

Monsoon – Robert D. Kaplan

Reviewed by

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This book is about what the historian C.R. Boxer termed ‘Monsoon Asia’ and its subtitle is ‘the Indian Ocean and the future of American power’. Now the monsoon, that life-sustaining weather system of Asia, originating from the rotation of the earth itself, has many resonances for all Indians, so also the Indian Ocean through which western colonialism had come to this country and the armed might of the US threatened it momentarily in 1971. The only ocean of the world to be named after a country, the Indian Ocean bears out the historic fact that India in terms of geopolitics not less than in myth and legend down the ages occupies the pride of place in its littoral.

I thought of all this as this book came my way for review. My mind also went back to a study I had made for the Mauritian Foreign Ministry some years ago about the prevailing status and future prospects of the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation [IOR-ARC], a unique grouping of nations comprising an oceanic community that is rooted in history, but alas, languishing in inactivity these days.

Robert Kaplan believes that the Indian Ocean, stretching from the Horn of Africa to Australia, may become as crucial a map for the 21st century as Europe was to the 20th. Thirty seven countries, one-third of the world’s population, the heartland of Islam and global energy politics and the geographical setting that will bear witness to much of the rise of India and China – there are valid reasons to support his belief. And Kaplan, combining economics, politics and strategy, has effortlessly exercised his geopolitical imagination on the possibilities of this region.

The main argument of the book is that with the cold war having ended and the US and China in particular, and India, upto a point, figuring as important powers

in a multi-polar world, “a new and more complex order is gradually emerging in the maritime rimland of Eurasia which includes not only the Indian Ocean, but the western Pacific”. There are significant intimations of rivalry in the future between the US and China on the one hand and between India and China on the other. The latter is evidenced by China’s strategic alliance with Pakistan and its sustained effort to establish a strong commercial and potential naval presence in Pakistan [Gwadar], Sri Lanka [Hambantota], Bangala Desh [Chittagong] and Myanmar [Kyank Phru and Coco Islands], while India is also seeking to expand its influence in the Indian ocean littoral through moves to enlarge its presence variously in Afghanistan, Iran, Sri Lanka and Myanmar and to deepen its engagement with Africa. But those rivalries are also tempered by the inter-connectedness of all the three powers. China has “an intensely developed diplomatic and economic relationship with the United States”, the outlook for the future is rather for a nuanced relationship in which the “US will both compete and cooperate with China”. India for her part will never officially join the United States in any anti-Chinese alliance, much as India and the US have been drawn closer together because of China and “leveraging allies like India and Japan must be part of a wider military strategy [for the US] that seeks to draw China as part of an Asia-centric alliance system”.

It was Vasco Da Gama’s arrival in India in 1498 – an event that inspired the Portuguse bard Luiz Vaz de Camoes to romance the Indian ocean much as Homer’s *Odyssey* and Virgil’s *Aenid* did for the Mediterranean – that initiated the dominance of the west in Asia. The US has been the last of the western powers to exercise imperial sway over the Indian Ocean. With that phase also passing, Kaplan believes that the post-imperial order allows for greater structural disruptions than the cold war ever permitted and “the Indian Ocean as the primary sea of the former third world will continue to be a register of such turbulence”, with the rise of the developing world as the defining feature of the future geopolitical playing field.

Kaplan’s measured optimism about the prospects of a cooperative scheme of things in the greater Indian Ocean contains a caution that we should not take China’s political order for granted. The present technologically-interconnected world being what it is and what it increasingly unfolds itself to be through young

people in megacities across Eurasia “prone to incitement by mass media and to destruction by environmental catastrophe”, China’s one-party state may have already reached the peak of its stability. Whichever way China goes would have an impact on the region. Kaplan, however, feels no such apprehension about India’s political order. A tribute to our democracy apart – as evident in the chapters on India – it is also a mark of his affection for the country.

The book has as its core pen portraits of the prime locations of the Indian Ocean seaboard: Oman whose maritime influence throughout history has stretched to Zanzibar in the south-west and to Indonesia in the east; Baluchistan and Sindh which reveal the deep fault lines of the tragic construct that is Pakistan; Gujarat, where despite the lasting trauma and pains of 2002, Kaplan finds India’s democratic spirit alive and well, besides evidence that vision of India’s economic transformation can be constrained by the ball-and-chain reality of the Indian landscape; Bangladesh, which is the most likely spot on the planet for the greatest humanitarian catastrophe in history, Kolkata with its predictable combination of rich historical legacy and the rebarbateness of abiding squalor and misery, but rounded off with the observation that whole areas of the city are changing their appearance as it begins to look as the next global city; Sri Lanka, where the India-China rivalry is seen by Kaplan as the typical evolving Indian Ocean pattern of nuanced relationships rather than covert alliances and basing arrangements; Burma, the prime arena for India-China struggle for influence and protection of their respective, national interests and finally Indonesia, the world’s fourth most popular nation and poised to be an economic giant of the twenty-first century providing the level playing field “to establish the true vision and philosophical texture of Islam in the twenty-first century”.

The chapters on “Curzon’s frontiers” and “[of] Strategy and Beauty” contains some sharp insights, particularly for non-Indian readers, on India’s self-conception and world view as well as the country’s strategic thinking that has emanated from it and evolved since the colonial era. In his reference to Neo-Curzonism, Kaplan throws light on the fundamental nature of India’s stakes in central Asia – he does not say clearly enough that Pakistan also lays claims to the same and hence the

rivalry between the two countries in Afghanistan – and argues elsewhere that India can best project power at sea and that the Neo-Curzonist tendency among Indian strategic thinkers represents a return to the realpolitik of the British Indian rulers. Kaplan observes that although top Indian military and civil officials have plans for India’s projection of power throughout the Indian Ocean world, they also convey “a prudent sense of tragedy” in their deep worries about the feebleness of India’s borders, to say nothing of India’s internal strife. But Kaplan gives Indians credit for this, because “the real art of statesmanship [is] to think tragically in order to avoid tragedy”.

It is Kaplan’s optimistic feeling that the pre-Portuguese Muslim-Hindu trading cosmopolis [a world that Amitav Ghosh sentimentally evokes in “In an Antique Land”] is now being rebuilt in the Indian Ocean region that will remain with the readers as a durable impression. He, however, fails to mention the regional economic integration initiatives like SAARC and ASEAN where India is playing an increasingly active role. Kaplan believes that American and Chinese navies will indeed be competing for sea routes and influence, but “these activities will be framed more and more by a global civilization, the product of a new bourgeoisie that in and of itself constitutes a moral force with which to be reckoned”. Kaplan would have America learn much from the Ming dynasty explorer Zheng He “who saw military activity as an expression not only of hard but of soft power as well: to help protect the global commons and trading system for the benefit of all”.

It takes a writer of fine sensibility to include in this work on geopolitics vignettes featuring Rabindranath Tagore [“there is no beautiful Bengali landscape in his view, only the glorious “Earth”] and Abdulrazak Gurnah of Zanzibar. In the latter’s celebration of the glories of trade through one of his fictional characters is the essence of the peaceful trading that had characterised Monsoon Asia before the harshness of strife and conquest came with what Sardar Panikkar calls the Da Gama epoch: “This is what we are on this earth to do. To trade... [with] a king or a savage... It’s all the same to us”.

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