest between China and the American allies in East Asia. Given such a geopolitical environment in Asia, the recent release of the book by Robert D. Kaplan, titled *Asia's Cauldron: the South China Sea and the End to a Stable Pacific* is a welcome and timely addition to the ongoing discourse on maritime security in East Asia.

Through this book, Kaplan has reaffirmed the message that he conveyed through his previous bestsellers like *The Coming of Anarchy*, *The Revenge of Geography* and *Monsoon*. The message is that geography would continue to play an important role in shaping the postmodern age dominated by globalization. The author examines the geographical features of the South China Sea, and likens it to a cauldron simmering with territorial disputes among the surrounding states. This amply exemplifies the author's creativity to bridge the gap between the real and the virtual world through his writings. By making best use of his skills as geopolitical analyst, he leaves a significant impact on the reader while narrating the tale of the SCS 'cauldron in making'. He describes the Sea as the throat of the Western Pacific and the Indian Oceans, with Taiwan and Malaysia, respectively, poised as the cork and the funnel of the Sea. As a geopolitical analyst, he explains how the great power politics have played out in the past, and will continue to do so in the future. Using the Yale Professor Paul Bracken's analogy that the "capitalist prosperity ultimately leads to military acquisition" – the book draws a parallel between China's geographic location and disposition vis-à-vis the South China Sea to those of Europe and the USA with regard to the Mediterranean Sea and the Caribbean Sea between the eighteenth and early-twentieth century AD. The European countries, benefiting significantly from the fruits of the industrial revolution, used the Mediterranean Sea as a springboard to propagate empires across the world, including up to the littorals of the Caribbean Sea. Whereas, the USA, in the early phase of its modern history, displaced the European powers from the Caribbean region. The dominance over the Great Caribbean gave the USA strategic control over the Western Hemisphere, helping its eventual rise as a world power. Likewise, China seeks to dominate the South China Sea – "a principal node of global power politics" – and push the USA out of Asia. So it is a vicious circle of the rise and fall of great powers backed by a similar assertion made by John Mearsheimer, in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* and Paul Kennedy in *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*.

Through the book, the author also shares his enticing travelling experiences to the Southeast Asian states, which makes the complex South China Sea issues an

interesting read. Referring to Singapore for instance, he notes that it is the only place in the Indo-Pacific, other than Japan, where traffic stops voluntarily for pedestrians. Regarding Philippines, he quips that “despite what the guidebooks claim, there really aren’t any distinctive Filipino cuisine, beyond fish, pork, and indifferently cooked rice”.

On a more serious note, the book explores China’s ability to dominate the South China Sea and “Finlandize” the region. The term refers to one powerful country influencing the policies of its smaller neighbours. (Originally, it refers to the influence of the Soviet Union on Finland’s policy making during the Cold War.) China has doubled its per-capita income in a decade. The Great Britain and America could only achieve this in six and five decades respectively. Although, China is capable of exerting significant influence on the South China Sea littorals, it may be difficult for it to “Finlandize” the region as a whole. The author narrates a discussion with Szu-yin Ho, the Professor of Taipei’s National Chengchi University, who says that that it may not be feasible for China to “Finlandize” Taiwan due to lack of a common border. The author extrapolates the discussion to Vietnam. In this context, the anxiety of Vietnam is premised on the fact that it shares an extensive land border with China. In any case, it would not be easy for China to exert an overwhelming influence upon the South China Sea littorals due to the large geographical distances involved.

The book goes beyond what China’s aspires to do in South China Sea and looks into the response of other regional stakeholders, including Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, Taiwan and Borneo. The book whets the appetite of the readers by labelling the chapters on Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines and Taiwan as the concert of civilization, the good autocrat, the American colonial burden and the Asia’s Berlin, respectively.

At the outset, the author discusses Vietnam, which he labels as a middle level power in South East Asia that has the potential to take on China. But in order to do that, Hanoi needs to get its economy in order and secure American support. Malaysia is preoccupied with its domestic challenges and the complex inter-communal interactions among its ethnic Malay, Chinese, and Indian population. Hence, it is averse to any military rivalry with China. Singapore, which is passing through a phase of authoritarian capitalism and might reach stable democracy, has internalised and externalised its security. Internally, it has built up a strong army. Externally, to secure its sea lines of communication and alleviate the fear of China, it relies on the hard

power of the USA and diplomatic manoeuvres of ASEAN. The Philippines, which is among the most underdeveloped countries in the Western Pacific, is beset by significant socio-economic challenges. Since its existence as a sovereign state, it has depended on the USA to ensure its security. Washington has provided Manila adequate political and military cover to maintain a “minimum-credible defence” against Beijing. Additionally, the author highlights the positive role played by leaders of some of these countries in shaping its future, the significant ones being Singapore’s Lee Kuan Yew, Malaysia’s Mahathir bin Mohamad and Taiwan’s Chiang Kai-shek. The author notes that the hostile external environment and the internal challenges have played a key role in motivating these leaders to combine discipline with iron-fisted rule, while formulating social and economic policies.

Within the context of the South China Sea, a common thread joining all its littoral countries is the desire to secure American support to counterbalance the Chinese influence. Strategically, the USA too has shown keen interest in rebalancing its role in the region, especially in the wake of its military withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan. So in the future, is the world going to witness an all out war between China and the USA-led small Southeast Asian states? What order might evolve in East Asia? The author makes a compelling conclusion by stating that the current situation reflects a state of nature, due to the conflicting legal claims of the states. Except in case of Malaysia to some extent (due to its more pressing internal challenges), there is little ground for multilateral cooperation due to immense stakes of individual countries involved. States are entangled in what Rober Putnam calls a “two level game”, wherein internationally, they seek to maximise their own ability to satisfy domestic pressures. It makes compromise difficult to achieve. Nevertheless, it will not lead to an all out war. It is certainly not in America’s interest for China to dominate the South China Sea. But neither is it in Washington’s interest to be drawn into a dispute with Beijing, given its many financial and other stakes involved in its relations with China. Rather, both America and China will try to control each other by maintaining an advantageous proportion of force in the area.

The only shortcoming of this book is the author’s habit of romanticising history because of which the book suffers from lack of clarity in certain sections. A few examples are, the detailed narrative of the early Ming dynasty explorer Zheng He (1371–1433), the voyage of Portuguese merchant Tome Pires (1465–1540), the origin of Taiwan beginning from the 16th century, and the ethnic composition of Malaysia. However, overall, the book gives a brilliant snapshot of the conflict brewing

in the South China Sea. It is, thus, an essential read for all those interested in the study of international relations and maritime security issues – whether policy makers or the academic community – who seek to understand how power politics play-out in context of South China Sea geo-politics, which has world-wide ramifications.