

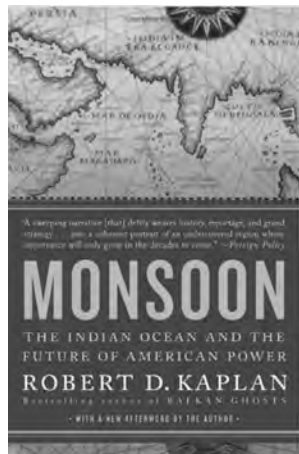
## Monsoon *The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power*

BY ROBERT D. KAPLAN

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Reviewed by James R. Holmes



Having taken a graduate-level political geography course in which the professor assigned a Robert Kaplan book as a text (*The Ends of the Earth*), assigned another to a class I was teaching (*Warrior Politics*, for undergraduate international affairs), and read still another as a primer on a region I was about to visit for the first time (*Balkan Ghosts*, for a US State Department-sponsored excursion to Southeast Europe), I can personally confirm the value of his work for students, educators, and practitioners. *Monsoon* is no exception.

Geography is central to Kaplan's repertoire. The author has an uncanny knack for conveying geospatial concepts. He compels readers to look at familiar maps anew and to contemplate how diplomatic, economic, military, and cultural interactions may play out within immutable geographic surroundings. Fittingly, he employs cartographic imagery to establish the importance of his topic, prophesying that the map of the Indian Ocean basin "may comprise a map as iconic to the new century as Europe was to the last one."

The author gives several reasons for this. He portrays the Indian Ocean region as a unified entity where the sea acts as a medium for cultural interchange. It is home to a cosmopolitan, maritime variety of Islam. The Asian order is undergoing fundamental change. Neighboring China and India are making themselves great seafaring powers at the same time, and they both discern vital interests in resource-rich South Asia. Such interests beckon their attention seaward, where ships plying the sea lanes carry natural resources and finished goods crucial to economic development.

India holds a central position in the region. New Delhi gazes toward "narrow seas" that provide access to the Indian Ocean, notably the Strait of Malacca to the subcontinent's east and the Strait of Hormuz to its west. Indian policy has taken on a pronounced east-west orientation. To enter the Indian Ocean, by contrast, Chinese vessels must transit the South China Sea, China's nautical gateway to South Asia. Beijing's policy unfolds along a southward axis. Or, as Kaplan puts it, "China expands vertically, India horizontally." That is a visual that stays with you.

Like his other works, *Monsoon* abounds with firsthand observations of cultures and societies readers seldom encounter. One personal anecdote: Over the past few years, I have written about China's "string of pearls." Beijing has bankrolled improvements to several Indian Ocean commercial seaports, including Gwadar in western Pakistan. Such projects are of interest because they could represent a prelude to Chinese naval bases in the region. A standing Chinese naval squadron at "pearls" like Gwadar could reconfigure the South Asian naval balance.

I have voiced skepticism toward Gwadar's potential as a base. *Monsoon* renders a service by confirming that analysis. The author depicts the port as a sleepy nineteenth-century fishing village where a modern container terminal has been built. It lies in a region, Baluchistan, bedeviled by an insurgency. Although Pakistani officials have publicly urged Beijing to construct a naval base there, the prospects for such a venture appear doubtful. It behooves Indian and US leaders to remain watchful, but Kaplan by no means sounds the alarm about Gwadar.

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It is worth noting that the author is at once influential and a generalist. Policymakers heed his views about the string of pearls, a "Greater China," and the like. At times, this places him at odds with specialists. Asian studies is notoriously compartmented—one is either a China scholar, a Japan scholar, or what have you. Many specialists, predictably, pronounce Kaplan a dilettante because he has not devoted a career to studying one country. I have sat through meetings where senior scholars inveighed against him for trespassing on jealously guarded turf.

As a generalist myself, I consider the broad view a feature, not a bug. This is especially true for an *Education About Asia* audience. One purpose of scholarship is to equip nonspecialists to think knowledgeably and perceptively about important matters. Works like *Monsoon* school readers' judgment and foresight, helping decision-makers cope with complex challenges and citizens discharge their civic oversight function. At its best, scholarship fires readers' imaginations, inspiring them to continue their self-education. This book meets that test.

All of that being said, lay readers may find the last few chapters of *Monsoon* tough going unless they have some background in geopolitics, strategy, and naval affairs. While best-known for his travel writing and for his *Atlantic Monthly* essays, Kaplan is also a senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security, a Washington-based think tank. These more wonkish chapters derive in large part from his think tank work. They are forward-looking and policy-oriented and thus better suited for faculty, graduate students, and advanced undergraduates. However, this detracts not one whit from the overall value of the book for teachers and students.

How does this all apply to the United States? For one thing, the US Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard have designated the Indian Ocean region one of two main theaters for exercising hard naval power, the other being the Western Pacific. Knowing the cultural and physical terrain is critical to shaping events in South Asia. Another takeaway from *Monsoon* is that the Indian Ocean is a remote, inaccessible theater. US forces in Asia are based primarily at Bahrain, in the Persian Gulf, and in Japan. That is, they are at the extreme eastern and western ends of Asia.

If China is expanding vertically and India horizontally, the US position thus looks like a vast, semicircular arc enclosing the South, Southeast, and East Asian rimlands. How to sustain America's primacy in this gigantic Indo-Pacific region, and how to do so in the coming age of stagnant or declining defense budgets, is one of the chief strategic dilemmas confronting US leaders. Reading *Monsoon* is a good way to start puzzling it out. ■

JAMES R. HOLMES is an Associate Professor of Strategy at the Naval War College and an occasional contributor to *Education About Asia*. He is coauthor, with Toshi Yoshihara, of *Red Star Over the Pacific: China's Rise and the Challenge to U.S. Maritime Strategy* (Naval Institute Press, 2010). The views voiced here are his alone.