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**Robert D. Kaplan, *Asia's Cauldron: The South China Sea and the End of a Stable Pacific*. New York: Random House, 2014. Pp. xxi, 225. ISBN 978-0-8129-9432-2.**

**Review by Sorpong Peou, Ryerson University (speou@politics.ryerson.ca).**

The title of this superb book and its author's name both carry the promise of a realist perspective on global affairs. The book should be read by all who wish to learn more about the Asia-Pacific region, which has seen impressive economic growth over the last several decades and many efforts at regional organization and community building. It is concerned, however, not with skyscrapers and shopping malls but submarines, warships, oil tankers, and competition over sea lanes, as well as the policies of modernizing autocrats.

Robert Kaplan, a leading foreign affairs specialist<sup>1</sup> and prolific author, advances his main thesis about the end of a stable Pacific by focusing on the South China Sea, the cockpit of increasingly intense maritime territorial disputes among, in particular, China (chapter 2), Vietnam (chapter 3), and the Philippines (chapter 7). Moving beyond a survey of overlapping territorial claims, Kaplan devotes several chapters to an often comparative discussion of political leaders in Singapore and Malaysia (chapter 5), the Philippines (chapter 6), and Taiwan (chapter 7). The first chapter sets the book's realist tone, while the last (chapter 8) fixes the impression of Kaplan's realist thinking. Methodologically, Kaplan has painstakingly assembled data from a plethora of sources, including numerous interviews with country specialists, regional experts, and government officials. He has even visited museums and archaeological sites in Asia (for example, the ruins of Champa, a state that was swallowed up by Vietnam).

Chapter 1 concerns "the humanist dilemma" in which power usually trumps morality and how the balance of power in a dynamic security system (not necessarily based on western democratic values) is "often the best preserver of freedom" (31); Kaplan's realist logic sheds light on the prospects of war and peace in East Asia. He often cites the offensive-realist work of John J. Mearsheimer<sup>2</sup> and the "classical realist" Thucydides (17-18, 22, 151-52, 180) to clarify the ambitious behavior of rising powers and the "stopping power of water" (7, 24, 44, 47, 150-52, 178).

Kaplan argues that China's actions in the South China Sea parallel those of the United States in the Greater Caribbean. American leaders, deeming the Caribbean to be within the US geopolitical sphere of interest, strove to secure the region from European interference.

The author does not say that war in Asia is inevitable, but he makes the case that it is unlikely to break out in Northeast Asia because of the "rough military balance of power between China, Japan, and South Korea (the latter two supported by the presence of the U.S. military)" (40) and the natural barriers of the Sea of Japan, the East China Sea, and the Taiwan Strait. The balance of power in the South China Sea area is more precarious, however: China poses a major threat to smaller states like Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia, to which "the U.S. military and body politic simply do not have quite the same attachment ... as they do to Japan and South Korea" (40).

Kaplan takes his realist line of argument about China's rising power in a more prescriptive direction in chapter 8, "The State of Nature." Specifically, he insists that "peace must ultimately be maintained by a balance of power" (174) and that states in the area should do more to help the United States counterbalance growing Chinese military power, rather than relying entirely on American military power—"the age of simple American dominance ... will likely have to pass" (183).

The author repeatedly, if indirectly, criticizes the non-realist vision of a "peaceful rise" advanced by Chinese leaders. He refutes both the Marxist assumption that communist states can be at peace with each

1. In 2011, *Foreign Policy* magazine named him one of the "top 100 global thinkers."

2. The work of the premier *defensive* realist, Kenneth Waltz, is cited only once (169).

other, and Western claims for the mitigating or pacifying effects of economic interdependence, globalization, international institutions, international law, and liberal democracy. For him, China's view of itself as a benign, non-hegemonic power "becomes increasingly untenable" because its leaders will do what American leaders did in the Caribbean. Instead of coexisting peacefully, communist China and communist Vietnam continue to threaten each other: "the new and enlarged Vietnamese state became a much greater threat to communist China than to the United States" (xxi), and the two communist states went to war in 1979.

Globalization has made no significant impact on the South China Sea, where territorial boundaries and disputes have not lost their meaning (13). None of the states in the area has shown more interest in acquiring *either* wealth *or* weapons—they have coveted *both*. Greater wealth has enabled them to accumulate more weapons for national defense. Kaplan writes that "the two realities I have encountered almost everywhere in the region are shopping malls and submarines" (143–44). He also stresses that economic interdependence or integration has not curbed Beijing's territorial designs. Despite the hundreds of flights per week linking China and Taiwan, the former has fifteen hundred land-based missiles aimed at the latter (150). An invasion is precluded only by the existing balance of power and a large expanse of sea.

Even if China were to become democratic, instability in the South China Sea would not be lessened. Moreover, democratization, Kaplan maintains, tends to generate and foster competitive or old-fashioned nationalism that leads to the modernization of militaries (167, 174). If democracies do not fight each other, it is largely because of the balance of power between them. "The British [for instance] did not challenge the Americans [over the Caribbean at the turn of the twentieth century], because they knew the latter would fight hard to defend the maritime extension of their own North American continent" (48).

Kaplan's arguments are truly perceptive and his book will instruct everyone interested in regional politics in the South China Sea, but I find myself struggling to grasp the realist logic of his thought. Given his admiration for Mearsheimer's work, one might think that Kaplan is an offensive realist. China would certainly like to see the United States decline and leave Asia. The Chinese could then continue to gain geopolitical power and prestige without having to go to war. Is Kaplan then a neoclassical realist? He has written extensively on the role of political leaders in the United States, China, Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Taiwan, being careful to distinguish good from bad autocrats. Just as American presidents like Theodore Roosevelt (46, 47) have sought to dominate the Caribbean, Chinese leaders are now seeking to expand China's strategic sphere of influence beyond its national borders.

Kaplan often cites Thucydides, who famously contended that "the 'real cause' of the Peloponnesian War was the rise of Athenian sea power and the 'alarm which this inspired in Sparta'" (180), and that "The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must" (18). So, too, in today's world, China's burgeoning military power, especially in the air and on the sea, is "altering the regional balance of power, something which in and of itself is destabilizing" (181). Neoclassical realists often believe a unipolar world provides the most stable system in international affairs. But, Kaplan also writes, "the age of simple American dominance, as it existed through all of the Cold War and immediately beyond, will likely have to pass. A more anxious, complicated world awaits us" (183). He sees the Cold War or immediate post-Cold War international system as unipolar, dominated by the United States. Political scientists concur that the collapse of the USSR gave rise to just such a unipolar world. Since Kaplan predicts that "A more anxious, complicated world" (179) will emerge with the passing of American predominance, he implies that a unipolar system is the most stable.

However, if such a system cannot be sustained because of the tendency of emerging powers to become revisionist or anti-status quo, then defensive realists also have a point—non-dominant states tend to join forces against hegemonic powers. Thus, according to Kaplan, "an emerging Asian power web designed to balance against China links countries like India and Vietnam in a 'robust strategic partnership'" (182).

The end of American preeminence heralds "a more anxious, complicated world," but both defensive and offensive realists agree that this new world may not spell the end of a stable Pacific, if a bipolar balance-of-power system emerges. But it is unclear whether any such system would be more complicated than the Cold War dichotomy of a communist Soviet Union and a liberal United States. Post-Mao China and the United States, sharing the same economic ideology (capitalism), may be less prone to mutual hostility or

outright war. As a realist, Kaplan may be right to stress that ideological factors are immaterial. After all, capitalist states compete with each other and also have a history of going to war against each other, as both Marxists and political realists have explained.

Kaplan characterizes his book as “all about warships, oil tankers and modernizing autocrats” (189). But what if the Asian states were all democratic? Kaplan observes that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations “is not at the level of integration of the European Union (EU), which is united by a common form of government—democracy—giving it a philosophical and hence political *raison d’être*” (174). This clearly implies that democracy can be a regionally integrating force and that democratic states may coexist peacefully, based on shared liberal values and institutions. Noting that “China today becomes less and less autocratic and less and less centralized” (163), Kaplan speculates whether, if China were to become a democracy, the United States might “be prepared to allow, in some measure, for a Chinese rising navy to assume its rightful position” (182), just as the democratic British were prepared to let the United States become the next hegemon in the Caribbean. Interdependence can restrain rising powers like China. Kaplan cites a Taiwanese professor who pointed out that Taiwan is not in the same situation as ancient Milos (*sic*; read Melos), because, in today’s “globalized world of intense interconnectivity,” Taiwan is not as isolated and vulnerable as Milos was (151). The South China Sea may become more stable than Kaplan thinks, if a bipolar balance of power emerges, but it may never be as stable as the Caribbean, where the democratic United States faces no challenges from another great power.

The author’s astute “progressive” realist analysis remains valuable. After all, we do not know whether the EU would remain peaceful, if US-led NATO were to disappear or Germany were to contend for hegemonic power in Europe. But will the Chinese quest for dominance over the South China Sea be more destabilizing than the expansion of US influence in the Caribbean?

*Asia’s Cauldron* is a compelling comparative analysis of an ongoing situation in the South China Sea with, Kaplan believes, strong parallels to the United States’ actions in the Caribbean. But the states now seeking balance against China are stronger than those the United States found in its own backyard.

Based on the EU and American experiences, as Robert Kaplan describes them, the balance of power between liberal democracies may be more inherently durable than that between authoritarian states or between such states and democratic nations.