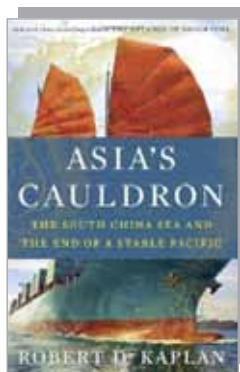


***Asia's Cauldron: The South China Sea and the End of a Stable Pacific***

By Robert D. Kaplan  
Random House, 2014  
\$26, 225 pages  
ISBN 9780812994322  
Reviewed by Benjamin Herscovitch



Rich in fishing stocks and energy reserves, the South China Sea is the object of some of the world's most volatile geostrategic disputes. As much as 90% of its waters are claimed by a resurgent and bullish China, while four of China's diminutive but nonetheless steadfast Southeast Asian neighbours lay claim to large tracts of the South China Sea. Brunei and Malaysia cautiously but firmly correct Chinese claims to seas that they consider their own. Meanwhile, Vietnamese and Filipino maritime patrol vessels clash with their Chinese counterparts as their diplomats and political leaders accuse Beijing of neo-imperial territorial aggrandisement.

The South China Sea is also the conduit for in excess of US\$5 trillion worth of ship-borne trade each year, making it one of globalisation's vital arteries. Moreover, with the Philippines benefitting from US alliance guarantees, the South China Sea disputes could easily sour all-important Sino-US relations. If China launched an attack on Filipino troops stationed on contested islets and Manila invoked the US-Filipino mutual defence treaty, the world's greatest military power (the United States) would be pushed dangerously close to war with the globe's second biggest defence spender (China).

As chief geopolitical analyst for Stratfor and a long-time correspondent for *The Atlantic*, Robert D. Kaplan should be an able guide to the complexities and controversies that swirl around the South China Sea's multiple flashpoints. Sadly, Kaplan's latest offering, *Asia's Cauldron: The South China Sea and the End of a Stable Pacific*, fails to illuminate these murky waters. Instead of delving into the details of the South China Sea disputes

and sketching a strategy for dialling down tensions, Kaplan has produced what is effectively a breezy travelogue.

Rich vignettes give the reader a seat next to Kaplan as he criss-crosses the nations adjoining the South China Sea. We wander the streets of Manila where buildings have "the look of broken crates bearing no architectural style" and are festooned with 'old air-conditioning units sticking out of this and that window like black eyes' (p. 118). On a bleak winter's day in Beijing, we meet with Chinese foreign policy mandarins in a 'world of elegant and traditional aesthetics' (p. 164). And we take in the vistas of Malaysian Borneo's north coast—"a world of cronyism and kickbacks governing everything from logging contracts to the control of local newspapers" (p. 190).

Given the number of Kaplan's asides, it is not surprising that *Asia's Cauldron's* most obvious failing is that there is barely space to cover the topic that this book ostensibly explores. In lieu of nuanced analysis of the South China Sea's territorial disputes, Kaplan offers broad brush-stroke portraits of some of the key social and political trends and challenges in six of the nations abutting this body of water (China, Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines and Taiwan). Absent are fine-grained accounts of what motivates each claimant state's strategies in the South China Sea and precisely which tracts of territory they claim. Instead, we learn, for example, about the commercial dynamism of Vietnam's emerging manufacturing hubs and the debilitating effects of corruption in the Philippines.

Regrettably, however, *Asia's Cauldron's* most glaring fault is not that it skirts around the very territorial disputes at the heart of the South China Sea story. Rather, Kaplan's glib and impressionistic analysis of Asian states and societies is this book's greatest drawback. Kaplan makes so many dubious generalisations that verge on the misleading that one cannot even excuse them in the name of journalistic provocation. Consider Kaplan's stinging criticism of what he bombastically labels the 'abject failure that was the modern Philippine state' (p. 128). Kaplan muses that compared to other East Asian metropolises:

The cityscape of the Philippine capital is...one of aesthetic and material devastation...[B]y the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, Asian dynamism had...bypassed the Philippines. (pp. 118–119)

For anyone who has spent time meandering through Manila's Mall of Asia or surveying the Filipino capital's bustling commercial centre, this assessment will seem unfair and jarring.

Kaplan's book is not just littered with distorted images of Asia (traffic supposedly does not stop voluntarily for pedestrians anywhere in the region aside from Singapore and Japan [p. 93]). *Asia's Cauldron* also contains naïve and offensive claims about vast swathes of the region's population. Here is Kaplan on Malaysian Muslims:

I thought the very fact that contemporary Malaysian Muslims conform to Veblen's generalizations about turn-of-the-twentieth-century Americans shows that Muslims are individuals much as everybody else, no different from us. There is no otherness to Islamic civilization, in other words. (p. 72)

Commentary of this kind is grating. Not only does it imply that it is somehow surprising that Muslims could be 'individuals much as everybody else', but it also assumes that Muslims are a homogenous mass. Kaplan's comments suggest that while he once thought that all Muslims might simply be part of an undifferentiated collective called the 'Muslim world', he is now confident that they are 'no different from us'. Categorising the world's more than 1.5 billion Muslims in such reductive terms is clearly foolhardy. As Boko Haram terrorism in Nigeria, warlordism in Libya, puritanical brutality in Syria and Iraq, and theocratic authoritarianism in Iran make plain, many Muslims are manifestly very different 'from us'.

Despite its false generalisations and failure to tackle the South China Sea disputes in detail, *Asia's Cauldron* is bursting with fascinating contemporary and historical anecdotes. The prologue's examination of the centuries-old meeting of Sinic

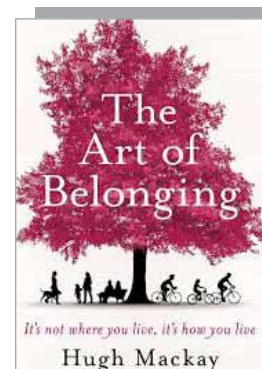
and Hindu civilisations in Indo-China provides a revealing lens through which to view the current geostrategic disputes over the South China Sea. Similarly, Kaplan's candid conversations with Filipino, Vietnamese and Taiwanese defence and foreign policy analysts are a valuable counter-point to the restrained language with which officials typically describe the South China Sea disputes. Nevertheless, Kaplan does not capitalise on these insights to flesh out the underlying forces fuelling the conflict over the South China Sea, much less recommend means by which Asian nations and the world-at-large might manage these most testy of territorial disputes.

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***The Art of Belonging: It's Not Where You Live, It's How You Live***

by Hugh Mackay  
Pan Macmillan, 2014  
\$32.99, 304 pages  
ISBN 9781742614250  
Reviewed by Peter Kurti



Psychologist Howard Gardner once remarked that in order to endure, a society must ensure that its values are passed on to succeeding generations. 'For if we give up lives marked by truth, beauty and goodness', he mused, 'to all intents and purposes, we resign ourselves to a world where nothing is of value'.

One of the indicators nowadays of our having lost confidence in something is when books appear telling us how to regain that confidence. It may be job insecurity that unsettles us, or the bewildering experience of raising children. Or it may be, as Gardner feared, that we have lost confidence in our capacity to instil our values in