

How geography determines destiny

Will the South China Sea be for China what the Caribbean Sea was for America in the past?

By Ian Morris



Asia's Cauldron: The South China Sea And The End Of A Stable Pacific

By Robert D. Kaplan

225 pages. Random House

THIS is the latest in a series of insightful books, like *The Revenge Of Geography* and *The Coming Anarchy*, in which Robert D. Kaplan, the chief geopolitical analyst at the global intelligence company Stratfor, tries to explain how geography determines destiny - and what we should be doing about it.

Asia's Cauldron is a short book with a powerful thesis, and it stands out for its clarity and good sense from the great mass of Western writing on what Chinese politicians have taken to calling their "peaceful development". If you are doing business in China, travelling in South-east Asia or just obsessing about geopolitics, you will want to read it.

Kaplan starts out from some basic economics. More than half of the world's annual merchant fleet tonnage (including four-fifths of all the oil burned in China) passes through the South China Sea. This commerce, Kaplan says, has turned that waterway into "the throat of the Western Pacific and Indian oceans - the mass of connective tissue where global sea routes coalesce", investing its straits, shoals and islands with extraordinary strategic significance.

At the heart of Kaplan's book is a striking analogy that aims to explain what this will mean in the 21st century: "China's position vis-a-vis the South China Sea", he suggests, "is akin to America's position vis-a-vis the Caribbean Sea in the 19th and early 20th centuries".

The parallel Kaplan draws is straightforward and convincing. Between 1898 and 1914, the United States defeated Spain and dug the Panama Canal. This allowed Americans to link and dominate the trade of the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, transforming the meaning of geography.

"It was domination of the Greater Caribbean Basin", Kaplan concludes, "that gave the United States effective control of the Western Hemisphere, which, in turn, allowed it to affect the balance of power in the Eastern Hemisphere".

In a rather similar way, he suggests, the South China Sea now links the trade of the Pacific and Indian oceans; consequently, "were China to ever replace the US Navy as the dominant power in the South China Sea - or even reach parity with it - this would open up geostrategic possibilities for China comparable to what America achieved upon its dominance of the Caribbean".

Because of this, the South China Sea is "on the way to becoming the most contested body of water in the world".

Throughout the book, Kaplan tempers hard-nosed geopolitics with an engaging mix of history and travelogue (no reader is likely to forget his evocative comparisons of Hanoi and Saigon or his description of Borneo's water villages) and also stresses the differences between the two cases as well as the similarities. Probably the biggest of these differences is that in the 1890s, the revisionist power in the Caribbean - the United States - was militarily stronger than Spain, the status quo power, whereas in the 2010s, the revisionist power in the South China Sea - China - is militarily weaker than America, the status quo power.

Kaplan is surely right to conclude from this that Beijing is unlikely to risk a military showdown involving Washington any time soon. Instead, he tells us - mixing historical analogies slightly - that China will "Finlandise" South-east Asia. Confronted by the same kind of pressure that czarist Russia applied to its Scandinavian neighbour, South-east Asia's governments "will maintain nominal independence but in the end abide by foreign policy rules set by Beijing".

Because Finlandisation is so different from the way the US threw Spain out of the Caribbean in 1898, the outcome will differ too. "But", Kaplan concludes, "the age of simple American dominance, as it existed through all of the Cold War decades and immediately beyond, will likely have to pass. A more anxious, complicated world awaits us".

These sentences might tempt readers to lump Kaplan into the company of "declinists", writers who rejoice in announcing the imminent fall of the American Empire, but that would be too simple. Kaplan is in fact a leading proponent of the theory of international relations known as realism, which traces its ancestry back nearly 2,500 years to Thucydides. He is explicit about his intellectual debt to this tough-minded ancient Greek and, like him, glories in stripping away fondly held illusions to reveal the harsh reality of governments nakedly pursuing their own self-interest without concern for values, beliefs or ideology.

It is realism that keeps Kaplan's book so refreshingly free of the breathless "oh my God it's worse than you think" prose style that mars so much Western writing on the rise of China. In its place, however, realism encourages a Thucydidean detachment that some readers will find even more alarming. But that, Kaplan says, is the way it has to be, because the struggle over the South China Sea is going to be detached and unemotional.

America's struggle with the Soviet Union raised great moral issues and fired the passions of all involved; but it has proved hard to invest the South China Sea with the same philosophical freight as the Berlin Wall, despite the best efforts of some. (While writing a column for a newspaper - not this one - a few months ago, I was firmly informed that the editor wanted "less history, more scary stuff about China".)

"The fact is", Kaplan observes, "East Asia is all about trade and business". The heroes in Kaplan's story are hard, pragmatic men who recognise this, men like Singapore's Mr Lee Kuan Yew ("head and shoulders above most other leaders worldwide in the 20th century") and China's Deng Xiaoping ("one of the great men of the 20th century"). Realists to their core, both regularly turned on a dime, ditching what had once seemed to be deeply held convictions. Neither had much time for democracy; nor, it seems, does Kaplan.

Admitting that such thoughts are "heretical to an enlightened Western mind", he writes that "if you left the South China Sea issue to the experts and to the elites in the region, the various disputes would have a better chance of being solved than if you involved large populations in a democratic process, compromised as they are by their emotions".

The solutions that would be reached, though, might not be the ones that most people around the South China Sea would want. In the course of his travels, Kaplan found the spirit of Mr Lee and Deng much in evidence. One realist after another told him that they did not wish to be Finlandised or to replace America's embrace with China's; but realism teaches us that history is driven more by necessities than desires.

"At the end of the day", one Singaporean said, "it is all about military force and naval presence - it is not about passionate and well-meaning talk".

Since 2011, there has been much passionate American talk of a pivot towards Asia; but Vietnamese officials, realists to a man, respond by quoting a proverb - "A distant water can't put out a nearby fire". Poor South-east Asia. So far from God, so close to China.

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The book is available at Kinokuniya at \$28.89 with GST.

The reviewer's latest book is *War! What Is It Good For? Conflict And The Progress Of Civilization From Primates To Robots*.