



## Sea Change

The Cato Institute's Ted Galen Carpenter asks whether the United States can afford the naval confrontation with China envisioned by Robert Kaplan.

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Robert D. Kaplan's often incisive analysis of the current and prospective geostrategic rivalry in the South China Sea ("**The South China Sea Is the Future of Conflict,**" September/October 2011) suffers from three deficiencies. First, Kaplan says surprisingly little about how such East Asian powers as Japan and South Korea are likely to respond to the looming prospect of a Chinese bid for hegemony. A second deficiency is his comparison of China's projection of power in the South China Sea today to the United States' drive to make the Caribbean a U.S. lake in the early 20th century. The United States had no credible competitors in the Western Hemisphere capable of thwarting its ambitions. China faces a more challenging environment. Japan and India are credible competitors, and Indonesia has the potential to achieve that status.

The third problem is Kaplan's prescription for the United States. His conclusion that the optimal situation is a U.S. air and naval presence at approximately the current level creates an incentive structure that inhibits the development of an East Asian balance of power.

Countries like Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan woefully underinvest in their own defenses because they believe that they can rely indefinitely on U.S. protection. Given America's own fiscal woes and its excessive commitments in other regions, their expectation may prove to be more illusion than substance in the coming decades. If Washington wants to complicate Beijing's strategic calculations in the South China Sea and elsewhere, it needs to change the incentive structure so that China's logical competitors realize that they must put forth more

serious efforts. Kaplan's insistence on preserving the current oversized U.S. military presence in the Western Pacific would encourage the continuation of an unhealthy security dependence.

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**Robert D. Kaplan replies:**

It is a pleasure to be engaged by Ted Galen Carpenter, whose own incisive analyses about subjects as diverse as Mexico and East Asia I read regularly. Carpenter asks a serious question: If wealthy countries such as South Korea and Japan do not do more in their own military defense, why should American taxpayers pick up the burden? I am in agreement that hundreds of billions of dollars could be saved from our defense budget through various means, but I do not agree that this should be done by reducing the presence of carrier strike groups in the Western Pacific.

It is an exaggeration to say that East Asian nations are simply not rising to the challenge that China's military poses. I write these lines from Vietnam, where I can tell you that, as the Australian analyst Desmond Ball writes, East Asia is in the midst of an "action-reaction" arms race, rather than a more benign general defense buildup. South China Sea nations are enlarging their submarine fleets, even as South Korea and Japan continue to modernize their own navies in reaction to what China is doing.

Carpenter seems willing to bet that if we do less, East Asian countries will do more. But that may not be the case, since all these countries have no choice but to accept China as their biggest trading partner. It is the very combination of China's economic might, rising military strength, demographic heft, and geographical proximity that could force a form of

Finlandization on countries of East Asia were the United States to reduce its naval and air presence.

I am all for leveraging like-minded others to do more in their own defense so as to reduce our own burden; but it cannot be done by forcing an either-or decision on them. It is precisely our willingness to keep our own forces at adequate strength that is encouraging smaller countries of the region to enlarge or at least modernize their own militaries. On another matter, while the differences between the South China Sea and the Caribbean are real, it is the similarities that are fascinating and therefore worth recording.