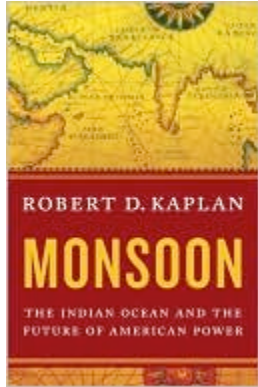




## Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power

Robert D. Kaplan

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- [Introduction](#)
- [Remarks](#)
- [Questions and Answers](#)

### Introduction

**JOANNE MYERS:** I'm Joanne Myers, director of Public Affairs Programs, and on behalf of the Carnegie Council I'd like to thank you all for joining us in what I know will be a very stimulating morning.

Our guest, Robert Kaplan, is often referred to as the quintessential journalist, travel writer, and political analyst, who is always one step ahead of everyone else in exploring how global power is shifting. In my opinion, he ranks among the very best.

For those of you who have had the opportunity to listen to our guest before, you know that he will provide a realistic and nuanced look at the changing politics of our world. He invariably introduces us to places and ideas that we would not necessarily be thinking about, but even if we were, it would not be with the same acute insight or geopolitical imagination that he employs.

History is the key to understanding his newest book, [Monsoon](#). While the 20th century is often referred to as the European century, it was also a time that saw the rise of America as a new world power whose navy patrolled the seas.

Now, as we enter this new era, the winds of time seem to be shifting towards the East, as China and India emerge to exert their influence on the world stage.

As Mr. Kaplan studies this shift, from the Horn of Africa, past the tense arc of Islam, past the Indian subcontinent, all the way to the Indonesian Archipelago, he sees this area as a place where he believes the struggle for religious freedom, energy independence, and the fight for democracy will all take place.

As he follows the monsoon winds from Oman all the way to Zanzibar, with each stop he recognizes the uniqueness of each country, but also the interconnectedness of a regional system that America will need to fit itself into if we don't want to risk losing our place in the world.

In the 21st century America will no longer act as a single hegemon, but as one of the several great powers that will manage global governance. The emerging multipolar world Mr. Kaplan envisions has the Indian Ocean as its center. Why?

For example, it is the Indian Ocean, the third-largest body of water in the world, that serves as the global energy interstate. Nearly 50 percent of the world's container traffic and 70 percent of the world's petroleum product travel through these waters. It is also where the political future of Islam will most

likely be determined.

It makes sense, Mr. Kaplan argues, that if America wants to remain relevant in an ever-changing world, we will need to concentrate our power in this vibrant, evolving geographic sphere that cannot be ignored.

While this book is a treasure trove of history, it is just as much about the present as it is about our future. If you have read any of Bob's previous books, such as [Balkan Ghosts](#), [Warrior Politics](#), [Eastward to Tartary](#), or [The Coming Anarchy](#), I know you learned a great deal about the nature of far-flung places of the world and the geopolitical challenges they present. Today I am confident you will learn a great deal more.

Please join me in welcoming one of my favorite guests, Bob Kaplan. Thank you for joining us.

### Remarks

**ROBERT KAPLAN:** It's a delight and a great privilege to be back here yet again. Whenever I think of a new book coming out, I think of speaking at breakfast at the Carnegie Council.

Let me start out this way. Where did I get the idea for this book?

In 2006, there were several articles in the *Armed Forces Journal* that mentioned the Indian Ocean but didn't go much into detail. I became intrigued.

Whenever I'm searching for a new idea, I look at a map. You know, maps stimulate me in a way that I can't describe.

I looked at a map and I said, "Oh my word, the Indian Ocean—the entire arc of Islam, from the Sahara Desert to the Indonesian Archipelago. It is literally the world's global energy interstate, where all the oil and natural gas from the Arabian Peninsula and the Iranian Plateau are shipped across the Indian Ocean, through the Strait of Malacca and Lombok Strait, up to the burgeoning middle-class fleshpots of Asia in the Chinese coast, in South Korea, in Japan, et cetera."

And there's something else about the Indian Ocean. It's the only ocean in the world that has the monsoon winds.

With a book titled *Monsoon*, in an American lexicon people hear the word "monsoon" and they think of a disaster or a storm. Actually that's not what the monsoon is only. The monsoon is a wind-and-weather system.

What is unique about it is that it is reversible. The winds flow in one direction—northeast, southwest—steadily for six months a year, then reverse themselves by 180 degrees and flow in the other direction for six months a year.

And they are utterly predictable, unlike other wind systems around the world. Because they are utterly predictable, it makes sailing distances calculable in advance. In other words, sailors could calculate exactly when to sail, and how much time it would take to get to a place. This has been the pattern since antiquity. The Indian Ocean, unlike the Atlantic or the Pacific, did not have to wait for the age of steamships to unite it.

It may be vast, many thousands of miles across from the Indonesian Archipelago to South Africa or East Africa, but it is in a way a small, intimate ocean. It's why you have large Malay communities from South East Asia living in Madagascar, right off the coast of East Africa. It's why you have large Yemeni communities from the Arabian Peninsula living in Indonesia. It's why you have large populations of Omanis from the Arabian Peninsula living in East Africa. It's why Gujaratis from northwestern India are

everywhere in the Indian Ocean, particularly in East Africa.

It's all because of the historical legacy of this geographical fact of the monsoon winds.

That leads us to another realization. If everyone was everywhere along this ocean, it kind of does violence to Cold War area studies, which artificially separated the world.

At the end of World War II, the United States found itself as a great global power and it had to manage the world to an extent, and it needed experts for everywhere. So it divided up the world. We had the Middle East, Central Asia, South Asia, South East Asia, East Asia, and other regions. University departments, think-tanks, and the U.S. government did this. The CIA, the Pentagon, the State Department especially, had different divisions for different parts of the world.

We live in a world now where South Asian energy demand in India requires Middle East, or particularly Iranian, natural gas in the future decades. It's where China is investing heavily in the Middle East, and it is particularly in Saudi Arabia and in Iran. It's where India in South Asia wants to build gas pipelines toward South East Asia. It's where the Chinese are prospecting for copper in Afghanistan.

If there were ever even semi-stability in Afghanistan, it could become a nexus of pipeline and road networks that would take gas from Turkmenistan across Pakistan into South Asia and then across to the Malacca Straits, to China, or directly by pipeline from Turkmenistan across to Uzbekistan into western China.

We are entering a world where these area divisions are breaking down. There is nothing more symbolic of that than an Indian Ocean map. Focusing on the Indian Ocean allows you to deal with the whole world without drifting into the bland nostrums of globalization. It allows you to kind of see a picture of the world while focusing on one particular area that shows that, rather than subdivisions, what you have is a flowing, organic continuum of economics and culture.

Another thing about the Indian Ocean: It shows you a different take on Islam. Americans tend to think of Islam as a desert religion, supposedly prone to the extremities of thought to which deserts give rise.

But Islam is also a great seafaring faith, with Arab and Persian soldiers in the medieval centuries, before the arrival of [Vasco da Gama](#) and the Portuguese in South Asia. These Arab and Persian sailors sailed across the longitudes from the greater Middle East all the way to the South Seas and the Far East.

If you go back and look at the book [Sinbad the Sailor](#) and Sinbad's voyages, Sinbad was an Omani who sailed out of Basra in Iraq. If you look at the descriptions of his voyages, it takes you to the Andaman Islands and the Bay of Bengal, to Borneo, to various places in South Asia and South East Asia. Sinbad was a story that encapsulated the trading adventures of these early Muslim traders.

The Islam that developed in the tropics, in the Far East, was very much a cosmopolitan religion because it was spread gradually by sophisticated traders, rather than suddenly by the sword, as it was across North Africa.

Because it was spread gradually, it overlaid neatly onto the indigenous Javanese and Malay cultures in what is today the Indonesian Archipelago and Malaysia. So it gives you a whole new kind of cultural representation of Islam.

I contend that we are going back in a way to the era before the Portuguese, to the era when you had Arab and Persian sailors all over the Far East, which is why you have remains of 8th century mosques in the cities of China.

We are back to an era when you had early [Ming Dynasty](#) Chinese navigators in Yemen, making the *hajj* to Mecca if they were of Mongolian Islamic descent, and back to an age where the Chinese are all over the

Middle East, when Middle Easterners are all over Asia. In other words, we are back to a trading system where in this case the Chinese will be the first among equals in the area.

When Vasco da Gama sailed to India, he didn't discover India. What he did was he reacquainted Europeans with the monsoon wind system that allowed him to go to India. It was Arab navigators in what is today Kenya that helped him do that.

The Portuguese were not the first Westerners in the Indian Ocean. The ancient Greeks and the ancient Romans were the first. They have even found Roman coins in West Bengal, up the Hooghly River near present-day Kolkata. This knowledge of the wind system was lost until Portuguese navigators reacquainted Europe with it.

These navigators instituted basically a 500-year domination by the West of the Greater Indian Ocean from the Horn of Africa to the South China Sea. Following the Portuguese were the Dutch, the French in the southern part of South Asia, the British, and finally the Americans in the guise of the American Navy.

But the American Navy, which was 580 warships during the [Reagan](#) era and 350 warships during the [Clinton](#) era, and now down to 286 warships, and maybe going down to 250 if you trust the Congressional Budget Office and other studies, means that maybe we are slowly passing out of the era of complete domination by the West and going back to the pre-da Gama era, where this trading system will be in the hands of the indigenous countries.

When I speak of the Greater Indian Ocean, I include the western Pacific too. There are feasibility studies and visions of building a canal across the Kra Isthmus in southern Thailand, of land bridge projects using rail and roads to take cargo from the Bay of Bengal side of the Malay Peninsula to the South China Sea side of the Malay Peninsula. Dubai Ports World and some others are doing feasibility studies on this. In other words, the Indian Ocean does not have to be totally dependent on the Strait of Malacca to connect it with the western Pacific, and the western Pacific and the Indian Ocean could be more of an organic continuum.

In thinking strategically about the Indian Ocean, look at it this way. Think of China moving vertically south and India moving horizontally east and west and in the course of that overlapping.

When I talk about the rivalry—and I use the word rivalry, not conflict—between India and China, I am talking about a rivalry that has very little history behind it. India and China developed separately two great world civilizations separated by the Himalayas. It's not a hot-blooded dispute, like between India and Pakistan. Buddhism spread from India to China in the early modern centuries.

It's a rivalry that has come about because of the shrinkage of distance caused by the advancement of military technology. You now have Chinese airfields in Tibet with fighter jets whose arc of operations theoretically includes India. It's a rivalry because you have Indian warships in the South China Sea and Chinese warships in the Indian Ocean. In other words, their military arc of operations and economic operations have spread so that each one layers on top of the other.

It's a rivalry that will ultimately be held in check because India and China will constitute the world's greatest trading relationship. Their economies are very complementary.

But let me go back to China moving south, and India moving east and west.

China does not have a coastline on the Indian Ocean, but the Indian Ocean was never far from China's gaze, going back to the Early Modern era. Early Ming Dynasty explorers got as far as the Red Sea and Yemen.

China is presently building or helping to build deep-water ports in Gwadar in Pakistan, in Chittagong in Bangladesh, in Kyaukphyu in Burma, and in Hambantota in the southern tip of Sri Lanka. All these ports

are described in the book. I visited them.

In fact, I was arrested in Sri Lanka for sneaking onto the construction site of the Hambantota seaport. I was held in jail for one night and was treated very well and was released the next morning due to the intercession of the American Defense Attaché in Colombo. But the fact that I was arrested is an indication of how sensitive some of these projects are.

I saw hundreds of Chinese engineers, with hardhats and all, directing literally whole armies of dump trucks, moving earth from the bottom of this vast pit that stretched to the horizon to the top of the pit. They were literally moving the coast inland by several hundred yards.

At the same time that China is building these new state-of-the-art ports, it is providing significant military and economic aid to all of these countries where they are building the ports.

What is China's goal? Does China want to have naval bases in these places? I don't believe so. To have permanent naval bases in any of these ports would be too provocative to India. China is at pains to convince people that its military and economic rise is benevolent and non-hegemonic.

What China envisions—first of all, there are disputes within the Chinese policy community about this. There are arguments about what to do with Gwadar now that it is finished.

The Chinese policy community is pretty united that they need to build roads and pipelines across Burma to get natural gas from the natural gas fields in the Bay of Bengal into China without having to go through the Strait of Malacca. The Chinese are too dependent on the Strait of Malacca. [Hu Jintao](#) has spoken about a "Malacca dilemma" for the country.

They are building these ports with the hope that they can have warehousing and throughput facilities for their commercial goods for sale to the Middle East and East Africa, and also visitation rights and bunkering rights for their merchant fleet and their naval warships on occasion. In other words, it would be the 21st century equivalent of 19th century British coaling stations across the Indian Ocean.

If you were China and you had their terrible 19th and early-20th century history, when there were all these territorial depredations against you by the countries of the West, Japan, and Russia, you would not want to trust the U.S. Navy forever to protect the sea lines of communication linking your oil and natural gas from the Greater Middle East to China. You would one day hope to have a blue-water oceanic navy to protect your own sea lines of communication. These Indian Ocean ports will be part of the story.

At the same time that China is building these ports, the Indians feel somewhat surrounded and threatened by them. India has been building up a big naval base at Karwar, south of Mumbai, on the Konkan coast of western India, as sort of a response to Gwadar, the Chinese-Pakistani port near the entrance to the Strait of Hormuz.

India is moving east and west. One figure from history who has become more relevant in the last 20 years in Indian elite policy circles is Lord [George Nathaniel Curzon](#), the Viceroy of India from 1899–1905.

Curzon may have been British, but he looked out on the world from the same geographical perspective as Indian elites do today. Curzon's India was a greater India. It included Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Burma. This India, in Curzon's view, required shadow zones of influence, especially in the Iranian Plateau, in the Persian Gulf, in Central Asia, and in South East Asia all the way to the Gulf of Siam.

It's interesting how India is putting emphasis on these same shadow zones of influence.

India is helping Afghanistan build roads into Iran so that Afghanistan can be more dependent on Iran and thus less dependent on Pakistan. India needs Iran as a partial check against Pakistan.

India is a democratic country, with Western values—or indigenous Indian values I should say—but at the same time India has no choice but to do business with one of the world's most oppressive, benighted military dictatorships in Burma. This is because the Chinese are building roads and rail lines throughout Burma.

The Chinese foreign policy is not like American foreign policy or Soviet foreign policy. American and Soviet foreign policy was a missionary foreign policy—the Soviets promoting communism; the Americans under Democrats or Republicans promoting democracy, democratic capitalism, and civil society.

Chinese foreign policy is mainly motivated by the hunger for strategic minerals, hydrocarbons, oil, natural gas, and strategic metals. Burma is abundant in all of these. It is abundant in natural gas, uranium, timber, hydropower, and many other natural resources.

India simply does not have the luxury and stands aside while China makes Burma a veritable satellite. It has to do business with Burma. So India has relationships with the Burmese military and is doing business with Burma. It can't stand aside from half-a-world away and make moralistic pronouncements about the regime in Burma, the way that the United States has the luxury to do. So you have this competition between India and China in Burma.

You have India thinking in the long run that they will have to do more business with Iran and with the Persian Gulf. Remember that global energy needs are going to increase by 45 percent by 2030, and half of that is going to come from India and China, and much of that is going to come from the greater Middle East—from Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Iraq.

One of the reasons I am emphasizing the sea so much is that, even in this jet and information age, 90 percent of all commercial goods travel by sea.

Americans have had their heads focused on two messy land wars in Iraq and Afghanistan over the past decade. But the future of military activity—I say activity, not necessarily warfare—will be maritime, because military activity tends to follow trade and economic activity.

That brings me to make one of the central theses of this book, which is that the sum total effect of the Iraq and Afghan wars has been to fast-forward the arrival of the Asian century. By "Asian" I mean South Asia and East Asia. And I don't mean only in economic terms, which is something that we already know about. In fact, the Asian economies and militaries have been growing since the late 1970s.

It's not just China. India is on its way to being the third-largest navy in the world. So-called quasi-pacifistic Japan, which gives only 1.5 percent of its GDP to the military, has 123 of the most modern state-of-the-art warships. That makes it four times larger than the British Royal Navy before Britain announced its massive defense cuts of two weeks ago.

China will have more submarines than the United States in about another 15 years. Navies and air forces that go with them—naval and air platforms—are enormously expensive. The price tag on the latest destroyer is about \$4 billion, the latest aircraft carrier \$12 billion, and the latest fighter jet is over \$100 million. If your economy stays wobbly and just keeps growing at 1–2 percent a year, sooner or later your navy and air forces are going to be cut down because of political pressure.

But if your economy has been growing by 10 percent a year for the last 30 years, and can even weather a global recession where it grows at 6–7 percent a year, you are going to be closing the gap with countries in terms of air and naval platforms.

Let me tell you about three things here. I've got another five minutes. Let me start with Sri Lanka, go to Taiwan, and end with the South China Sea, which is in the purview of this Indian Ocean book.

The [Sri Lankan civil war](#) ended in May 2009. I was there. I saw it happen. It ended very decisively. The

government in the south decisively defeated the Tamil rebels in the north.

What went uncovered in the world media is that in essence China won the war, because what happened was that for years Western governments, including the United States, had withdrawn much military and economic aid from the Sri Lankan government because of massive alleged human rights disputes.

China moved in, filled the gap, supplied everything from knockoffs of AK47 assault rifles at roadblocks, all the way up to fighter jets, advice, diplomatic support, and signed an agreement to build the Hambantota seaport in 2007. So the Sri Lankan government ended the war somewhat beholden to China. But I don't believe that China will build a naval base in Hambantota because that would be too provocative to India.

Why is Sri Lanka important? Because it is right at the crux of the great international sea lines of communication. It's where tens of thousands of ships and merchant vessels pass each year. In this new geographic I'm detailing, Sri Lanka is going to be a very important major player.

Just as China probably won't build a naval base at Hambantota, the Americans will probably not open up a new naval base at Cam Ranh Bay in Vietnam.

Because of this new world we're entering, Vietnam, lo and behold, is about to become a great new military ally of the United States. In the last six weeks, the USS *George Washington*, a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, visited Vietnam; the USS *John McCain*, a guided missile destroyer, visited Vietnam. We are giving the Vietnamese nuclear power.

U.S. officials tell me that the most disorienting thing about East Asia is that when you go to East Asia, the most friendly people, who want to do the most for you, especially in the military-to-military context, are the Vietnamese. It's precisely because the Vietnamese defeated the United States in a war that they have no axes to grind, no chips on their shoulder, no face to lose. They can enter into an unabashed military alliance with the United States without needing to explain or apologize anything to their neighbors.

Vietnam looks like it will emerge like France or England in the 20th century, as a major ally of the United States in the South China Sea.

The South China Sea will be somewhat of a diplomatic battleground. Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, and other countries, all have claims over it. But on the other hand, China treats the South China Sea the way the United States treated the Caribbean in the 19th and early 20th centuries. From Presidents [John Quincy Adams](#) forward, they said that the Caribbean may technically be an international waterway but in fact the Americans will dominate it. That is how China looks upon the South China Sea.

Just to wrap up, in this world we are entering it is going to be one of a kind of [Metternichian](#) balance of power, where India, China, the United States, Vietnam, and other countries will leverage and cooperate with each other in some points, come into conflict in others. It will be a world where the center of strategic gravity will move from Europe to the southern rim land of Eurasia.

Thank you very much.

## Questions and Answers

**QUESTION:** I'm Susan Gitelson. This was so fascinating. Thank you. Just an eye-opener.

Can we go back to the world that we inhabit and our newspapers?

You are presenting what is really a livable view of trade—and maybe some competition, but not Japan going out, or the Nazis, or whatever it is. But in our world we are afraid of nuclear warfare. Iran, which is

in the Indian Ocean, Pakistan, North Korea—you know, there are these other possibilities of disruption of this system. And also we're afraid of terrorism, which also comes mainly from the Indian Ocean area. You mentioned Yemenis are all over, and the Saudis, and all this.

How do you factor in these major potential dangers in this almost stable, balanced world?

**ROBERT KAPLAN:** That's a great question.

It is true that terrorism has an Indian Ocean address. Piracy has an Indian Ocean address. The pirates get their gasoline from Yemen, they launder their money in the Persian Gulf, and they raise havoc throughout the Sea of Oman, the Arabian Sea off the Horn of Africa. The [terrorists who assaulted Mumbai](#) in November 2008 came by sea from Pakistan.

I'm not going to wish away these problems. But I will say that compared to the vast amount of trade that is going to occur, these problems will be nuisances more.

Let me take piracy. Piracy makes a great news story. But piracy has been endemic to the Indian Ocean since antiquity. The Romans sent out whole fleets to combat pirates.

Piracy tends to be most pronounced when global trade is at its high point, because pirates are parasites essentially. The very fact that you are entering a very wealthy trading world goes along with the fact of piracy.

Piracy also has the potential to lead to naval cooperation between India and Pakistan, China and America, because it is such an obvious example of anarchy. It is the ripple effect of anarchy on land moved out to sea.

The nuclear question is different. That's a much more serious note. If Iran were to develop a few tactical nuclear devices, that could lead to Saudi Arabia paying Pakistan to park some of its nuclear weapons in Saudi Arabia, and that could fuse the South Asian crisis between India and Pakistan with the Middle East crisis between Shiite Iranis, the Sunni Arabs, and the Israelis.

But a nuclear Iran could still be containable, because what would a nuclear Iran be? It would be an Iran with a few low-level nuclear weapons of uncertain quality with an uncertain delivery system, with an early-warning system that could be penetrated by the Americans or the Israelis at will. It's not necessarily the end of the world.

**QUESTION:** Richard Valcourt, *International Journal of Intelligence*. Thanks for another *tour de force*, Robert.

**ROBERT KAPLAN:** Thank you.

**QUESTIONER:** A couple of years ago, in this room, Ambassador [April Glaspie](#) and her colleagues posited that in the relatively near future India will take over from the United States as the essentially policing factor in the Middle East. Do you see that happening?

**ROBERT KAPLAN:** I've seen reports that by the 2030s there will be more Indian warships in the Persian Gulf than American warships. Given the naval acquisition trends, that is possible.

I think "takeover" is too strong a word. What will occur—and Indian officials have told me this—is they want to see the U.S. Navy not as an offshore balancer, because, given how involved we are now, offshore balancing connotes semi-isolationism. Instead, they want to see a U.S. Navy operating in unofficial concert with the Indian navies and other like-minded navies of democratic countries, like Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, and others.



I don't believe India wants a formal strategic alliance with the United States. It wants to remain officially non-aligned. Nor does it seek to see the United States withdraw from the region.

President [Obama](#) is going to India, Indonesia, Japan, and South Korea. What unites all these countries? The challenge of managing a rising China. That requires, not land forces, but naval and air forces in the region.

**QUESTION:** Don Simmons is my name. You mentioned the complementarity of the economies of China and India. What are the main classes of goods and services that you see each providing to the other over the next ten or twenty years?

**ROBERT KAPLAN:** India is very good in the service industry. It can help out in cell phones—all kinds of things, really. I can't name them specifically.

**QUESTION:** Larry Bridwell, Pace University. Could you comment on the future of Turkey in the context of the Indian Ocean, and to what extent do you think they will move away from Europe or stay with Europe? What is your view of the future of Turkey?

**ROBERT KAPLAN:** The Ottoman Navy had a strong Indian Ocean presence in the early modern centuries. They fought wars with the Portuguese off the coast of Gujarat and also off the coast of East Africa. The Ottoman Turks were never able to dominate the Indian Ocean in a comprehensive way because they were too much of a land power and they were too distracted by their naval operations in the Mediterranean and their land operations in the Balkans and in the Middle East.

I would put it this way. The Turks want to achieve a kind of soft economic and political influence throughout the Arab world. The Turks keep talking about how they want to cooperate with Iran; they are opening up all these new trade venues to Iran. But Turkey will be a natural balancer against Iran.

Throughout history, the peoples of the Turkish Plateau and the Iranian Plateau have often balanced against each other, and in fact in some cases fought wars with each other.

This more Islamic Turkey upsets Americans, but in the long run it is in our interest. I say this because the mere fact of Turkey's rise, which gives it more influence in the Arab world and in Iran, will serve as a leverage for more of a moderate policy, because Turkey, as Islamic as it has become, still has a diplomatic relationship with Israel, is a part of NATO, and has ties with the United States.

It is not Iran by a long shot. It can pick up the phone and talk with the Israelis any day of the week. Arab countries can't necessarily do that or they don't want to.

The stronger Turkey becomes, as uncomfortable as we are with the nature of their government now, it is going to work out well for us in the long run.

**QUESTION:** James Starkman. Despite a history of some friction between China and Vietnam, why would one assume that Vietnam would tilt decisively toward the United States' influence rather than China's influence going forward?

**ROBERT KAPLAN:** In a way because it already has. It has already made it clear.

The Vietnamese seem terrified of the Chinese. They fought a big war with China after U.S. troops were gone from the country for four years already.

The very fact that China will be Vietnam's biggest trading partner, that it will be Indonesia's biggest trading partner, it will be almost every country in the region's biggest trading partner, means that countries like Vietnam need the presence of the U.S. Navy and Air Force as a natural balancer to keep from being enveloped by China. In other words, the stronger China becomes, the more useful U.S. air

and naval power becomes to countries like Vietnam.

The American role has to be, it can't be the world's policeman. It has to find a way to leverage these countries and to get these rim-land, mostly democratic countries, to spend more money on their own defense in return for us maintaining a robust naval presence.

A robust naval presence doesn't require an extra 50 warships. I have seen plans where we can acquit ourselves of our responsibilities with a 250-ship Navy.

**QUESTION:** As a graduate of the Naval War College, also as somebody very interested in Mahaz's [phonetic] theories, what about Russia? Is the great game over?

**ROBERT KAPLAN:** There's a new great game being played out very subtly in Bangladesh, Burma, and Sri Lanka between India and China.

In terms of Russia, Russia will be—well, here's something interesting that is not covered in the newspapers very much. Russia just opened a big natural gas pipeline to China from the Russian far east into Chinese Manchuria. At the same time, though, Russia just completed a new modern highway all across the Russian far east, along the border with China but not going into China.

Russia fears China in the Far East because on the Chinese side of the border you have a population density 62 times higher than you have on the Russian side of the border. You have Chinese corporate and demographic interests threatening Russia's control of the Russian far east. Russia and China can never wholly trust each other, so to speak.

Russia's energies in the coming years will be devoted to regaining influence in its former Soviet near-abroad and Central Asia, to consolidate the Far East. I think, though, that Russia will be checked by China in Central Asia in this region.

Russia can cooperate with China tactically but can't really have a strategic arrangement with China because of geography. The two countries just distrust each other too much.

Playing out this vision, it might be useful for the United States to balance against Russia in Europe but in favor of Russia in the Far East. Why is China going to sea in the manner that it is? It's because for the first time in hundreds of years its land borders are secure.

Even [Hegel](#) wrote about how the Chinese were not necessarily a seafaring nation. This going to sea in the massive manner that they are now is something new in Chinese history for the first time since the early [Ming Dynasty](#). The only way to check it is to make China more insecure on land via Russia.

**QUESTION:** Robert James. One issue that the Democrats and Republicans agree on is security for energy. This means being free of Persian Gulf or Indian Ocean oil. Would you comment on this?

Would this really help our security, and at what cost?

**ROBERT KAPLAN:** We can't have energy security without a great navy because the sea lines of communication have to be protected.

Why is there globalization in the first place? Because the sea lines of communication, outside of piratical nuisances in the Horn of Africa and other places, are mainly secure. They are secure because we have been living for decades in a unipolar military system, where the United States has dominated the western Pacific and the Indian Ocean as American lakes.

But I'm here to tell you that that unipolar moment is not forever, that we are entering more of a multipolar military environment. Whether the sea lines of communication will remain as secure into the

future decades is open to question.

I am well aware that our economy is wobbly, that spending \$4 billion on a destroyer is something Congress is very right to protest against. A way has to be found to acquit ourselves of our responsibilities with a slightly smaller Navy.

**QUESTION:** William Verdone. You mentioned our influence over the islands in the Caribbean and then you mentioned China's influence in the South China Sea. There are many countries who have claim to the [Spratly Islands](#). I wonder if you can comment on whether that perhaps will not be a future flare-up. Thank you.

**ROBERT KAPLAN:** It could be a future flare-up because there are oil and natural gas deposits. That's why there are conflicting claims in the first place.

It is interesting. Secretary of State [Clinton](#) for the last year or two has been essentially going back and forth to Asia, competing with China. The best result of the appointment of special presidential envoys for Israel, Palestine, Afghanistan, and Pakistan is that it has freed up the Secretary of State's time to concentrate on Asia and other places. I think she is back in Vietnam for like the third time in six months, or something like that.

She made the statement in Hanoi that the United States would be glad to mediate differences on the South China Sea. The Chinese went ballistic. They announced the South China Sea is a core interest.

Had the Secretary of State made that statement, say, at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York, I don't think it would have elicited the same Chinese rebuke.

But the fact that she made it in the region, and especially from Vietnam, really showed how these will be very sensitive disputes for years going forward.

To look at maps of the conflicting claims of the South China Sea is like looking at maps of the conflicting claims of the Aegean by the Greeks and Turks.

**QUESTION:** I'm Peter Brazard. Do Chinese designs on Taiwan pose a military threat that could involve the United States?

**ROBERT KAPLAN:** Let me answer it this way. There are 1,500 Chinese missiles focused on Taiwan. At the same time, there are 270 commercial flights a week between Taiwan and the Chinese mainland.

China is gradually enveloping Taiwan through trade, through implicit threats. The way I liken it is this way. The United States became a great world power when it basically closed the frontier and consolidated the American West. The last major battle of the Indian wars was 1890, and right afterwards we started building the Panama Canal and became a great naval power.

Once China envelops Taiwan, unofficially, undeclared, to a point where its military energies can be focused elsewhere, then China starts to have designs on the first island chain in the Pacific, on having a two-ocean presence in both the Pacific and the Indian Ocean.

There was a [RAND study in 2009](#) that showed that by 2020 the United States, even with F-22s, even with bases in Japan, will not be able to defend Taiwan against a Chinese strike the way things are going at the moment.

I don't think China will ever need to invade Taiwan. It will incorporate Taiwan very peacefully the way the current trends are going.

**JOANNE MYERS:** I really want to thank you for another very special presentation.

**ROBERT KAPLAN:** Thank you.

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