



More Realism and Pagan Thinking

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Reviewed by F.G. Hoffman

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IN REVIEW

Robert Kaplan, *The Return of Marco Polo's World: War, Strategy, and American Interests in the Twenty-first Century*, New York: Random House, 2018.

Robert Kaplan is no stranger to readers of this journal. His body of work, totaling some 18 books, is highly regarded for its originality, range, and depth. He has made a unique mark in foreign affairs, melding history, geography, and political philosophy in a historically informed yet accessible style. *The Return of Marco Polo's World* exhibits the same penetrating style, but is formatted in an anthology of previously published works. Each essay reflects the same degree of acutely insightful and politely provocative analysis.

One can find themes in this new book that show marked consistency with Kaplan's prior writings, particularly the pragmatic approach of realism and the importance of history. Long ago, in his *Warrior Politics*, Kaplan echoed Thucydides and reinforced Machiavelli's noted comment, "Anyone wishing to see what is to be must consider what has been: all the things of this world in every era have their counterparts in ancient times."

That book, while published in 2002, echoes today. "The evils of the twentieth century arose from populist movements," Kaplan wrote, "that were monstrously exploited in the name of utopian ideals, and had their power amplified by new technologies." Today, the power of monstrously evil and autocratic leaders has high-jacked populist themes and learned how to manipulate their power via social media technologies. The history of the twentieth century does not preordain our future, "but only fools would discount it, particularly because populist movements now permeate the world, provoking disorder and demanding political and economic transformation." The fact that Kaplan wrote those words over 15 years ago shows how far ahead of his time he is.

Geography is another constant in Kaplan's outlook, as it should be for any geopolitical analyst worth his salt. To Kaplan, author of a book titled *The Revenge of Geography*, maps and geography are a "spatial representation of humanity's divisions."

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He sees the world as a topographic map, one defined by the steep mountains and desiccated expanses that either trap populations or facilitate mobility via the broad commons of the seas. While he is not advocating geographical determinism, Kaplan stresses that to understand the role of geography is to understand a “historical logic” lost to an age with continuous access to real time information and global travel.

In his newest book, the central premise is the dilution of Europe and its Westphalian order. He describes the Old World as “debt-ridden and economically stagnant.” “Europe now fractures from within as reactionary populism takes hold,” he writes, “and new borders go up throughout the continent to prevent the movement of Muslim refugees...” In its place, he foresees the transformation of a Eurasian singularity that links the imperial legacies of China, Russia, Turkey and Persia into one battle space.

His opening chapter is a global *tour d’horizon* and strategy tutorial. The evolution of ongoing upheavals in the Middle East and their autocratic states, coupled with modern transportation and media technologies, are bringing into being a more ferociously contested world. Kaplan’s pronounced geopolitical senses are challenged in this world, one with feudal connotations and dense mega-cities. Geography still counts in this world, and people will fight to the death for their dry parcel of it, but legal borders and the state-based map we have known for over half a century will matter much less.

The book’s title and the opening chapter draw on Kaplan’s assessment of the rising salience of the Greater Indian Ocean, and ranges from the Persian Gulf to the South China Sea and the greater Middle East and China. This matches with the route and travels of Marco Polo and not coincidentally, that of China’s ongoing One Belt, One Road initiative, which seeks to replicate the globalizing impact and influence of the early Chinese trade routes.

Beyond the old Silk Road, Kaplan predicts that the Black Sea will become a geographic center of conflict with Russia. Kaplan argues that the Black Sea is where the Russia, Ottoman, and Habsburg conflict systems merge. It is where the conflict zones of Ukraine, Crimea, Turkey and Syria overlap and are framed as contested rimlands. While the West might like to avoid these interactions by hiding behind ever higher walls and closed borders, it cannot escape them and prosper. The nature of ongoing technology and economic interactions creates more intensified connections and shrinks geographic space. Thus, Kaplan warns his readers:

So forget the dichotomy between the pessimists who predict anarchy and the optimists who predict greater connectivity: both trends will happen simultaneously. Think again of Marco Polo’s world: one of great, overwhelming danger for the traveler in which a Silk Road nexus—with all its sinews of wealth creation—nevertheless existed.

Kaplan is surely not Panglossian, but nor is he Cassandra. He does not feel it is necessary to demonize China and Russia (which some suggest the newly published Trump Administration *National Security Strategy* does). He has an optimistic view that weighs Chinese and Russian long-term vulnerabilities (stability, domestic economics,

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