



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

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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