

Q&A with Robert D. Kaplan

Description

Editor's Note: This article is presented in a question-and-answer format, with the Irregular Warfare Initiative's [Maritime Program](#) (facilitated by [Christopher Booth](#)) interviewing [Robert D. Kaplan](#). This piece has been edited for clarity and readability, as spoken language differs from how text is read on the page.

Robert D. Kaplan is the bestselling author of twenty-four books on foreign affairs and travel translated into many languages, including: [China Whisperers](#), [Waste Land](#), [The Loom of Time](#), [The Tragic Mind](#), [The Revenge of Geography](#), [Asia's Cauldron](#), [The Coming Anarchy](#), and [Balkan Ghosts](#). For three decades, he reported on foreign affairs for *The Atlantic*. He is a distinguished senior lecturer at the University of Texas at Austin. He was a member of the Pentagon's Defense Policy Board and the U. S. Navy's Executive Panel. *Foreign Policy* magazine twice named him one of the world's Top 100 Global Thinkers.

Q: In your most recent book, *Waste Land*, you predicted a heightened period of global turmoil and conflict. Based on the ongoing war in the Gulf and your more than half a century experience in the region. What are your predictions for what the situation looks like in Iran and the Strait of Hormuz five years from now?

Robert Kaplan: I think that even if this war turns out not to be good for President Trump, even if it turns out to be in conventional terms a failure, a wasted war, I think we'll have a new regime in Iran within five years. Remember, you're dealing with a population that has less and less potable water, less and less electricity. The middle class in Iran has been destroyed; the currency has been destroyed. The revolution has been a failure. In that regard, you probably won't see any uprisings now because Trump, because of his rhetoric, in addition to other factors, has created a short-term rally around the flag sort of syndrome in Iran.

But I think that months after the war concludes there will be other demonstrations or an uprising against the regime. The regime is very tired. It's in a sort of a Brezhnev-Chernenko phase. I think we'll get a new regime at some point, but I'm not convinced at all that it will be tied to what

we've been doing the past few weeks there.

Q: In your 2010 book, *Monsoon*, you postulated that the Indian Ocean and what you call the region of monsoon Asia will become crucial for America's future role in the world. Do you think your theory still holds?

Robert Kaplan: Yes, absolutely. Because that's where the people are. That's where the population is in the greater Indian Ocean: in China, in India. We're moving into a more multi-polar world. The Chinese Navy is growing in size and ours is stagnating. The Chinese are really the readers of Mahan now much more than the people at Annapolis or other places like that are.

I think strategically, demographically and economically to the degree that that the earth has an economic or a geographic center or a node it will be it will be Monsoon Asia, the western Pacific and greater Indian Ocean.

Q: Early in the current conflict with Iran, a U.S. Navy submarine sunk the Iranian warship *IRIS Dena* while it was returning from a fleet review in India. *The Guardian* quoted India's former chief of naval staff, Adm Arun Prakash, who said the attack on *Dena* was legal, but nonetheless shocking on multiple fronts. He also described it as treacherous and an embarrassment. And retired Indian Vice Admiral Shekhar Sinha was quoted as saying, "It's clear we need to relook at Indian Ocean security and underwater surveillance," he said. "If an American submarine is floating in the Indian Ocean so close by and we did not know, then we better buck up." Do you see this incident impacting US/Indian relations or leading to any changes for the Indian Navy in the Indian Ocean?

Robert Kaplan: U.S.-Indian relations will get over this. U.S.-Indian relations are about mega economic, financial, strategic things. It's not going to be derailed because of this. But I think what it will do is it'll act as a catalyst for the Indian Navy to get better and better. It sounds cruel, but wars lead to lessons learned for militaries. And the Iran, Iraq, and Afghan wars may have been tragedies for the United States, but they also boosted the capability of our land forces simply because of the lessons learned.

The lessons learned will help us for years and decades ahead, whereas the Chinese have not fought a war since the 1979 clash with Vietnam; though the U.S. Navy hasn't had a fleet-level battle since the battle of Leyte Gulf in October 1944 off the Philippines. So, this incident is sort of a small-scale lessons learned opportunity for the Indian Navy that will lead to lead to good things from their point of view in terms of strengthening their operations.

Q: One of the people you interview in *Monsoon* was the up-and-coming Chief Minister of Gujarat named Narendra Modi. He has now been the Indian Prime Minister for over a decade. How has the US-India relationship changed over that time?

Robert Kaplan: I think Modi is really the first prime minister of post-independence India who thinks strategically. The Nehruvian prime ministers starting with Nehru and continuing up to right before Modi basically had an ideology of anti-colonialism et cetera. They weren't strategic thinkers at least not publicly.

Modi has no patience for this. He's not an Oxbridge educated elitist like Nehru and others. He thinks purely strategically and he needs the U.S. Navy to help him balance against China in the Indian Ocean because the Indian Navy cannot do it alone. I think he's had an incredible effect on India good and bad. He's made it more of a normal country in terms of thinking geopolitically. He's also made it more of a sectarian country in terms of conflict and tension between Hindus and Muslims. So it's a double-edged sword with Modi.

Q: During his term, there's been several significant border incidents with China. What do you see the long-term state of the relationship between those countries is militarily and politically?

Robert Kaplan: Well, I think if US relations with China get better this will lead India to balance more in favor of the United States. But if the US were to have a military conflict with China, India would go back to neutralism because it cannot afford to be hostile to China in a warlike situation given its long border with China and given how much overall weaker India is than China militarily.

Q: In your 2014 book, *Asia's Cauldron*, you argue that the rise of China will bring new maritime conflicts in the region. We think this argument has been thoroughly validated and

since the multiple US administrations have tried to refocus the United States on the region with mixed success. How do you see the next decade playing out in this region.

Robert Kaplan: The Trump presidency has been an erratic, norm-breaking presidency. I think that we're likely to see some sort of agreement coming out of the May summit between China and the United States, and the media may play it up as if tensions over Taiwan are going down. But, I think that would be a mistake to believe that there is no threat. Remember: one of the reasons for World War I was that the Germans became convinced that England would not come to the aid of France and Belgium and that England was moving away from conflict. This was a miscalculation and I can foresee future miscalculations over Taiwan where the Chinese think that we won't come to the aid of Taiwan when in fact we might.

Q: What are your thoughts on whether this administration would or wouldn't support defending Taiwan?

Robert Kaplan: Well, whatever the Administration says, it may do the opposite because as I said, it's a very erratic administration.

Q: You wrote the foreword for the Penguin Classic's reissue of Jean Larteguy's *The Centurions*, which is an infamous French novel about the experience of French paratroopers in Vietnam and Algeria, and which has a heavy emphasis on counter-insurgency. Are there any relevant lessons for America's military from the book or the French experience in these colonial wars?

Robert Kaplan: I think there are. Larteguy is sort of like a double shot of Scotch in a sense. He's unpopular. He's been reputed to be allied with fascists, you know, all of that. But it's a great read. I mean, it really is a great read. And it's a great read by someone who knows what he's writing about, who's actually had the experience and that's why there are lessons learned from it. People will be reading Larteguy for years to come I think because whenever you can't really intelligently make a study of counterinsurgency without encountering his books and counterinsurgency though it's always out of fashion periodically becomes necessary because the United States blunders into situations that it didn't intend.

Q: You and your books have repeatedly highlighted countries and regions that you argue are important or overlooked, like the Balkans, the Indian Ocean, South China Sea, and the Adriatic. Are there countries or regions that we should be paying more attention to and why?

Robert Kaplan: I think every place in the world is potentially strategic now. It used to be only the temperate zone of the Northern hemisphere was where history was made. There were some great geographers who wrote this very fact in the 1940s. It used to be that itâ??s mainly Eurasia. Itâ??s the heartland. Itâ??s not Africa. Itâ??s not South America. But as the globe is diluted and is shrunk by technology, we all inhabit an increasingly close and claustrophobic world where a crisis in any one place can ignite a crisis halfway around the world. And weâ??ve seen this, everything becomes simply more intense, more impossible to ignore. I mean, everybody arguing about Gaza or about this or about that. So, I would say every place matters. Now, the most obscure place can become important overnight.

Q: Can you share what youâ??re currently working on or research topics or areas that you want to dig into that you havenâ??t gotten to yet?

Robert Kaplan: Yes. Well, Iâ??m publishing a book in November. Itâ??s called *China Whisperers: The Voices That Have Helped Shape Americaâ??s Views of Its Chief Geopolitical Rival*. Itâ??s a history of China experts going back to the 1920s and continuing right up into the Trump administration. And itâ??s sort of a sequel to a book I did over 30 years ago, *The Arabists*. But, this is about China experts. Itâ??s about individuals, so theyâ??re all different. Some were proved right; some were proved wrong. Some were dupes, some were brilliant. But despite all their mistakes, I make the argument that thereâ??s no getting away from area expertise, from area specialty, that especially as more and more knowledge accumulates, thereâ??s more and more specialization. At the end of the day, we have no choice but to go back to our China experts, and thatâ??s the book thatâ??s coming out in November.

Q: Can you recommend a book you think is particularly interesting or gave you new insights?

Robert Kaplan: Well, the one novelist I think who captures the world and where itâ??s going and is writing today is [Amitav Ghosh](#), the Indian novelist. I believe he divides his time between

New York City and Kolkata. He wrote a trilogy called the *Ibis Trilogy* about migration through the throughout the Indian Ocean during the time of the Opium Wars. And he also writes about in the environment but not from a flaky aesthetic point of view but almost from a strategic point of view. If you're looking at fiction, I think you can't do better than him if you're strategically oriented.

Q: How about any non-fiction or people that are following your path of in-depth reporting?

Robert Kaplan: Oh, there are just so many books. I think in 2005 the late [Colin Gray](#), in the midst of counterinsurgency, in the midst of the war on global terrorism, basically said, "Forget this. The future is great power conflict," even though it was not on the horizon at all when he published the book. It was a really clairvoyant book, [Another Bloody Century](#). It was about the 21st century, and really kind of hit the nail on the head.

Q: Ukraine seems in many ways to have become a stalemate although we've seen constant adaptation iteration of various technologies. Where do you see that conflict going?

Robert Kaplan: When I think of Ukraine, I think it's gone on as long as World War I. And World War I changed the 20th century because it went on for four long years. And empires collapsed. Kings and queens left. The Hapsburg dynasty, the Hohenzollern dynasty, the Ottoman Empire all collapsed. And I think this war is going to eventually have a similar effect on Russia. Russia will have more and more difficulty projecting power in the Caucasuses, in Central Asia and Siberia and in the Russian Far East. We could be looking after this war at the Putin regime turning into something like a low-calorie version of the former Yugoslavia, which broke up. I think that over the long arc of history Russia has had a tendency to collapse and then regenerate because of its great history, literature, culture, etc. We may be heading into some sort of semi-collapse of Russia.

The views expressed in this interview do not reflect the official position of the Irregular Warfare Initiative, Princeton University's Empirical Studies of Conflict Project, the Modern War Institute at West Point, or the United States Government.

Image Credit: Image taken by author, Christopher Booth.

If you value reading the Irregular Warfare Initiative, please consider [supporting our work](#). And for the best gear, check out the [IWI store](#) for mugs, coasters, apparel, and other items.

Date Created
2026/04/27