

Book Review

PRISONERS OF GEOGRAPHY: TEN MAPS THAT TELL YOU EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT GLOBAL POLITICS

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Elliot and Thompson Limited,
2016. 256 pages
ISBN: 9781783961412

Tim Marshall is an esteemed authority on foreign affairs, with more than thirty years' experience in broadcasting, reporting, analysis and writing about past, present and future geopolitical affairs – most of the time reporting from the front line on major world events and conflict zones that had significant geopolitical effects on global politics, such as the Balkan wars of the 1990s, the Kosovo crisis of 1999, the first Gulf War (1991), the US war in Afghanistan (2001). He also covered three US presidential elections (*The What and The Why*, 2016). *Prisoners of geography: Ten maps that tell you everything you need to know about global politics* is arguably the most successful of his books, and makes for an intriguing read by an author with such an impressive résumé.

The cover of the book is beautifully designed, drawing one's attention to the geopolitical word cloud spreading across Africa, Europe and Asia. This immediately creates a feeling of excitement to start reading this highly acclaimed book, with over 500 000 copies sold worldwide.

The book provides an excellent outline of contemporary geopolitical issues facing all the major regions of the globe, of which Russia, China, the United States, Western Europe, Africa, the Middle East, India and Pakistan, Korea and Japan, Latin America and the Arctic are discussed. The author argues that global socioeconomic development, political ideologies and international affairs are shaped by the features of the physical landscape and geographical factors (e.g. demographics, availability of natural resources and climate) that characterise these 10 regions. A chapter is dedicated to each region, which comprehensively describes the geospatial location and geographical characteristics that influence the attack and defence strategies of each region. Each chapter is prefaced by a political map of the region for orientation purposes, and shows boundaries, major

cities and prominent features. Additionally, 10 smaller maps are presented, which are more focused and orientated, and which enjoy more explanation by the author as key areas of past, present and possible future conflict zones. Even though these maps serve their purpose to orientate and provide reference to discussions, one let-down is that they are monotonous and lack diversity.

The author mentions that no one geographical feature is more important than the next (p. 2), but indirectly focuses on the influence of rivers, seas and mountains as important features that determine action. Rightly so, because all 10 regions discussed in the book are in some way or another affected by water bodies and mountains that influence international affairs. The author discusses each region by focusing on both internal and external matters. Aspects such as population distribution, ethnic and religious rivalries, international trade and relationships, national and international politics, access to natural resources, conflicts and the search for power (supremacy) are described. In these discussions, the focus falls on past, present and future trends and how the shape of the land (i.e. its geographical characteristics) influences and dictates the actions in a region. This review highlights a broad description of four superpowers (Russia, China, the United States and Western Europe), which the author identifies and discusses in this book. The other six regions are only briefly cited.

The author highlights that Russia is surrounded mostly by mountains and sea and its most vulnerable point of attack is across the North European Plain, which is where the focus of Russia lies. The size of Russia provides it with a geographical advantage that the author calls 'strategic depth', meaning that opposing forces need long and sustainable supply lines to attack from the west. It is stated that this has never happened successfully. Conversely, Marshall notes that Russia will never be a global superpower, because of its geographical location. As he states, "[t]he bars of Russia's geographical prison ... are still in place" (p. 79). Arguments are made that Russia's quest for warm water open sea-lanes in the south, which has still not been achieved, is the main reason for shaping their global policies and their continuous conflict with Ukraine. Mention is made that in future, Russia will use the concept of "ethnic Russia" (p. 18), which describes its population in territories outside the Russian borders, and its energy resources (i.e. oil and gas) to justify potential international influences and actions.

It was interesting to note the notion that like Russia, China selected the territorial defence strategy of "attack as defence" (p. 38), because it covers a vast territory, which is protected by the Pacific Ocean to the east and south, the Himalayas to the west and the Gobi Desert to the north. However, considering the fact that most of China's population is located within the heartland, known as the North China Plain, the defence strategy would be nullified with a massive offensive focused on this area. It is further stated that China has always made use of short sea routes for trade and therefore never required naval supremacy. However, the argument is put forward that this is changing. To patrol and occupy maritime borders effectively and ultimately control the South China Sea for the purpose of forcing the voyaging US Navy back to their territory, a strong navy will be needed. This move will evidently give them authority over their neighbours in terms of territorial control and access to resources.

Marshall claims the United States (US) is a superpower because of its location, and he comprehensively describes the advantages of the geography of this region. The main idea of this argument is that the United States is ideally located geographically and has the advantage of long coastlines with natural harbours, navigable waterways, interconnected river systems, fertile land, and access to rich natural resources. Why then the global involvement? The author states that the US global strategy is to establish and maintain an international geopolitical footprint to be the supreme economic and military power. Through global alliances, the United States has forces that are strategically placed around the globe to act and get involved in any foreign entanglement that would challenge its global domination. Mention is made that there are three such global powers, namely a united Europe, Russia and China, of which China is the most likely to overtake the United States as the leading superpower.

Much of the same geographical description followed in the previous chapters is presented in the chapter on Western Europe. The importance of Europe's climate, river networks, mountain ranges, open plains and fertile soil is mentioned. The author further states that Western Europe has one important disadvantage – disconnection through natural barriers. The lay of the land creates a lack of cohesion between countries that still act independently from one another by putting their own interests before the interests of the region. In the second half of this chapter, the author briefly describes the geography of France, Germany and the United Kingdom (UK). The relationship between France and Germany is highlighted, and the author states that this love–hate relationship created the gateway for establishing the European Union (EU). Marshall refers to the unique geographical situation of the United Kingdom – a secluded location – which has the advantage of selecting either to isolate itself from the mainland or to decide when to interact, which normally happens when its supremacy is challenged or at risk. No mention or reference is made by the author about the effect of Brexit on the supremacy of the United Kingdom in the European region or elsewhere in the world. An interesting consideration for future work would be whether the United Kingdom would maintain its superpower status with limited and restricted support by European countries.

Regarding the chapters on Africa and the Middle East, the main ideas highlighted are that isolation, exploitation of resources and people, and the delineation of artificial boundary lines by colonial powers, with no regard for the arrangement of physical features and cultures, are a formula for disaster. The consequences are ethical and cultural unrest, division between religious groups, and civil wars, which are limiting the development of these regions to be global economic role players.

The same theme about artificial boundaries on maps and conflict between countries is visible in the chapter on India and Pakistan. Geography placed these two opposing states together. Pakistan is fixated with what India does and why they are doing it. So, too, is India obsessed with Pakistan, but India is also an evolving economy and political role player, an emerging global power. This chapter describes the past, present and future rivalries between these two states, and refers to the involvement of China and the United States in the region.

Concerning Korea and Japan, not much reference is made to the geographical layout and characteristics that shape this region, as in the other chapters. Marshall creates a picture of uncertainty regarding the predictability of the tension that exists between North and South Korea. There is a troubled past between these two countries relating to territorial occupation disparities. The author notes that the geographical barriers of Japan caused it to militarise in the first half of the twentieth century. Consequently, Japan was punished by the Western world, which brought its economy and industrial development to its knees. However, a common enemy – Communist China – created the path for an alliance between the United States and Japan. Consequently, Japan is well on its way to rise to be a global powerhouse again.

The chapter on Latin America describes the barriers that location and geography create for international relations, internal cohesion and development. The influence of colonialism on the region, the relationship between the United States and Mexico, and the interests of China in the region are discussed.

The last chapter, the Arctic, mentions that this almost uninhabitable place has never really been on the radar of most nations. The author states that this is changing and that the twenty-first century will see more disputes amongst countries over this region, because energy had been discovered. Russia is claiming parts of this region, but the United States, Canada, Norway and Denmark are opposing these claims. Marshall foresees a possible zone for future military conflict, or perhaps a communal territory with rich natural resources that will be shared by all – only time will tell.

Prisoners of geography: Ten maps that tell you everything you need to know about global politics by Tim Marshall is a fascinating read that combines historical and regional geography. It identifies key geopolitical issues facing the major global regions and comprehensively outlines past, present and possible future conflict zones. The book lacks an in-depth analysis of major conflict events of the past that shaped the world, as we know it today, but generally provides a good background to why geography plays such a defining role in international affairs. However, this simplicity makes the book easy to understand. The author makes mention of the role that modern technology plays to overcome geographical barriers, but only to a limited extent, and no mention is made of the role that nuclear weapons might play in the future to overcome geographical barriers. Nevertheless, the way that the author articulates geography as a major determinant that influences politics on a regional, national and global scale is quite brilliant. A very informative and easy-to-read book that is highly recommended to anyone who wants to understand the concept of geopolitics better – more specifically, the influence of geography on global affairs and how history has shaped the world as we know it today.

An illustrated version and explanatory text for children and teenagers alike, called *Prisoners of geography: Our world explained in 12 simple maps*, originated from this book. This latter book was published on 31 October 2019 (Geographical, 2019) and might be a good read to consider for educating the young about global geopolitics.

ENDNOTES

Geographical. "Prisoners of geography: An interview with Tim Marshall". 30 October 2019. <<https://geographical.co.uk/people/i-m-a-geographer/item/3466-tim-marshall>> Accessed on 24 January 2020.

