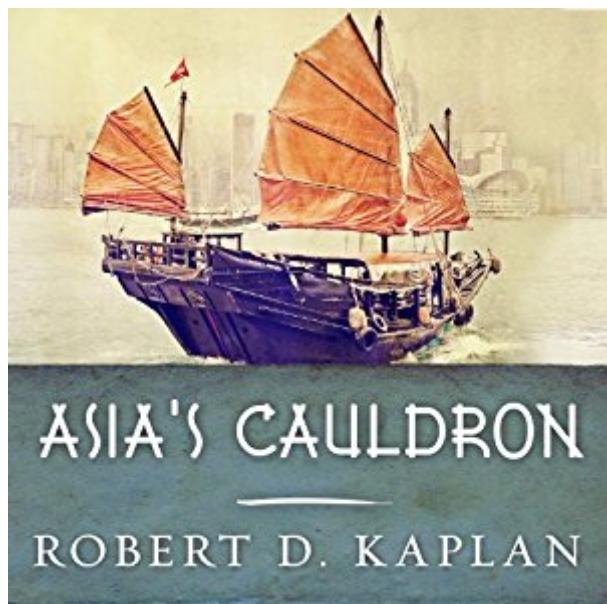


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# Asia's Cauldron: The South China Sea And The End Of A Stable Pacific



## Synopsis

Over the last decade, the center of world power has been quietly shifting from Europe to Asia. With oil reserves of several billion barrels, an estimated 900 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, and several centuries' worth of competing territorial claims, the South China Sea in particular is a simmering pot of potential conflict. The underreported military buildup in the area where the Western Pacific meets the Indian Ocean means that it will likely be a hinge point for global war and peace for the foreseeable future. In *Asia's Cauldron*, Robert D. Kaplan offers up a vivid snapshot of the nations surrounding the South China Sea, the conflicts brewing in the region at the dawn of the 21st century, and their implications for global peace and stability. To understand the future of conflict in East Asia, Kaplan argues, one must understand the goals and motivations of its leaders and its people. Part travelogue, part geopolitical primer, *Asia's Cauldron* takes us on a journey through the region's boom cities and ramshackle slums: From Vietnam, where the superfueled capitalism of the erstwhile colonial capital, Saigon, inspires the geostrategic pretensions of the official seat of government in Hanoi, to Malaysia, where a unique mix of authoritarian Islam and Western-style consumerism creates quite possibly the ultimate postmodern society; and from Singapore, whose "benevolent autocracy" helped foster an economic miracle, to the Philippines, where a different brand of authoritarianism under Ferdinand Marcos led not to economic growth but to decades of corruption and crime. At a time when every day's news seems to contain some new story - large or small - that directly relates to conflicts over the South China Sea, *Asia's Cauldron* is an indispensable guide to a corner of the globe that will affect all of our lives for years to come.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Robert Kaplan describes the South China Sea as being “as central to Asia as the Mediterranean is to Europe.” He discusses the impact of a powerful China on the countries bordering the Sea. China believes that almost the entire Sea belongs to them, and they have plenty of old maps to support their claim. China is on the rise and it is starting to throw its weight around. China has indicated that it would like the US military to pull-out of Asia and it seems to have aspirations to become a regional hegemon. China’s behavior has triggered a regional arms race and Kaplan is predicting that South East Asia will become less stable. Kaplan does not believe that a war between China and the United States is inevitable, it depends on how the US responds. He wants the US to accept a smaller role in the region and suggests that America may have to rethink its Asian strategy. Kaplan does a good job explaining the issues. Firstly, the South China Sea is an important waterway. More than half of the world’s annual merchant fleet tonnage passes through the region. Secondly, it contains a lot of oil and China is desperate for new energy. Chinese oil reserves account for only 1.1% of the world total, while it consumes over 10% of world oil production. China believes the South China Sea contains more oil than any area of the globe except Saudi Arabia. Some Chinese observers have called the South China Sea “the second Persian Gulf.” Thirdly, China is seeking an Asian version of the Monroe Doctrine, and believes in “Asia for the Asians.” Fourthly, the future of the region depends on whether the US is willing to pull-back and allow China to expand its power and influence. Kaplan believes the South China Sea is to China what the Greater Caribbean was to the United States in the 19th and early 20th centuries. He argues that the United States became a great power, geopolitically, by dominating the Caribbean. He claims that the Europeans departed the Caribbean allowing the US to dominate it. He suggests that the US should consider reciprocating in the South China Sea. “American officials must be prepared to allow, in some measure, for a rising Chinese navy to assume its rightful position, as the representative of the region’s largest indigenous power.” Kaplan has this back-to-front. The US did not chase Britain out of the Caribbean. Britain had several sugar colonies in the region and possessed the world’s largest navy. It maintained several naval bases and in 1895 it could deploy forty-four battleships to America’s two. Its ships went where they wanted, like the US today. America still thought of Britain as its major geopolitical rival at

Bretton Woods in 1944. Like Britain in the Caribbean, the US has no intention of pulling out of the South China Sea. The US has maintained a military edge over its rivals since WW2 because of its superior technology. Most "experts" in the media advise us that for the foreseeable future, China's military is no match for America's. The US Navy still relies on 11 very expensive, but increasingly vulnerable aircraft carriers to police the oceans. However, China has been developing capabilities specifically designed to counter America's power in the Pacific. The Economist reports that for over two decades China has been investing in submarines, air defense systems, ballistic missiles, and advanced cyber capabilities. The aim is to make it too dangerous for America's carriers to operate close to China. The Economist suggests that the US may find it difficult to win a war in the South China Sea. After all, the US fought China during the Korean War and the result was a draw. The US has been the hegemonic power in Asia since WW2, but it now has a rival. America assumes the right to send its ships close to the Chinese mainland, and China views this as intimidation. Kaplan believes that the US is in relative decline, while China's military power will continue to grow. He concludes that America will either have to change the way it operates in the South China Sea, or risk war. The US does not have many good options. Many of the states in the region depend on the United States for diplomatic and military support. It will be difficult to run away, as Ian Bremmer has advocated. Kaplan is hopeful that China will become a benign regional hegemon and won't pose a threat to its neighbors. Kaplan is optimistic about China, he claims that China "however truculent, is no Imperial Japan."

The South China Sea is easily becoming the most important foreign policy issue in the Asia-Pacific region. With impeccable timing, Robert Kaplan's new book, *Asia's Cauldron*, attempts to illuminate the main actors in the dispute. The book seems written for readers with some knowledge of Asia and foreign policy issues. This is both a strength and weakness of the book. The book is very accessible and Kaplan writes clearly enough for readers with only minimal knowledge to step right in. In some ways, the book could serve as an introduction to the countries surrounding the South China Sea. As somebody who teaches about U.S. foreign policy in Asia, I could easily imagine using chapters from this book on my syllabus in future years. Kaplan provides a compelling chef's tour of the South China Sea. He has a knack for drawing out the essential political and cultural characteristics of each country without veering into essentialism. I found his chapter on Malaysia ironically, one

of the less consequential disputants in the region Šč to be particularly insightful in its ability to unpack the potential contradictions in Malaysian modernity and Malay Islam. I found the discussion of each government’s attitude towards military power to be particularly illuminating. Kaplan seems able to obtain honest insights from key policymakers about their country’s relationship with China and the U.S. On the other hand, the book does not go into sufficient detail for Asia specialists (I am probably in the latter camp) or those who have studied the South China Sea for years. There is surprisingly little discussion about the territorial claims themselves Šč if anything, the book focuses on the disputants, not the disputes. He skims over important aspects of the issue, such as ASEAN’s role (or lack thereof). While he does include anecdotes about the state of military and naval forces in each country, analysts will likely long for more rigorous detail. Kaplan does not end the book with grand foreign policy proposals for the Obama administration or State Department. I think this partly reflects his admirable humility, but also left me wondering how the U.S. should proceed in the future (especially because one of the disputants, the Philippines, is a treaty ally). I certainly do not mean this to be a criticism of Asia’s Cauldron, but rather to suggest that the book will likely suit generalist readers more than Asia scholars. It provides invaluable insights into the countries along the South China Sea. Policy wonks, however, will probably want to supplement this book with a report from Brookings or other think tanks.

I wanted to like this, but was increasingly disappointed as I read. Kaplan is best when he is detailing and analyzing the relationships among the nations of the South China Sea, their strategies vis-a-vis China and the U.S., on the ground facts, etc., Even if you don’t agree with him, he raises important issues thoughtfully. These areas probably make the book worth reading once. He is much less impressive when analyzing (and praising) the single party rule/dictatorships of Malaysia, Singapore and Taiwan’s recent past and this takes up more of the book as it proceeds. In these areas, he is simplistic and his analysis is largely based on the 1980s ideology of Reagan/Thatcher with a little 1990s neo-conservatism thrown in.

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