

Prisoners of geography: ten maps that explain everything about the world, by Tim Marshall

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Book Review

Tim Marshall, **Prisoners of geography: ten maps that explain everything about the world**, New York, Scribner, 2015, 291 pp., \$15.00 (hbk), ISBN 978-15011-2146-3

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Maps, world atlases, and travel books have always been invaluable sources of geographic knowledge. These sources, and their pedagogical significance, are a powerful tool used by geopolitical actors to control territories, peoples, and discourses. Thus, world leaders, even leaders of weak nations, are acutely aware of their geography's importance. This is crucial in the assessment of a state's geopolitical strengths and weaknesses in relation to its national progress and survival. Perhaps this is the very reason states have sought to control geostrategic locations such as gates, seaways, plateaus, farmlands, hillsides, mountain passes, and water resources since the beginning of statehood. These strategic locations are believed to be advantageous to those who control them.

However, controlling strategic locations does not automatically bring advantages. Sometimes having rich resources and occupying crucial locations deliver geopolitical challenges, especially if the state is not in a position to use those advantages strategically. In the case of weaker states in the Middle East and colonised Africa, recent history has shown that rich resources and strategic locations brought these regions nothing but misery, predicaments, and subversion. For instance, the fight in Syria reminds us that a new colonial attitude is at work and in action to control rich resources and strategic locations. Thus, one can assume that states are products of their geography or, taken to the extreme, 'prisoners of their geography'.

In this sense, Tim Marshall's book entitled *'Prisoners of Geography: Ten Maps That Explain Everything About the World'* emerges, provoking one to consider recent arguments that validate the importance of geographic exceptionalism in current times (see, Robert Kaplan's *The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells us about Coming Conflicts and the Battle against Fate*, 2013). Marshall, as a practising geographer and a prominent journalist, writes his book not because he wants to awaken the old controversy of environmental determinism, which assumes geographic characteristics overpower human subjects and shape their fate, but he does argue that geography is not a passive actor in the shaping of human actions and behaviours. He further argues choices that world leaders make are often limited to their geographic conditions and this limits the potentials of their state. Although Marshall acknowledges that technology eases some of the challenges and obstacles of our geographies, the lands that we live on will have a great impact on how we determine our capabilities and strengths. He notes, ... '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’ (p. 2). Considering the recent geopolitical aspirations to control strategic locations and oil-rich towns and cities in the Middle East and elsewhere, this does not seem to be an exaggerated claim, for sure. Marshall, in his book, does a great job of analysing essential points of our geopolitical struggles and dilemmas not only from a geographer’s point of view but also that of a journalist.

Marshall brings 10 substantiating maps into our attention. These maps represent not only two-dimensional world affairs of our time, but they also help us understand how geopolitical realities shape, and are shaped by, states’ capabilities and their options to approach external and internal challenges. These maps, Marshall argues, demonstrate geopolitical fault lines and where political geography potentials lie. The regional maps outlined in the book include Russia, China, The United States, Western Europe, Africa, The Middle East, India and Pakistan, Korea and Japan, Latin America, and the Arctic.

In the case of Russia, Marshall finds that the country is limited by its enormous, but no less ominous, geography stretching from the Baltic Sea to the Sea of Japan and encompassing 11 time zones. With this vast geography, Russia is, of course, a fortunate state, but also a victim of its size at the same time. The benefits of its enormous size, no doubt, provide Russia with rich resources and plenty of space to exploit, but at the same time this gigantic geography weakens the state as its Far-East region is being depopulated and becoming empty land. Thus, uninhabitable Russian Siberia and frozen sea routes compel Russia to push for warmer ports and useful sea accesses. Marshall quotes Peter the Great’s advice to his descendants urging Russia to pursue an aggressive approach to access warm waters (p. 19). Marshall notes that Russia may not have easy access to warm waters, but it has plenty of other natural resources that bless the country. Furthermore, he argues that Russia’s strength does not rely on its nuclear weapons, army, or air force but instead on its gas and oil. After the US, Russia is the world’s number one supplier of natural gas and never hesitates to use this power to its advantage if the need arises.

With its population of 1.4 billion, China, on the other hand, is becoming the most critical economic and political power in our time. Marshall spends a considerable amount of time on the many reasons to be frightened of China’s aspiration to become the 21st century’s superpower. As with other states, China, too, carries geographic advantages and disadvantages in its pursuit of world leadership. The most striking disadvantage to China is its enormous population and the need to produce to feed so many people while at the same time competing with other powerful world nations for energy and market. To Marshall, China has locked itself into the global economy. He highlights that:

if we don’t buy, they don’t make. And if they don’t make, there will be mass unemployment. If there is mass and long-term unemployment, in an age when the Chinese are a people packed into urban areas, the inevitable social unrest could be, like everything else in modern China, on a scale hitherto unseen. (p. 61)

For Marshall, China is blessed with its geostrategic location and massive army but the country is unavoidably doomed with its gigantic population and by the need to produce to stay afloat.

Marshall continues to scrutinise eight other regions and states that are either imprisoned by their geography or beautified by their convenient location and productive landforms. According to him, Europe and the US are two examples of those advantaged regions where the geography shapes history in their favour.

Prisoners of Geography stands out as a prominent journalistic-style book demonstrating and convincing us that geography not only shapes our political history, but also provides clues to why we live our lives the way we do. As one critique highlights, Marshall does not refrain from asking thorny questions and seeking sharp answers to those questions. His approach, with no doubt, is prone to provoke the decades-old debate emphasising geographical determinism and colonial discourse. But nevertheless Marshall's contentious book on 10 maps that explain how and why world leaders make certain choices and how and why they become prisoners of their geography as they make these choices should be considered as a concise and a useful *entrée* for students of geopolitics.

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