

Robert D. Kaplan, *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power*, New York, Random House, 2010, xiv+366 pages.

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The importance of the Asia-Pacific region for the United-States came to the fore again when President Obama announced, during a visit to Australia, a few months ago, the opening of a US military base in this country. Economic considerations are also highlighted by negotiation among Pacific Rim nations concerning a Free Trade Partnership in the region, excluding, at least initially, China. However, on another front, the visit of Secretary of State Hilary Clinton to Myanmar, and all the changes in the relationship between the two countries, as well as a renewed hope for democratic reforms of the Burmese regime, if it can be seen as part of a containment policy designed by the Americans, indicates that the region broadly called the Indian Ocean, is also very present as a focus of attention among American strategists. This invites a large public to read the book *Monsoon* of Robert Kaplan, well-known for his pleasant style introducing well researched and insightful reports on his travels around the world.

He is not ashamed to qualify his work as “journalistic research” (see the first line of Acknowledgments, p. 325); he knows that he is not an expert on each country he visited to make his book. How could you be when you go from Oman (ch.2) to Zanzibar (ch.7) via Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Indonesia, with a constant reference to China? Specialists may find imprecision here and there in his narratives, just as proof that Kaplan relies on second, albeit well-chosen, sources. This is not a flaw in his analyses since it is a characteristic of the genre of book he has written. Perhaps the choice of country visited may have been directed by opportunities; the scale people interviewed would need more scrutiny, but they are of a very wide range of positions and opinions. The historical background sketches for each country, in particular on Portugal, should not be read as fundamental explanation of the present situation; they are a necessary reminder of influential past and underline that the Indian Ocean has for a long time been a centre of cross-fertilization in the world, covering geo-political, cultural, and obviously economic aspects and concerns. This, Kaplan demonstrates, is still the case today.

The sub-title of the book, *The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power*, seems to indicate that Kaplan speaks mainly from an American perspective or concern. It is true that the analyses are not primarily from the point of view of the people in each country, neither of its government. Many interviewees do express their opinions on local affairs, for example the troubles in Baluchistan and Sindh (ch.5), but are reported by the author in the context of global concern. This again is not a negative remark; just a pointer to the main interest of the work. The “grand journalistic” genre adopted, in which Kaplan is brilliant, should be accepted not as definitive recipe to tell you what you should know when you visit countries and people, but to draw attention and help you in your observation. There, also, the author succeeds: the Indian Ocean should be more carefully observed, and put in more pro-eminent place, not only for its captivating records in world history but for the mapping of present and future contested interests and ambitions. In this respect, India and China, are given great attention with special chapters at the beginning, in the middle and at the end of the book, but are also nearly omnipresent along the other chapters.

The two countries are presented not only as already first class economic actors in the world, but some kind of rivals who must live together and cooperate in many fields.

The same is true for the US. While checking on expansionist tendencies, each country realizes that it is necessary to get closer to each other and combine policies. The history of the port of Gwadar in Pakistan, and the project of a canal across the thinnest part of Thailand, the Isthmus of Kra, are but two vignettes of such concerns. Other places, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, may appear as minor actors, but they are rightfully presented, with one or two chapters for each, as of strategic significance, because, among other factors, of their population and geographical situation. The reader, making also good use of the maps and the index, will be easily convinced. True also, not all countries round the Grater Indian Ocean, including the Arabian Sea, are introduced. Well, enough is already said to alert a wide public of various interests, of the crucial significance of this part of the world today and in the near future.

So why Oman and Zanzibar? Unexpected pages perhaps, but revealing “Oman is an example of how globalization at its best is built on vigorous localisms that can survive the onslaught of destructive commercial forces.” (p.25) As for Zanzibar, its “mixture of races and cultures” could be a positive marker of beneficial globalization, but that was of the past more than the present. (p.311). A somber note at the end of the book! But Kaplan writes at the very end of his work that competition among great powers “will be framed more and more by a global civilization, the product of a new bourgeoisie that in and of itself constitutes a moral force...”(p.323) and that should inspire use of hard and soft power in order to protect trade for the benefit of all. With such a conviction, ample room is thus given for conversation and decision among partners. The larger Indian Ocean, according to Kaplan, is one regions, perhaps the most significant one, in the world where this is more and more needed and relevant.