

Robert D Kaplan, *Asia's Cauldron: The South China Sea and the End of A Stable Pacific*, (New York: Random House, 2014), Pages: 225, Price: Rs 499.00.

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The book under review by the famous geopolitical analyst Robert D Kaplan focuses on the aspects and territorial disputes in the South China Sea with a cultural and strategic narration. Kaplan starts with the “geopolitical study of the South China Sea with the delectable, mythic legacy of India.” He acknowledges the fact that one must not “lose sight of the vividness of India’s presence in this part of the world at a time when China’s gaze seems so overpowering.”

The author succinctly says, “The shadow of China presently looms large, but if at some point very soon China dramatically falters, the South China Sea may once again live up to its French colonial description of *Indo-China*, where China competes on an equal – rather than a dominant – footing with India and other powers and civilisations.” Alongside, the study points to a military rivalry between the US and China and the possibility of a multi-polar strategic scenario with a host of powers, including Vietnam, Malaysia, Australia, or Singapore, against each other. If history is any guide, “the centrality of one power at a time when another is still ascendant, is a symbol of surprise and possibilities yet unseen.”

In the first chapter, the author highlights a shift in the location of ‘contested areas’ in global politics since the last phase of Cold War markedly “from Europe to opposite end of Eurasia where the spaces between the principal nodes of population are overwhelmingly maritime.” Therefore, the author says there is a remote possibility of land warfare, exception being Korean Peninsula. Owing to the centrality of location and proven oil reserves, the South China Sea is likely to become “the second Persian Gulf.” In addition, the traders and merchants of the world pass through South China Sea. In Kaplan’s words, this commerce and trade has turned waterway into “the throat of the Western Pacific and Indian Ocean – the mass of connective tissues where global sea routes coalesce.” He compares China’s position *vis-à-vis* the South China Sea that is akin to America’s position *vis-à-vis* the Caribbean Sea in the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Kaplan continues with retrospective analysis of historical events between 1898 and 1914, during which the United States defeated Spain and made the

Panama Canal. This helped the United States to establish and link the trade between Atlantic and Pacific Ocean. This gave the United States control over the Western Hemisphere, and in turn affected the balance of power of the Eastern Hemisphere. On the other hand, Kaplan views that the South China Sea also links the Pacific and Indian Oceans where China wants to replace US Navy which is dominant or become parallel to it; this, because it will open geostrategic possibilities for China and will help China to achieve what America achieved in Caribbean. In the words of Kaplan, due to this, South China Sea is “on the way to becoming the most contested body of water in the world.” At the same time, the dominant presence of US Navy is in decline and Chinese navy is growing rather dramatically. It is presumed at certain point China will be able to deny the US Navy unimpeded access to parts of South China Sea. In the book, Kaplan largely touches upon the geopolitics with a mix of history and travelogue; he also points out the similarities and differences in the two cases. His lucid narration allows you to walk into the past and to the 1890s when America was stronger than Spain in their military in the Caribbean with status quo power; On the contrary, in 2010 in the South China Sea, China was weaker in military terms than the United States, a *status quoist* power. Observing about the South China Sea and its conflicts for territorial gain and the commerce of the South China Sea, Kaplan sees, “East Asia is all about trade and business.”

The author also gives the profiles of modern state builders like Chiang Kai-Shek from Taiwan, Singapore’s Lee Kaun Yew, and Malaysia’s Mahathir Mohamed. He offers examples and profiles of these personalities because in Asia authoritarian politics have borne fruit. He also quotes John Stuart Mill, Isaiah Berlin and others, and defines a “good dictator” as “one who makes his own removal less fraught with risk by preparing his people for representative government.” With all these there might be solutions for these disputes but people around the South China Sea would not want to accept those. Eventually, it will be the military and naval forces that will control the South China Sea. Besides “Since 2011, there has been much passionate American talk of pivot towards Asia”; but Vietnamese officials respond by quoting a proverb – “A distant water can’t put out a nearby fire.”

Towards the end, the author paints a conjectural scenario of the world up to 2050 with seven out of nine billion people across the world living in the Greater Indian Ocean comprising East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, and East Africa, along with the Western Pacific. The countries of South China Sea, according to Kaplan, constitute the inner points, or strategic core – the Mitteleuropa of the twenty-first century. This is the region through which one can imagine the global discourse to unfold during the next couple of decades which would largely be “a nervous”, “a more anxious, and a “complicated” world. The handy volume is a must read for strategic analysts, academia and scholars.