

Book Review: *Monsoon: the Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power* by Robert D Kaplan, 369 pages, The Random House Inc. New York 2010 eISBN: 978-0-679-60405-1

By Tim Lynch¹

From time immemorial the monsoon winds of the Indian Ocean were reliable sources of energy that predictably moved sailing craft of various forms and sizes across vast distances in record time. Many of the skills that are assumed in modern day sailing can be traced back to the original sailors of the Indian Ocean. While ocean seas do not record any marks of events that transpire on their surfaces, the places these ships left from and arrived at were moulded by the cargo they carried and the people they transported. The opportunity for trade across continents between empires and communities, with its potential rewards, as well as the sheer adventure involved in embarking on such journeys, are the catalysts that have motivated persons of all races, colours, creeds and nationalities to explore and travel through the millennia of time. The advent of the steam engine made some routes and ports redundant, but the desire to command and control maritime passageways and littoral communities in the Indian Ocean by nations, both local and from afar, has not diminished. It is an appreciation of how these trends have influenced our North American / Eurocentric / Atlantic, twentieth century maritime world, and how they will impact global maritime relationships in the twenty first century, that a reader will gain from Robert Kaplan's book *Monsoon: the Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power*.

The book is an easy-to-read soliloquy of the author's experiences while travelling in an eclectic sample of littoral states bordering the Indian Ocean. Kaplan punctuates a didactic account of historical, social, political, religious and ethnic phenomena that have befallen the countries he visited between the early fifteenth century and our modern day, with descriptions of his personal travel experiences while researching for this book during the first decade of the twenty first century.

The author conveys a historical, socio-political bird's eye view of that part of the globe between the Cape of Good Hope bordering the Atlantic Ocean and the Indonesian Archipelago border of the Pacific Ocean. Hanging down in the centre, like a bunch of grapes, is the Indian sub-continent, which provides a northern equatorial boundary between the Arabian Sea on its west coast and the Bay of Bengal on its east coast. Anyone unfamiliar with these regions of the world is in for a treasure trove of discovery from reading this book.

Most striking are the different faces of Islam and how they evolved differently between the fanatic Arabic versions and the secular business Asian approach. The origins of Islam sound like a divine version of the "Rotary Club" with its emphasis on good trading practices and the ethics among traders needed to build on such behaviour. The essential purpose of the book seems to be to serve as a prologue for the American establishment's acceptance of its diminishing role in the world as a "cold war" global maritime warrior protecting the American way. The strategic naval question the book poses is: who will take America's place: China or India?

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Neither India nor China seems interested in gaining global possessions in the way their successive colonial masters of the past did to their respective countries. What is critical to both nations is having in place relationships that will ensure a sustainable supply of energy, in all its manifestations, which each state needs in order to fully develop what they currently possess and ensure their respective desire for global dominance. Kaplan's narrative provides a picture of both countries going to extreme lengths to ensure and protect sea routes that feed their hunger for a sustainably supply of energy throughout the region. He provides a meticulous account of what he describes as China's vertical approach, citing first hand experiences in witnessing the development of ports in Gwadar on Pakistan's Arabian Sea shore, and Hambnatonota seaport, near Sri Lanka's southern extremity, where more than thirty thousand vessels per year transport fuel and raw materials from the Middle East to East Asia.

He describes how India is developing horizontal relationships among Middle East oil interests with its historical ties along the coast of East Africa in its western theatre and cementing its old colonialist alliances with neighbouring Bangladesh, Burma, Thailand and Indonesia in its eastern theatre, while defining its ownership around the Strait of Malacca. Kaplan explores how Indian nationalism is an impediment to the country's desire for global dominance as a tried and true secular democracy, a rare phenomenon in the region. He contrasts how Buddhism in Sri Lanka militarily defined that country against the perceived onslaught of Hindu influences coming from southern India and he provides a geopolitically explanation of the myriad of ethnic relationships among the peoples who comprise Burma.

China's investment in port facilities ensuring its gateways around the Indian Ocean is complemented by huge investment in pipelines connecting its land locked interior with critical port facilities in Pakistan and the Arabian Sea, and Burma and the Sea of Bengal. While western societies are hesitant to do business with countries that do not subscribe to "western" principles of human rights, China, and somewhat reluctantly India, suffer from few such limitations.

Over the centuries the Spanish, Dutch, British, French and American all left their mark on the littoral countries of the Indian Ocean but it was the Portuguese who initially discovered, explored and exploited its wealth. The Portuguese occupied Goa in 1510, Malacca in 1511, Hormuz (near Muscat) in 1515 and Colombo in Ceylon in 1518. Twenty three years after rounding the Cape of Good Hope, they reached Java; by 1571 there were some forty Portuguese forts and outposts in the Greater Indian Ocean. Kaplan describes Portugal's efforts in the Indian Ocean as an "English Crusade" and compares such efforts against the Muslim countries of the Mediterranean's Levant with the Portuguese taking on four great empires; Ottoman Turkey, Safavid Iran, Mughal India and Ming China, of which he stresses three, were Muslim.

Kaplan acknowledges that it was their faith that gave the Portuguese strength to endure inhumane conditions in the bowels of their carracks which, while out of date by European standards, were very successful military transportation vessels in a region that had no equal. The Portuguese's Prophet was the Virgin Mary. Notwithstanding their maritime fortitude, they were medieval Europeans coming from a society that did not have the benefit of a renaissance period of secular enlightenment like other parts of Europe. They believed that the defence of their religion through the slaughter of non-believers, which were mostly Islamists, assured them of greater glory in the next world. This reader couldn't help but get the impression that history

repeats itself when one considers the author's frequent references to the impact of 9/11 in explaining the various geopolitical imbroglios of the region.

Lessons for Canada

Kaplan provides an interesting account of piracy in the region but does not acknowledge Canada's involvement in the prevailing situation around Somalia. He reports, that Canadian interests lost out to the Chinese in developing the port at Hambantota in Sri Lanka. This is his only direct reference to Canada in the Indian Ocean. The major lesson to take from Kaplan's book from a Canadian perspective is that the Atlantic Ocean is very much "twentieth century." He predicts that in the twenty first century domestic fiscal pressures will force the US to reduce its obligations in the Atlantic in order to hold onto the Indian Ocean for as long as it can domestically justify such expenditures.

Acknowledging the current public popularity for defending Arctic coastline among Canadians, this may be a good time to engage Canadians in defining Canada as a "maritime nation." The country has to see itself beyond the political "coast, to coast, to coast" paradigm. There is only one coastline around Canada. Public awareness around maritime matters in Canada is largely focussed around the Atlantic Port of Halifax with its ties to old Europe, NATO and the European theatre. Few Canadians could point out on a map of Canada where their Pacific Ocean naval Port of Esquimalt is located. When the Royal Family visits Canada they usually visit Halifax, rarely Esquimalt. Any Canadian reading Kaplan's book has to conclude that there is a need to balance out Canada's naval culture from the east coast to the west coast. Strategically Canada should demonstrate that it belongs to the Asia Pacific littoral communities and shift its naval HQ to its Pacific coast. Or, alternative, Canada may assume that the American Navy will protect Canadian interests in the Indo-pacific region and adopt a naval role of substitute for the US in preserving North American presence in "old Europe" and NATO.

Kaplan's book provides a valuable resource of historical, cultural and policy insights of past, present and evolving maritime trends on the other side of the globe to Canada. Most of Canada's future trading alliances and many of its new citizens originate from the region. From a Canadian perspective Kaplan's book charts a direction for Canada in defining its twenty first century maritime strategy. Its bibliography offers a resource of references that could be analyzed and interpreted from a Canadian perspective. Most enjoyably, Kaplan also provides a glossary of terms that will test the lexicons of all mariners, and geo-political scientists, regardless of their nationality.