

# Teaching Robert D. Kaplan's *Asia's Cauldron: The South China Sea and the End of a Stable Pacific*

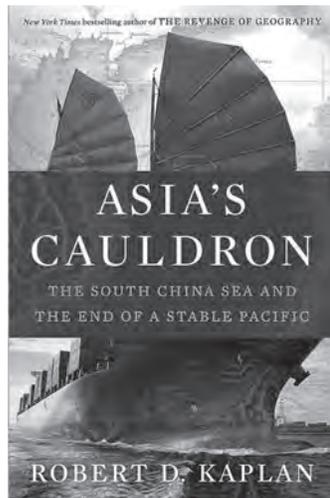
By Joe Renouard

## Asia's Cauldron

*The South China Sea and the End of a Stable Pacific*

NEW YORK: RANDOM HOUSE, 2014

256 PAGES, ISBN: 978-0812994322, HARDBACK



When Robert D. Kaplan talks, people listen. Kaplan has authored over a dozen books on subjects ranging from the conflicts of the Middle East to the wars of the Balkan Peninsula, and his uncanny ability to assess international trends has catapulted him onto *Foreign Policy* magazine's list of the Top 100 Global Thinkers. In his latest book, *Asia's Cauldron: The South China Sea and the End of a Stable Pacific*, he demonstrates that the Southeast Asian littoral may very well be the locus of the most important clashes of the twenty-first century. Kaplan's talents as an author comple-

ment his insightful analyses; his prose is lucid, informative, and accessible. The book is an excellent tool for exploring multiple classroom topics ranging from nationalism, geography, and diplomacy to military affairs, interstate competition, economic development, and authoritarianism. Most undergraduates, as well as high school students in honors or advanced placement courses, should have no problems understanding the narrative. The book is potentially useful for instructors in several academic disciplines, including history, international politics, and human geography.

One look at the map gives us a sense of Kaplan's thesis: "Europe is a landscape; East Asia is a seascape. Therein lies a crucial difference between the twentieth and twenty-first centuries" (5). Much of the world's trade flows through the South China Sea, and its seafloor likely conceals significant oil and gas deposits. Moreover, the convergence of China's 1.3 billion people with the Indian subcontinent's 1.5 billion and Southeast Asia's 600 million makes this region, in Kaplan's words, "the demographic cockpit of the globe" (9). Geography, demographics, and competing territorial claims have increased the significance of naval power, especially with respect to the disputed island areas of the Spratlys, the Paracels, and the Pratas. Yet the Western news media have underreported these nations' maritime disputes and military buildups. The elephant in the room in this scenario is the rise of China, whose trade patterns and growing air and sea power threaten the independence of the region's other states (40). Beijing is increasingly bold in the South China Sea, while the surrounding nations—Việt Nam, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Indonesia, Taiwan, and Thailand—are steadily tilting toward the United States in order to counter Chinese power.

There is some irony in these nations' desire for Washington's support. Whereas the US was forced to withdraw its military forces from Việt Nam

in the 1970s and the Philippines in the 1990s, those two nations (along with the others in the region) now want a stronger US presence. The US seems amenable to these overtures, as evidenced by the Obama administration's public "pivot" in 2011 away from the Middle East and toward East Asia. Although this pivot has been complicated by renewed Middle Eastern violence, Kaplan's long-term projection remains sound. In his estimation, China's desire for regional hegemony threatens the interests of both the US and the states of the South China Sea, making it somewhat inevitable that these nations will find common cause in checking Chinese power. Washington's Asia pivot has included joint military exercises with the Philippines, the hosting of US Navy warships in Singapore, a de facto US-Việt Nam strategic partnership, and a long-term Marine training relationship with nearby Australia.

Teachers might consider a historical comparison between China's regional interests and those of the United States. Just as the US used diplomacy, economic power, and military might to squeeze the European powers out of the Caribbean and to protect American interests there a century ago, so does China seek to push the US out of the South China Sea. (Kaplan even goes so far as to dub this sea "China's Caribbean.") China's assertion of maritime sovereignty is known as the "nine-dotted line"—AKA the "cow's tongue," so named for the cartographical shape of the claim. Analysts in Beijing assert that China's right of dominion dates back more than two millennia to the Han dynasty, and they point out that in the ensuing centuries, Chinese explorers, traders, and fishermen have charted and claimed the sea's shores, islands, shoals, and reefs (41–43). Of course, the "cow's tongue" claim is hotly contested, not least because it contradicts the Law of the Sea convention, to which China is a signatory.

*Asia's Cauldron* also illuminates the cultural characteristics, regional interests, strengths, and weaknesses of Việt Nam, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, and Taiwan. Since Kaplan gives each country its own chapter, this material is an excellent primer on recent developments. For example, whereas most Americans' knowledge of Việt Nam is limited to a passing familiarity with the war that ended four decades ago, today's Việt Nam is a potential middle-level world power, with the thirteenth-largest population in the world, over a decade of 7 percent GDP growth per annum, and a long coastline close to major shipping lanes and undersea energy deposits (54–58). There are also 400 industrial parks in the country—harbingers, perhaps, of Việt Nam's future as the "new China," i.e., a place of high industrial output through low-wage labor. Notwithstanding Việt Nam's considerable political and economic shortcomings, it has an admirable record of poverty alleviation. As one Western diplomat told Kaplan, "They have gone from bicycles to motorcycles" (66).

Teachers may also consider using the book to analyze South China Sea nations' shifting ties to Washington and to each other. The China/Việt Nam/US triangle symbolizes the region's predicaments. After centuries of Sino-Vietnamese antagonism (and a series of violent border clashes as recently as 1979–90), China and Việt Nam have solved most of their land border issues. But now, they have multiple competing claims in the South China Sea. "The fact is," writes Kaplan, "no country is as threatened by China's rise as much as Việt Nam" (63). Việt Nam's strategic tilt toward the US includes a US \$200 million overhaul of the Cam Ranh Bay port

to accommodate US Navy ships. Yet culture and commerce still conjoin Việt Nam and China, and the latter remains Việt Nam's primary source of imports. Meanwhile, Vietnamese officials do not entirely trust Washington because of its geographical distance, its occasional vacillation in world affairs, and its criticism of Việt Nam's domestic policies (64). Similarly, Washington's occasional chastising of Beijing's domestic and foreign policies sits somewhat incongruously alongside billions of US dollars in annual Sino-American trade and the large-scale exchange of tourists, students, and businesspeople.

Another classroom discussion point concerns the sources of conflict in the region. Kaplan's principal message is that these disagreements are highly *conventional*. They are not about ideology, religion, moral causes, or ethnic kinship; they are simply about *territory* and *power*. Whereas the twentieth century saw moral struggles against fascism and communism, and the last two decades have seen international efforts against militant Islam and genocidal regimes, the South China Sea "shows us a twenty-first-century world void of moral struggles," writes Kaplan. "There is no philosophical enemy to confront . . . It is all about power" (15–16). Kaplan calls this "the humanist dilemma" and explains that those who emphasize morality in international relations find little traction in this part of the world. Some of these nations' mistreatment of dissidents may arouse some activists' attention, but it has not sparked international outrage (15).

On a related point, one of Kaplan's most controversial claims is his differentiation between "good autocrats" and "bad autocrats" (chapter 5). This assertion can serve as an introduction to discussions about authoritarianism in Asian states and elsewhere. Is there a cultural basis for it? Are there really "Asian values"? Are there "good" autocrats? Kaplan's answer to this last question is a resounding yes. In contrast to the Middle East, he argues, in the South China Sea region "there really has been such a thing as

enlightened authoritarianism, which has built not only civil societies, but those that are economic dynamos and therefore primed to become pulsating democracies" (106–7). To Kaplan, the Singaporean statesman Lee Kuan Yew was the best of the autocrats ("head and shoulders above most other leaders worldwide in the twentieth century"), Filipino strongman Ferdinand Marcos was the worst, and Malaysia's Mahathir bin Mohamad fell somewhere in between (99). Lee was integral to the Singaporean economic miracle, and Kaplan argues that his story challenges the assumptions of Western humanist intellectuals because it suggests that virtue does not require democracy. To the contrary, "Meritocratic quasi-autocracy can in a poor country achieve economic results quicker than can a weak and chaotic parliamentary system" (99).

Teachers might also consider a compare/contrast between the development successes of Singapore and Taiwan (chapters 5 and 7) and the development failures of the Philippines (chapter 6). What has been the difference? Kaplan concludes that leadership had much to do with it. The Philippines have remained relatively poor despite their neighbors' successful paths to modernization and despite billions in US investment. Kaplan lays much of the blame at Marcos's feet, arguing that he "represented the worst of Spain's legacy of absolutism, fatalism, and the pre-Reformation" and "did nothing revelatory or interesting with the Philippines, except postpone the day when it might, too, become an Asian tiger" (125). Meanwhile, much like the governments in Việt Nam and Singapore, Manila now sees Beijing becoming more intrusive in places like the Spratly Islands, which are adjacent to the Philippine island province of Palawan, and Scarborough Shoal, which was the site of a standoff in 2012 between Chinese fishermen and the Philippine Navy. Because Filipinos still face endemic poverty and underdevelopment, they are ill-equipped to fend off Chinese intimidation. Thus, like the others in the region, the Philippines are tilting back toward the United States for security and investment. The US has responded by selling and granting more weapons in the interest of providing what one US defense official termed a "minimal credible defense" (130). The ironies of this rekindled relationship are not lost on Kaplan, who suggests that we are seeing a return to "colonial-like dependency" in the Philippines (138).

Kaplan suggests that the region's future depends in large measure on events in China. If China's economy stagnates, for example, Beijing will find it harder to get its way in the South China Sea. But if the United States economy weakens considerably or if it loses the political will to maintain its Pacific naval dominance, China will have an easier way of it. It is also possible that the US will find itself distracted by other global priorities. As of this writing, the conflicts in Iraq, Syria, and Ukraine are threatening to spill over beyond these nations' borders. If such localized struggles become regional wars, China will likely benefit in Southeast Asia. But if these are only temporary struggles—as Washington hopes that they are—then we are liable to see a long-term power struggle in the South China Sea with plenty of military and diplomatic intrigues for many years to come. *Asia's Cauldron* serves as a great source for understanding this story. ■

**JOE RENOARD** is an Associate Professor of History at The Citadel in Charleston, South Carolina. A specialist in modern history, diplomacy, and human rights, he has authored two books and has contributed essays to several journals and edited volumes. His upcoming book on American human rights policies will be published by Penn Press in 2015.

## ADVERTISE!

Choose the Association for Asian Studies (AAS), Inc. for all your advertising needs and reach the largest Asian Studies audience.

Promote your organization, market your publications, introduce study programs, announce employment opportunities, and more!

### EDUCATION ABOUT ASIA

- Articles on all areas of Asia.
- Invaluable information for students, scholars, libraries and anyone interested in Asia.

### ASIAN STUDIES E-NEWSLETTER

- Filled with news on grants and fellowships, study programs, employment opportunities, conferences, publications, web resources, and membership information.

### JOURNAL OF ASIAN STUDIES

- Features the latest in-depth scholarship on Asia, extensive book reviews, and state-of-the-field essays on established and emerging topics.
- Reach scholars and university libraries.

### AAS ANNUAL CONFERENCE

- Exhibit, advertise, and/or sponsor for an opportunity to reach over 4,000 Asianists, including department heads & chairs, university faculty, librarians, independent scholars, international scholars, and graduate students in Asian Studies.

### CLASSIFIED EMPLOYMENT ADS

- Place your text-only ads on the AAS website, in the Asian Studies Newsletter, or both.
- Posted online on the first and third Monday each month for two months.

### MAILING LISTS

- Use AAS mailing labels to reach your Asian Studies audience.
- Select from lists that are updated daily.
- Specialized sections available.

Reserve space today!

[www.asian-studies.org](http://www.asian-studies.org)