

## **'Rivalry in the Indian Ocean. Why it Matters for NATO and Europe'**

Report of the meeting with Robert D. Kaplan and the Q & A session

**On 16 September 2009, the Netherlands Atlantic Association organised a meeting with the well-known publicist, Robert D. Kaplan (*The Atlantic*), to discuss the article 'Center Stage for the Twenty-first Century. Power Plays in the Indian Ocean', which Kaplan published in *Foreign Affairs* in March this year. In 'Sociëteit De Witte' in The Hague, Kaplan argued that the rising powers, China and India, are about to increase their influence on international affairs in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Indian Ocean will function as the world's center stage for the competition between the great powers. The meeting welcomed around 100 visitors and was chaired by Monika Sie Dhian Ho, vice chair of the Atlantic Association.**



Kaplan started by pleading for a new vision for the United States' and Europe's foreign policy. He argued that the West should not merely focus on Afghanistan and Iraq, but more on South-east Asia. According to Kaplan, countries such as China, India and Japan will threaten the interests of both the United States and Europe – not only because of their economic power, but also because of growing military investments. In sharp contrast with the American navy, which is in relatively

decline, China for example develops a “shop till you drop” policy, aimed at building high-tech submarines and ballistic missiles. The Indian maritime power, for its part, is extending in such a way that it soon will be ranked the third largest in the world, after those of the United States and China.

Kaplan further explained that both China and India aspire to increase their zones of influence in the Indian Ocean, above all in order to guarantee their peoples with oil and gas supplies and to intensify commercial ties with countries in Asia and the Middle East. The Chinese policy, which has become known as the ‘string of pearls’ strategy, aims at developing commercial and navy ports in friendly countries along the ocean's northern seaboard. Moreover, the Chinese government invests in constructing roads, waterways and pipelines, for example in Myanmar and Bangladesh, in order to link these countries with China's southern regions and to stimulate commercial activities there. Kaplan argued that China's presence in the Indian Ocean clashes with India's tendency to expand its military and economic ties further east and west. To be sure, the Indians want to build their own ambitious system of pipelines, all the way from Iran to Myanmar, that would ensure their country of oil and gas.

As a result of the intense rivalry between China and India, the United States is turning away from the Atlantic Ocean and is concentrating itself more and more on the Indian Ocean. According to Kaplan, Europe is no longer a key continent: “Although the most important historical events in the 20<sup>th</sup> century took place in Europe, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Indian

Ocean will be the center stage of the world.” Kaplan in particular criticised the European Union’s choice to invest above all in soft power. He argued that, in a century in which hard power will be dominant, the European countries should focus more on developing their armies and navies. “The United States will not neglect the EU if it invests in hard power,” said Kaplan. “However, if Europe continues to decrease its defence budgets, I foresee problems within the transatlantic alliance.”

With regard to the current world order, Kaplan stressed that we are still living in a unipolar world. According to Kaplan, the United States maintains itself as the world’s most powerful country, above all as a result of its highly advanced navy. However, in the future, the world is most likely to be characterised by a multipolar order, in which China and India, but also Russia and Iran will manifest themselves as key players. Kaplan argued that Iran is developing itself, despite the recent revolt during the elections, as the “most progressive country of the Middle East”. Furthermore, Iran is likely to take strong advantage of its trade agreements with India. Russia, for its part, is in a strong domestic position as a result of its energy resources. Since both Iran and Russia have a strong interest in a stable situation in the Caucasus, Kaplan predicted that we will witness a strong Russian-Iranian alliance emerge in the future.

Kaplan finished while referring to the danger of instability that will come with the multipolar world. It is striking, however, that he continued to stress the importance of the United States – also in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. According to Kaplan, America’s maritime presence in the Indian Ocean will be of fundamental value in order to function as a third and stabilising power, next to China and India.

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