

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Robert Kaplan Isn't Rescuing Anything

Justin Logan | March 19, 2012

Stephen Walt [writes](#) at his FP blog that Stratfor has hired

noted realist Robert Kaplan to write a regular feature on geopolitics. I don't always agree with Kaplan's analysis—I don't agree with anyone all of the time—but he's one of the few prominent journalists who sees the world through a realist lens and has a clear capacity to think in broad strategic terms. He's also an intrepid traveler and lucid writer who is willing to challenge conventional nostrums, and I'll be interested to see what he has to say from his new perch.

I was interested, too. Stratfor has released a [video](#) featuring Kaplan discussing Iran with Stratfor's leader, George "[Coming War with Japan](#)" Friedman. In that clip, Kaplan offers a number of interesting observations about the politics of the Middle East and Iran's potential role in them. Let's take two of his thoughts:

- Iran's frontage on both the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf, its "access" to the Middle East as well as Central Asia, and its road- and pipeline-building projects in that region make Iran a "potential regional hegemon."

This is absolute, unmitigated nonsense. "Regional hegemon" is supposed to mean something. To take the definition used by [someone Kaplan knows well, John Mearsheimer](#), it means a state that is powerful enough to "dominate all the

other states” in a “distinct geographical area.” By Mearsheimer’s definition, the only regional hegemon in modern history is the United States in the Western Hemisphere. Is Kaplan really saying that Iran could throw its weight around in the Middle East akin to the way in which Washington throws its weight around in the Western Hemisphere?

To poach a bit from my forthcoming article in the April *American Conservative*, let’s look at Iran’s military power:

Iran does not have significant power-projection capabilities. As the International Institute for Strategic Studies’ 2012 issue of The Military Balance makes clear, an Iranian effort at power projection, if opposed, would face terrible odds. Iran comprises less than 10 percent of regional military spending, compared to Saudi Arabia’s 36 percent and Israel’s 14 percent.

Regional hegemon?

- Iran’s influence in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon could lead to something resembling a reconstitution of “the Iranian empires of old, whether Parthian or Achaemenid or whatever. You have the Mediterranean to the Indian subcontinent. Almost.”

Something’s wrong with this. The Achaemenid empire included chunks of Greece, Egypt, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. The Parthian analogy is somewhat less egregious, but Iran can’t gnaw off chunks of Pakistan or probably even Iraq without causing itself lots of trouble. And suffice it to say that neither of the empires mentioned above was squared off against a power with the capacity for strategic denial like the United States. If Iran started trying to conquer its way toward either of those empires, and if the United States lifted a finger to help Israel and the Gulf Arab states, Iran would be in a world of trouble.

Walt wonders whether Kaplan can “rescue” the foreign-policy debate in America. If this is what’s supposed to rescue us, I’m still waiting

