Monsoon
The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power

By Robert D. Kaplan
New York: Random House, 2011

Reviewed by James R. Holmes

I have voiced skepticism toward Gwadar’s potential as a base. Monsoon renders a service by confirming that analysis. The author depicts the port as a sleepy nineteenth-century fishing village where a modern container terminal has been built. It lies in a region, Baluchistan, bedeviled by an insurgency. Although Pakistani officials have publicly urged Beijing to construct a naval base there, the prospects for such a venture appear doubtful. It be-hooves Indian and US leaders to remain watchful, but Kaplan by no means sounds the alarm about Gwadar.

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It is worth noting that the author is at once influential and a generalist. Policymakers heed his views about the string of pearls, a “Greater China,” and the like. At times, this places him at odds with specialists. Asian studies is notoriously compartmented—one is either a China scholar, a Japan scholar, or what have you. Many specialists, predictably, pronounce Kaplan a dilettante because he has not devoted a career to studying one country. I have sat through meetings where senior scholars inveighed against him for trespassing on jealously guarded turf.

As a generalist myself, I consider the broad view a feature, not a bug. This is especially true for an Education About Asia audience. One purpose of scholarship is to equip nonspecialists to think knowledgeably and perceptively about important matters. Works like Monsoon school readers’ judgment and foresight, helping decision-makers cope with complex challenges and citizens discharge their civic oversight function. At its best, scholarship fires readers’ imaginations, inspiring them to continue their self-education. This book meets that test.

All of that being said, lay readers may find the last few chapters of Monsoon tough going unless they have some background in geopolitics, strategy, and naval affairs. While best-known for his travel writing and for his Atlantic Monthly essays, Kaplan is also a senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security, a Washington-based think tank. These more wonkish chapters derive in large part from his think tank work. They are forward-looking and policy-oriented and thus better suited for faculty, graduate students, and advanced undergraduates. However, this detracts not one whit from the overall value of the book for teachers and students.

How does this all apply to the United States? For one thing, the US Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard have designated the Indian Ocean region one of two main theaters for exercising hard naval power, the other being the Western Pacific. Knowing the cultural and physical terrain is critical to shaping events in South Asia. Another takeaway from Monsoon is that the Indian Ocean is a remote, inaccessible theater. US forces in Asia are based primarily at Bahrain, in the Persian Gulf, and in Japan. That is, they are at the extreme eastern and western ends of Asia.

If China is expanding vertically and India horizontally, the US position thus looks like a vast, semicircular arc enclosing the South, Southeast, and East Asian rimlands. How to sustain America’s primacy in this gigantic Indo-Pacific region, and how to do so in the coming age of stagnant or declining defense budgets, is one of the chief strategic dilemmas confronting US leaders. Reading Monsoon is a good way to start puzzling it out.

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