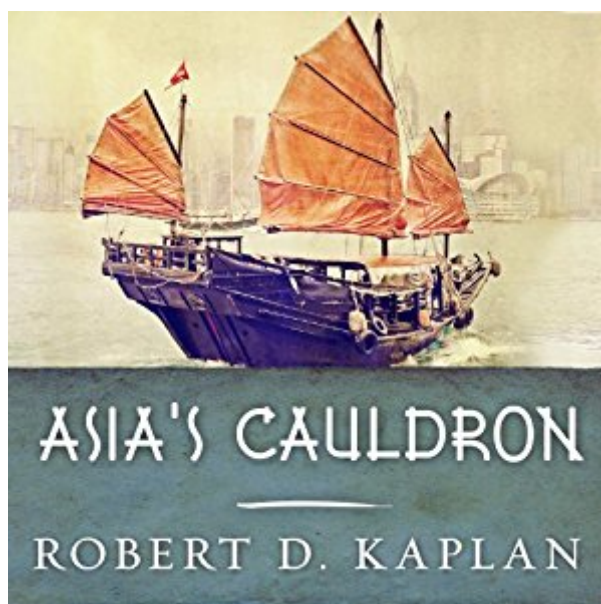


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# Asia's Cauldron: The South China Sea And The End Of A Stable Pacific



## 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

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" 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 "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.

Parts of this book are interesting but other parts do not appear to stand up to scrutiny. As other

reviewers have noted, this book is essentially a long article that has been expanded into book form. I believe Kaplan needed better editing to keep this book "on-point." Kaplan offers a convincing argument on China's ascendancy in the south China sea resulting in conflicts and possibly leading to Finlandization of the other countries depending on if US regional power wanes resulting in the region becoming a satellite to China. However, in my opinion, Kaplan writes this book like a debater to prove his point and dismisses issues that do not agree with his premise - another reason this book needed more editing - and data - to back Kaplan's points. Kaplan does not seem to consider issues that disagree with his premise. On every third page or so I would read a sentence or paragraph and think, huh, this does not seem quite true or seems quite over-stated. As a result, sections of the book do not stand up to scrutiny. For instance, Kaplan suggests in the book that a future naval war in this region will be a logical clean-type war that the rest of the world will be able to learn from as this area of Asia is so rational!? Huh? I believe any wars that may occur will not be predictable and I doubt they will be the clean sanitized naval war Kaplan appears to believe is possible. Wars, and their effects by their nature are unpredictable. The ending chapters of the book summarize the policies of China's neighbors in this region and are quite interesting. In summary, this book is a very mixed bag with an interesting argument with some good information but many sections need to be scrutinized or researched in greater depth.

It's ironic that I write this review on the day that the U.S. and the Philippines agrees to a new military alliance, where the U.S. sends rotating troops and navy ships to perform maneuvers and reconnaissance. The U.S. now has similar treaties with Australia and Singapore. I've also been reading recent articles on why the U.S. is making military commitments, to counter China, with Obama stating that "China isn't the focus." This book explains what this situation is all about, the situation of each country on the South China Sea, and why China is so hostile to all this. Note that China is building up their military, not their army, but their navy, and to a slightly lesser degree, their air force. The American press pictures China as the hostile power here, but when you look at it, China feels they have a rightful claim to the South China Sea, just as the U.S. has a claim on the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico, and Europe having a claim on the Mediterranean, except that the U.S. does not violate the territorial waters off of other countries in the Gulf or the Caribbean. With China now being a major economic power, and they do do business with India, Africa, and the Middle East, the South China Sea provides major passage between the Pacific and Indian Oceans, and, like the United States, China intends to become a two ocean country. This sea also has a lot of valuable natural resources, starting with oil and natural gas, not to mention rich fishing grounds, and

China is going to want all that wealth. With a population of 1.3 billion people, they are going to need it. Another little known fact is that China does not go by the Law of the Sea treaty, with a claim 200 miles of the continental shelf off its coast only, with all other international borders respected. China want all of the sea. The U.S., from their point of view, has no right to it because they are a country 7000 miles away, with no claim whatsoever. China, having a history of being colonized, and humiliated by other world powers, in coming into its own, and what they claim, they will have. That's the way they see it. Are they really the villains? Other countries around the sea do see China as a threat, and China's claims are intruding on their own territories on the sea, with Chinese coast guard vessels driving off fishing boats and other vessels, laying claim to small islands other countries also claim (the Spratleys, the Parcels, etc.). Because of this, these countries, Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines, Vietnam (yes, Vietnam), Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Australia are all drawing up treaties with the U.S., allowing them to either establish naval bases or at least allow our navy ships to dock at their ports. Many of these countries and also establishing posts of their own in the sea to counteract China. This is where the situations stands today. Robert Kaplan has visited these countries, studied their cultures, and history, and gives a clear understanding of why these countries, and China, have the points of view that they do. In order to stabilize that part of the world, the U.S. Navy, and Air Force, has to be there to protect these countries and allow freedom for their ships, merchant and military, to sail where needed. China needs the freedom to sail on the South China Sea, through the Straits of Malacca, to the Indian Ocean and beyond to Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. What is especially interesting is the question on Taiwan. China may want it back, and they are very stubborn about this, but Taiwan's coast is almost impossible for ships to land in invade, and the Taiwanese themselves are armed to the teeth. Vietnam, in spite of our war with them (they call it the American War), has invited the U.S. Navy back to Cam Rahn Bay for ships to dock. They have a sense of superiority because they won the war against us, but that is fading into history. Malaysia is an interesting case because, although Muslim, that also have a Chinese and Indian population, and they all get along quite well. All these countries and cultures are described in great detail, and gives us a point of view that Americans do not have. One reason why this book is accurate because after I have finished reading it, I read in the newspapers how U.S. Air Force reconnaissance planes constantly flies over the South China Sea to spy on the Chinese and test their reaction. It is only a matter of time before the Chinese navy and air forces catches up with us. Also given are scenarios of China should their economy begin to fail. How likely that is remains to be seen. When you read the newspapers about the present situation in the South China Sea, I strongly recommend that you pick up this book for a clear point of view, and how China and

Southeast Asia sees it.

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