

**Robert D. Kaplan, *Asia's Cauldron: The South China Sea and the End of a Stable Pacific*
(New York: Random House, 2014), 209.**

Reviewed by Gulandam Mian

Robert D. Kaplan's *Asia's Cauldron* has made a timely appearance since over the last few years the world has concerned itself with the likely power shift from the West to Asia. His expert knowledge covers the regional and extra-regional powers and how they are hedging one another by strengthening relations with the littoral states that are focusing on updating their naval infrastructure. Most of the smaller states such as Philippines, Vietnam, and Thailand are looking up to the US for giving them security assurances against China. This in turn, is fueling military modernization of China. The situation is setting into motion Kenneth Waltz's security dilemma in the region. All this according to the author's analysis are enough to make it a "cauldron" on high flame and a region of future conflict.

The author's comparative analysis of the 21st century conflict in the South China Sea with the European conflict of the 20th century brings into light the difference in their geographies. China's position in the region is compared with that of Germany prior to World War 1 that was a land power while China aims at becoming a sea power. The writer foresees a similarity of China's ambitions in the South China Sea with that of the US Caribbean adventure when it kept the British out of the region, by implementing Monroe doctrine that helped it to become a world power. China thus aims at the US exit from the region and to become a Sea power in the Indian Ocean. However, the major difference between the Caribbean and the South China Sea for the author rests in the fact that the latter being home to the international shipping routes cannot be dominated by a single power.

The author's foresight unfolds a humanist dilemma in the future conflict in the South China Sea due to the absence of ideology to defend unlike in the Cold War period. Therefore, there

is a greater possibility according to the author for the intervention of the extra regional powers to be carved out on the bases of catchy phrases like feeding the hungry etc.

While discussing the problems of the littoral states around the South China Sea the author refers to the historical rivalries between Vietnam and China. The Vietnamese lay claim to the Paracel and Spratly Islands in the South China Sea and reject China's claim to the "nine-dash line" or the "cow's tongue" enveloping the entire sea. Vietnam, according to the author, is the fiercest protagonist in the dispute. Brunei has solved its problem with China, Indonesia and Philippines lack a well-defined foreign policy and Singapore is capable but lacks the geographical size to match that capability. Thus the challenge for China rests in winning over the Vietnamese support, which can make them the potential heirs to the region.

Another interesting observation, by the author is related to the strong desire of Vietnamese, Taiwanese, Singaporeans and the Philippines for the US to stay in the region to balance against China. But unlike the others Taiwan has minimum interest in getting involved in a war, at least for the present and reliance on the US is the least dependable option for them, due to the US involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, Taiwan is worried about the possible instability on the mainland China in case of the loosening central authority in Beijing, which might unleash the nationalistic forces. It does not fear finlandisation like the other littoral states by China because the two nations do not share a land border instead they have the Taiwan Strait five times the size of the English channel which makes occupation difficult. Whereas the possibility of Taiwan replicating Hong Kong has a rare chance because unlike Hong Kong the Taiwanese have a strong nationalistic feeling created in the myth of "Guomindang" waging an epic war against the Mao's Communists.

The successful experiments of Malaysia and Singapore's authoritarian leadership are also briefly discussed in the book. The Malaysian management of the cultural diversity in the author's view defies Henry E. Huntington's Clash of Civilization Theory. The state has become a liberal dream for the Muslims of the Middle East and other Islamic countries. The author believes that the Malaysian cultural diversity can be destroyed by the resurgence of

nationalistic passion that has not yet arrived in Malaysia, as nationalism is limited to its defence and security ranks. Malaysia's experience thus might become the "most revealing in telling the world how to be a mass democracy in an age of high technology." It might take up bridging roles for mitigating rivalries in the South China Sea as its domestic challenges and intercommunal complexities may leave little energy for the state to get involved in the outside conflicts.

The author compares the Singaporean, Chinese and Malaysian dictators to that of the Middle East, who have, unlike them, produced economic miracles that have led to the creation of wide scale personal freedoms despite the fact that they are guilty of many atrocities against their populations. However their final triumph rests in the successful evolution of stable democracy in Singapore and Malaysia by ceding power to the opposition.

For the author the situation in the South China Sea is more or less like the state of nature where might is right. The petty claims and issues if unresolved can lead to war if they are tied to the vital interests of powerful states (China and the USA). The US would prefer a new order based on the international legal norms that will be enforced by its warships in the region. Whereas, China demands an order that will let China be the dominant regional power in the South China Sea.

Kaplan's vast knowledge of history and geography makes him an incisive analyst of the foreign affairs. His books attract the readers, experts and amateur alike on these subjects as his writing style and analysis make the most complicated historical issues simple for the readers to understand. He has a natural flair for keeping the interest of the readers alive by goading them to intellectual deliberations. However at times the information contained in the book becomes increasingly confusing since the author is trying to put too many issues in a volume of about two hundred pages. A slightly more detailed analysis could have made a big difference. For instance a detailed discussion on the South China Sea by taking notice of the UNLOS, which is mentioned only once, would have added to readers understanding of the issues.

The most appealing aspect of the book is its realistic approach. The author does not consider democracy to be the only solution to the problems of all states in the world. He is appreciative of the homegrown political system developed by states like Malaysia and Singapore that suit the character and psyche of their people instead of replicating western democratic model in their countries. The book can be considered an excellent geopolitical primer for a first time reader who is unaware of the region and its crisis but an expert might find it a bit too basic.