Stirring Debate on the Dilemma of Power in the Pacific

BENEDICT ANDERSON opened his famous study of modern nationalism, *Imagined Communities*, with Comrade Tullian’s 1979 invasion of Communist Vietnam as an example of how nationalist identity trumped communist solidarity. While Anderson’s insights into the formation of nation-states proved enduring, that war turned out to be an anomalous start to three decades of Chinese military restraint, as Beijing encouraged a stable international environment conducive to its primary goal of economic reform and opening-up. But over the past few years, observers have begun to wonder if that era of restraint, of “hiding our brilliance and biding our time,” as Deng Xiaoping put it, has come to an end.

This spring, Asia’s two communist neighbors once again seemed dangerously close to armed conflict after China’s state-run offshore oil company parked a massive, billion-dollar drilling rig in contested waters in the South China Sea. Vietnam dispatched Sea Guard vessels to demand that the rig move on, encountering a Chinese armada accompanying it. The two sides sparred at sea, firing water cannons, ramming hulls and the like. Both sides claimed to have international law on their side, but their interpretations of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea—the blueprint from which they derived their national self-interest. The potential value of offshore oil reserves in the South China Sea remains a matter of speculation and dispute. But clearly a great deal of national prestige was at stake, as violent, anti-China riots convulsed Vietnam, while one of China’s top generals explained, “For the territory which was passed down by our ancestors into the hands of our generation, we cannot afford to lose an inch.”

The Chinese general happened to be in Washington, and the United States cast a long shadow over this intra-Communist dispute, as the US Navy offered Vietnam more port calls and US Secretary of State John Kerry decried China’s “provocative” behavior. But there was little the US, or Vietnam for that matter, could do to remove the Chinese rig, short of full-scale military action.

Robert D. Kaplan could not have asked for better headlines to usher in the release of his latest book of geopolitical rumination, presented in travelogue form. Perfectly anticipating the latest Sino-Vietnamese standoff, he writes that the South China Sea “is a nervous world, crowded with warships and oil tankers, one of incessant war games without necessarily leading to actual combat: a world in which actions taken by a country such as Vietnam, the political belwether of the South China Sea region, can affect the highest decisions of state in Beijing and Washington.” Kaplan’s book is, if nothing else, timely. And there is a great deal to learn from his vivid account of traveling around the region.

Despite the Cassandra-esque title, he comes to measured conclusions about China’s rise and the role of the US in maintaining a stable Pacific. Along the way, however, Asia’s Cauldron often veers off course, while leaving critical parts of the story untold. Kaplan’s digressions and lacunae are in a sense the most revealing aspects of the book.

IRAQI GHOSTS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Readers might find it odd that a book ostensibly about maritime Asia launches into extended digressions on Middle Eastern politics. The US invasion and occupation of Iraq in particular rears its head in seemingly unrelated contexts. That Iraq haunts Kaplan’s South China Sea is perhaps not surprising. After all, he became a lightning rod of contention in American foreign policy circles due to his exuberant embrace of the Second Gulf War, during which he popularized romantic neoconservative notions of revivified American neo-imperialism. To his credit, Kaplan eventually recanted in public for getting Iraq terribly wrong, and there is a chastened sense in Asia’s Cauldron that the US will have to reconcile itself to “balance, not dominance,” and make way for a risen China. “There is the very real imperial fatigue felt by the American public … following the ruinous cost in lives, diplomatic prestige, and monetary expense of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq,” he concedes. An American call to arms this is not.

Kaplan’s contrition over Iraq may also have been what led him into the intellectual lap of a university professor whom he credits with having gotten both the first Gulf War (invade) and second one (don’t) “exactly right.” If there is a unifying theoretical foundation to Asia’s Cauldron, it is provided by the University of Chicago’s John Mearsheimer and his ideas about “offensive realism.” In his widely read study of international relations theory, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, Mearsheimer argued that every state seeks survival in an anarchical international system, but for Great Powers, the surest way to ensure survival is by achieving regional hegemony. A rising power is therefore by definition a revisionist one, seeking as much dominion as it can. China was the punchline of Tragedy when it came out in 2001, and in a brand new second edition, Mearsheimer concludes with a careful argument about “why China is likely to follow basic realist logic and attempt to become a regional hegemon in Asia.”

At the height of the oil-rig crisis with Vietnam, Chinese President Xi Jinping took Mearsheimer’s argument head on, claiming the Chinese are genetically immune to the “tragic” fate of great powers throughout history. “The Chinese people do not have the gene for invading others or dominating the world in their blood, do not accept the logic that a strong country must be hegemonistic.” But if you believe Mearsheimer, as Kaplan does, Xi doth protest too much, for there are no exceptions to the cold logic of Great Power hegemony. China, in fact, should not be judged too harshly for its pursuit of dominance. Indeed, the Chinese are merely doing precisely what the United States did by achieving total control over the Western Hemisphere through continental expansion in the 19th century and Sea war expansion in the early 20th. After rehearsing Mearsheimer’s argument that China will naturally seek to do in the South China Sea what the US did in the Caribbean, Kaplan comes to the sobering, post-Global War on Terror conclusion that “the US military will have to make some serious accommodation with a rising Chinese military power.”

ORIENTAL DESPOTISM

Kaplan’s post-traumatic stress disorder over making the wrong call in Iraq sends Asia’s Cauldron down another long tangent in defense of Asia’s “good autocrats.” He describes the Middle East as a land of “bad autocrats,” but in getting rid of them, things often only get worse. “Without authority, however dictatorial, there is a fearful void, as we all know too well from Iraq in 2003 and 2007.” Fortunately, however, Kaplan thinks he has found a region where dictators should not just be left alone, they should be showered with praise. “Truly, the place where benevolent autocracy has struck deep and systematic roots is Asia.” In the middle of a book about the emerging Sino-American struggle for dominance in the
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According to Kaplan, China is the world’s “great man” and “good autocrat.” He defines a good dictator as one who, after his dictatorship, leaves his people more ready for representative government than before it. Yet there is no evidence that his model is still in effect today. On the contrary, he devoted his life to leaving behind a Communist Party dictatorship in perpetuity, which so far has worked. If China democratizes, it will be in spite of Deng, not because of him. Nothing demonstrates that fact more vividly than the ways in which the events of June 4, 1989, were forcibly forgotten once again this year on the 25th anniversary.

The White Whale
Kaplan’s misguided exposition on Deng’s dictatorship draws attention to a deeper problem at the very core of Asia’s Cauldron. Why, after all, did he write the book? He tells us, in an almost confessional tone, “If I do not confront China’s rise — if I do not confront the signal trends of recent decades — then there can be no relevance to my observations.” Whether China has the intention and capability to command the South China Sea is the central question of the book, and the stakes are enormous. “The South China Sea is also first and foremost about the destiny of China, the geopolitical hinge on which war or peace in the region rests.” And yet, China forever eludes his view. While Kaplan uses a vivid travelogue method to tour the reader around the region, shedding light on how a diverse group of Southeast Asian nations see things, we barely get to know China itself. In every country he visits, Kaplan sits down with scores of experts and officials, often mentioning them by name and quoting them at length, but virtually none from China. He skips cosmopolitans in Kuala Lumpur, wanders the tidy streets of Singapore, and travels by boat and plane to far-flung islands, but other than a brief, generic paragraph on Beijing, he never transports the reader to China proper. He visits his history museums and reads up on local religions and philosophy, but has little of substance to say about the Chinese worldview. Describing his visit to the National Palace Museum in Taipei, Kaplan rather boldly asserts, “You can travel the mainland and not get such a compressed and comprehensive insight into what, aesthetically, constitutes China as you can in this museum in Taiwan.” But one wonders how many museums, temples, tombs, and aesthetic sites Kaplan has actually visited on “the mainland” as a basis for this sweeping judgment.

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THE PIVOT AWAY FROM ASIA
Nonetheless, Kaplan is surely right that the rise of Chinese sea power is an event with profound implications across Asia and potentially the globe. Indeed, for China, it marks a turning point of epic proportions. Until the 19th century, China was a great power among continental empires, but it fatally erred by ignoring the sea. Soon after China’s defeat to Britain in the first Opium War, a Confucian strategist named Wei Yuan wrote a pioneering Treatise on Sea Powers, but his insistence that China needed to rapidly build up Western-style “steamships and firearms” was ignored until it was too late to catch up. Today, China is doing its best to not make that mistake again. But how exactly China will end up using its growing maritime muscle remains a burning question for every nation in the South China Sea, as well as those in the littoral of the other side of the Pacific leading them from behind.

Kaplan counsels what amounts to a rebalancing away from the western Pacific. “It is just not good enough for American officials to plan for continued dominance in these waters. For they 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… the age of simple American dominance… will likely have to pass.”

He further points out that from the perspective of the American taxpayer, the best path forward is to convince Asian nations to increase their capabilities and form a united front to stop China from replacing the US as regional hegemon. But as his colorful accounts of South China Sea countries display, ASEAN remains a long, long way from achieving EU- or NATO-level solidarity. Likewise, the powerful militaries of Northeast Asia, Japan and South Korea, have weak security ties to Southeast Asia, not to mention severe strains in their own bilateral relationship. In many cases, the link among China’s neighbors remains their “hub and spoke” alliances with far-away, financially strained Uncle Sam. Thus the dilemma: “The idea that the United States can reduce its commitment to the western Pacific, while sitting back and letting the indigenous states themselves bear more of the burden, may be feasible in the long run, but not in the short run. In the short run, a weaker American commitment to the region might result in the states on China’s periphery losing heart and bandwagoning instead with China.”

The Obama Administration’s celebrated “pivot to Asia” might make a certain amount of sense for the time being, therefore. But, according to Kaplan, prudence will likely dictate a second pivot in the not so distant future that makes more room for the Middle Kingdom. Despite its flaws, Asia’s Cauldron puts an urgent dilemma of Asian geopolitics and US foreign policy front and center. Kaplan will help fuel the conversation about how to fashion “a new security order” in the western Pacific, as Chinese regional power advances in leaps and bounds and “the old order of American military unipolarity” recedes. For that alone, his is a book worth reading and debating.

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