

Prisoners of Geography: Ten Maps That Explain Everything About the World

By Tim Marshall



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In the bestselling tradition of *Why Nations Fail* and *The Revenge of Geography*, an award-winning journalist uses ten maps of crucial regions to explain the geo-political strategies of the world powers.

All leaders of nations are constrained by geography. Their choices are limited by mountains, rivers, seas, and concrete. To understand world events, news organizations and other authorities often focus on people, ideas, and political movements, but without geography, we never have the full picture. Now, in the relevant and timely *Prisoners of Geography*, seasoned journalist Tim Marshall examines Russia, China, the USA, Latin America, the Middle East, Africa, Europe, Japan and Korea, and Greenland and the Arctic—their weather, seas, mountains, rivers, deserts, and borders—to provide a context often missing from our political reportage: how the physical characteristics of these countries affect their strengths and vulnerabilities and the decisions made by their leaders.

In ten, up-to-date maps of each region, Marshall explains in clear and engaging prose the complex geo-political strategies of these key parts of the globe. What does it mean that Russia must have a navy, but also has frozen ports six months a year? How does this affect Putin's treatment of the Ukraine? How is China's future constrained by its geography? Why will Europe never be united? Why will America never be invaded? Shining a light on the unavoidable physical realities that shape all of our aspirations and endeavors, *Prisoners of Geography* is the critical guide to one of the major (and most often overlooked) determining factors in world history.

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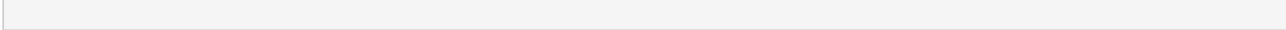
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Editorial Review

Review

"[Q]uite simply, one of the best books about geopolitics you could imagine: reading it is like having a light shone on your understanding." (*The Evening Standard*)

"In an ever more complex, chaotic and interlinked world, *Prisoners of Geography* is a concise and useful primer on geopolitics." (*Newsweek*)

"Marshall is excellent on some of the highways and byways of geo-politics." (*Financial Times*)

"Fans of geography, history and politics (and maps) will be enthralled." (*Fort Worth Star-Telegram*)

"This is not a book about environmental determinism – the geography of a region is never presented as fatalistic; but it does send a timely reminder that despite technological advances, geography is always there, often forcing the hand of world leaders." (*Geographical Magazine*)

"Lively and perceptive political and historical analyses are frequent. The chapter on China is excellent; the chapter on Africa combines geography and history in a convincing way; the chapter on Western Europe...is a brilliant narrative of European relations, particularly between France and Germany. The superb chapter on the Middle East makes for a clear indictment of the Sykes–Picot agreements and of their tracing of artificial borders. The chapter on the Arctic is precise and informative ...A very lively, sensible and informative series of country reports in which geography occupies its rightful place along with shrewd historical reminders and political judgments." (*Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*)

"Marshall's insistence on seeing the world through the lens of geography compels a fresh way of looking at maps—not just as objects for orientation or works of art, but as guideposts to the often thorny relations between nations." (*New York Times Book Review*)

"This book is especially timely...Landscapes, rugged or otherwise, and what the land holds in resources, exert their own kind of sway that no one, not even a Putin, can surmount. This book grabbed me because of its enormous relevance to our world today." (*Booktrib.com*)

"A convincing analysis of Russian geopolitical thinking....Also makes clear the terrible price the world has had to pay because European officials decided to create nation-states with borders that completely ignored cultural geography." (*Washington Post*)

About the Author

Tim Marshall is a leading authority on foreign affairs with more than twenty-five years of reporting experience. He was diplomatic editor at Sky News, and before that worked for the BBC. He has reported from forty countries and covered conflicts in Croatia, Bosnia, Macedonia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Israel. He is the author of the *New York Times* bestseller *Prisoners of Geography: Ten Maps that Tell You Everything You Need to Know About Global Politics*. He has written for *The Times* (London), *The Sunday Times* (London), *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, and *Daily Telegraph*, and his blog *Foreign Matters* was shortlisted for the Orwell Prize 2010. He is founder and editor of the current affairs site TheWhatandtheWhy.com.

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Prisoners of Geography

INTRODUCTION

Vladimir Putin says he is a religious man, a great supporter of the Russian Orthodox Church. If so, he may well go to bed each night, say his prayers, and ask God: “Why didn’t you put some mountains in Ukraine?”

If God had built mountains in Ukraine, then the great expanse of flatland that is the North European Plain would not be such encouraging territory from which to attack Russia repeatedly. As it is, Putin has no choice: he must at least attempt to control the flatlands to the west. So it is with all nations, big or small. The landscape imprisons their leaders, giving them fewer choices and less room to maneuver than you might think. This was true of the Athenian Empire, the Persians, the Babylonians, and before; it was true of every leader seeking high ground from which to protect their tribe.

The land on which we live has always shaped us. It has shaped the wars, the power, politics, and social development of the peoples that now inhabit nearly every part of the earth. Technology may seem to overcome the distances between us in both mental and physical space, but it is easy to forget that the land where we live, work, and raise our children is hugely important and that the choices of those who lead the seven billion inhabitants of this planet will to some degree always be shaped by the rivers, mountains, deserts, lakes, and seas that constrain us all—as they always have.

Overall there is no one geographical factor that is more important than any other. Mountains are no more important than deserts, nor rivers than jungles. In different parts of the planet different geographical features are among the dominant factors in determining what people can and cannot do.

Broadly speaking, geopolitics looks at the ways in which international affairs can be understood through geographical factors: not just the physical landscape—the natural barriers of mountains or connections of river networks, for example—but also climate, demographics, cultural regions, and access to natural resources. Factors such as these can have an important impact on many different aspects of our civilization, from political and military strategy to human social development, including language, trade, and religion.

The physical realities that underpin national and international politics are too often disregarded in both writing about history and in contemporary reporting of world affairs. Geography is clearly a fundamental part of the “why” as well as the “what.” Take, for example, China and India: two massive countries with huge populations that share a very long border but are not politically or culturally aligned. It wouldn’t be surprising if these two giants had fought each other in several wars, but in fact, apart from one monthlong battle in 1962, they never have. Why? Because between them is the highest mountain range in the world, and it is practically impossible to advance large military columns through or over the Himalayas. As technology becomes more sophisticated, of course, ways are emerging of overcoming this obstacle, but the physical barrier remains a deterrent, and so both countries focus their foreign policy on other regions, while keeping a wary eye on each other.

Individual leaders, ideas, technology, and other factors all play a role in shaping events, but they are temporary. Each new generation will still face the physical obstructions created by the Hindu Kush and the Himalayas, the challenges created by the rainy season, and the disadvantages of limited access to natural minerals or food sources.

I first became interested in this subject when covering the wars in the Balkans in the 1990s. I watched close at hand as the leaders of various peoples, be they Serbian, Croat, or Bosniak, deliberately reminded their “tribes” of the ancient divisions and, yes, ancient suspicions in a region crowded with diversity. Once they had pulled the peoples apart, it didn’t take much to then push them against each other.

The River Ibar in Kosovo is a prime example. Ottoman rule over Serbia was cemented by the Battle of Kosovo Polje in 1389, fought near where the Ibar flows through the city of Mitrovica. Over the following centuries the Serb population began to withdraw behind the Ibar as Muslim Albanians gradually descended from the mountainous Malesija region into Kosovo, where they became a majority by the mid-eighteenth century. Fast-forward to the twentieth century and there was still a clear ethnic-religious division roughly marked by the river. Then in 1999, battered by NATO from the air and the Kosovo Liberation Army on the ground, the Yugoslav (Serbian) military retreated across the Ibar, quickly followed by most of the remaining Serb population. The river became the de facto border of what some countries now recognize as the independent state of Kosovo.

Mitrovica was also where the advancing NATO ground forces came to a halt. During the three-month war, there had been veiled threats that NATO intended to invade all of Serbia. In truth, the restraints of both geography and politics meant the NATO leaders never really had that option. Hungary had made it clear that it would not allow an invasion from its territory, as it feared reprisals against the 350,000 ethnic Hungarians in northern Serbia. The alternative was an invasion from the south, which would have gotten them to the Ibar in double-quick time; but NATO would then have faced the mountains above them.

I was working with a team of Serbs in Belgrade at the time and asked what would happen if NATO came: “We will put our cameras down, Tim, and pick up guns” was the response. They were liberal Serbs, good friends of mine and opposed to their government, but they still pulled out the maps and showed me where the Serbs would defend their territory in the mountains, and where NATO would grind to a halt. It was some relief to be given a geography lesson in why NATO’s choices were more limited than the Brussels PR machine made public.

An understanding of how crucial the physical landscape was in reporting news in the Balkans stood me in good stead in the years that followed. For example, in 2001, a few weeks after 9/11, I saw a demonstration of how, even with today’s modern technology, climate still dictates the military possibilities of even the world’s most powerful armies. I was in northern Afghanistan, having crossed the border river from Tajikistan on a raft, in order to link up with the Northern Alliance (NA) troops who were fighting the Taliban.

The American fighter jets and bombers were already overhead, pounding Taliban and al-Qaeda positions on the cold, dusty plains and hills east of Mazar-e-Sharif in order to pave the way for the advance on Kabul. After a few weeks it was obvious that the NA were gearing up to move south. And then the world changed color.

The most intense sandstorm I have ever experienced blew in, turning everything a mustard-yellow color. At the height of the storm you couldn’t see more than a few yards ahead of you, and the only thing clear was that the Americans’ satellite technology, at the cutting edge of science, was helpless, blind in the face of the climate of this wild land. Everyone, from President Bush and the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the NA troops on the ground, just had to wait. Then it rained and the sand that had settled on everything turned into mud. The rain came down so hard that the baked-mud huts we were living in looked as if they were melting. Again it was clear that the move south was on hold until geography finished having its say. The rules of geography, which Hannibal, Sun Tzu, and Alexander the Great all knew, still apply to today’s leaders.

More recently, in 2012, I was given another lesson in geostrategy: As Syria descended into full-blown civil war, I was standing on a Syrian hilltop overlooking a valley south of the city of Hama and saw a hamlet burning in the distance. Syrian friends pointed out a much larger village about a mile away, from where they said the attack had come. They then explained that if one side could push enough people from the other faction out of the valley, then the valley could be joined onto other land that led to the country's only motorway, and as such would be useful in carving out a piece of contiguous, viable territory that one day could be used to create a mini-statelet if Syria could not be put back together again. Where before I saw only a burning hamlet, I could now see its strategic importance and understand how political realities are shaped by the most basic physical realities.

Geopolitics affects every country, whether at war, as in the examples above, or at peace. There will be instances in every region you can name. In these pages I cannot explore each one: Canada, Australia, and Indonesia, among others, get no more than a brief mention, although a whole book could be devoted to Australia alone and the ways in which its geography has shaped its connections with other parts of the world, both physically and culturally. Instead I have focused on the powers and regions that best illustrate the key points of the book, covering the legacy of geopolitics from the past (nation-forming); the most pressing situations we face today (the troubles in Ukraine, the expanding influence of China); and looking to the future (growing competition in the Arctic).

In Russia we see the influence of the Arctic, and how it limits Russia's ability to be a truly global power. In China we see the limitations of power without a global navy and how in 2016 it became obvious the speed at which China is seeking to change this. The chapter on the United States illustrates how shrewd decisions to expand its territory in key regions allowed it to achieve its modern destiny as a two-ocean superpower. Europe shows us the value of flatland and navigable rivers in connecting regions and producing a culture able to kick-start the modern world, while Africa is a prime example of the effects of isolation.

The chapter on the Middle East demonstrates why drawing lines on maps while disregarding the topography and, equally important, the geographical cultures in a given area is a recipe for trouble. We will continue to witness that trouble this century. The same theme surfaces in the chapters on Africa and India/Pakistan. The colonial powers used ink to draw lines that bore no relation to the physical realities of the region, and created some of the most artificial borders the world has seen. In the Middle East, an attempt is now being made to redraw them in blood.

Very different from the examples of Kosovo or Syria are Japan and Korea, in that they are mostly ethnically homogenous. But they have other problems: Japan is an island nation devoid of natural resources, while the division of the Koreas is a problem still waiting to be solved. Meanwhile, Latin America is an anomaly. In its far south it is so cut off from the outside world that global trading is difficult, and its internal geography is a barrier to creating a trading bloc as successful as the EU.

Finally, we come to one of the most uninhabitable places on earth—the Arctic. For most of history, humans have ignored it, but in the twentieth century we found energy there, and twenty-first-century diplomacy will determine who owns—and sells—that resource.

Seeing geography as a decisive factor in the course of human history can be construed as a bleak view of the world, which is why it is disliked in some intellectual circles. It suggests that nature is more powerful than man and that we can go only so far in determining our own fate. However, other factors clearly have an influence on events, too. Any sensible person can see that technology is now bending the iron rules of geography. It has found ways over, under, or through some of the barriers. The Americans can now fly a plane all the way from Missouri to Mosul on a bombing mission without needing to land to refuel. That,

along with their great aircraft carrier battle groups, means they no longer absolutely have to have an ally or a colony in order to extend their global reach around the world. Of course, if they do have an air base on the island of Diego Garcia, or permanent access to the port in Bahrain, then they have more options; but it is less essential.

So airpower has changed the rules, as, in a different way, has the Internet. But geography, and the history of how nations have established themselves within that geography, remains crucial to our understanding of the world today and to our future.

The conflict in Iraq and Syria is rooted in colonial powers ignoring the rules of geography, whereas the Chinese occupation of Tibet is rooted in obeying them. America's global foreign policy is dictated by them, and even the power projection of the last superpower standing can only mitigate the rules that nature, or God, handed down.

What are those rules? The place to begin is in the land where power is hard to defend, and so for centuries its leaders have compensated by pushing outward. It is the land without mountains to its west: Russia.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

William Perez:

As people who live in typically the modest era should be revise about what going on or data even knowledge to make these people keep up with the era that is certainly always change and progress. Some of you maybe will certainly update themselves by reading through books. It is a good choice in your case but the problems coming to you is you don't know what type you should start with. This Prisoners of Geography: Ten Maps That Explain Everything About the World is our recommendation to help you keep up with the world. Why, since this book serves what you want and need in this era.

Anthony Pisano:

A lot of people always spent all their free time to vacation as well as go to the outside with them family or their friend. Are you aware? Many a lot of people spent these people free time just watching TV, or perhaps playing video games all day long. In order to try to find a new activity honestly, that is look different you can read any book. It is really fun for you personally. If you enjoy the book that you just read you can spent the whole day to reading a reserve. The book Prisoners of Geography: Ten Maps That Explain Everything About the World it is extremely good to read. There are a lot of individuals who recommended this book. These were enjoying reading this book. In case you did not have enough space to develop this book you can buy often the e-book. You can m0ore quickly to read this book from a smart phone. The price is not to cover but this book features high quality.

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