Three dozen countries, representing a third of the world's population, are warmed by the waters of the Indian Ocean. Blessed with abundant natural resources, hobbled by weak political institutions, and tempted by Islamic extremism, they may well hold the key to global stability and prosperity in the 21st century.

And yet, according to Robert Kaplan, a senior fellow at the Center For a New American Security and a correspondent for The Atlantic, "Monsoon Asia," which includes Bangladesh, Burma, Indonesia, Oman and Sri Lanka, as well as China, India and Pakistan, remains hidden in plain sight: "America's overwhelming obsession with al-Qaeda has warped its strategic vision, which should be dominated by the whole Indian Ocean."

Here, Kaplan provides an elegantly-written, densely detailed and fascinating introduction to the region. Although it speaks "in a plethora of voices" and remains beset by ethnic tensions, he demonstrates that the civilization(s) of the Greater Indian Ocean "maintains the element of an integrated whole." Alongside poverty, piracy, terrorism and tyrannical governments, modernization and a middle-class are beginning to taking hold.

Kaplan believes that "even in elegant decline" the United States has "an unprecedented opportunity" to be seen "not as a land-based meddler, caught up in Islamic conflict" but as a benevolent force, indispensable rather than dominant, ready to help in tsunami emergencies (as it did in Indonesia in 2004) and working in concert with the navies of China and India.

To be sure, Kaplan acknowledges, China lusts for trade routes and ports in Bangladesh and the abundant reserves of oil, natural gas, uranium, coal, zinc, copper, precious stones, timber and hydropower in Burma (which "may be a more miserable place now than it was during the heaviest fighting of World War II") - and has "zero interest" in promoting democracy in these countries or, for that matter, anywhere else.

But it is by no means inevitable that the U.S. and the People's Republic "will become adversaries." After all, both nations must import energy, have no significant disputes over territory and inhabit opposite sides of the globe. At the moment, Kaplan emphasizes, China is, by and large, acting responsibly, to protect its economic and security interests in the region.

To remain influential, Kaplan claims, the United States must adjust to the new realities of a multi-polar world.

And tread lightly in the Indian Ocean. American policy makers will have to understand, for example, that Indonesia, with 240 million people, spread over many, many islands, and a defense budget as small as that of tiny Singapore, is vulnerable to China's military and mercantile domination.

The U.S. also needs to realize that Indonesian leaders had to sign an agreement with China in 2007 to collaborate on defense matters, even if they (secretly) hoped that India and the United States would "enmesh China in a Pacific alliance system, thereby neutralizing it."

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Associate Images:
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