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Book recommendation

Prisoners of Geography: Ten maps that tell you everything you need to know about global politics

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ABSTRACT

This article reviews Tim Marshall's *Prisoners of Geography: Ten Maps That Tell You Everything You Need to Know About Global Politics*, analyzing how physical, demographic, and natural landscape features inherently shape international relations and state development. By examining critical geopolitical arenas, the text illustrates how mountains, rivers, climates, and natural resources govern historical decisions and contemporary conflicts. Furthermore, it explores the enduring instability caused by colonial borderlines that disregarded physical and cultural geographies. Ultimately, the synthesis demonstrates that despite modern technological advancements, geographic realities remain decisive factors in determining global power structures, territorial conflicts, and emerging geopolitical shifts driven by environmental change.

Geopolitics explains international affairs through geographical factors – not just the physical landscape, but also the climate, demographics, cultural regions and access to natural resources.

Tim Marshall starts his book on the premise that the land where one lives shapes the wars, power, politics, and social development of the populations that inhabit it. Technology may seem to overcome distances in both mental and physical space, but the land on which we live, work and raise our children is extremely relevant, and the choices of those who govern us will be shaped by the rivers, mountains, deserts, lakes and seas that our land hosts.

In different parts of the planet, different geographic features determine what people can and cannot do.

Colonialism, for instance, demonstrated that drawing borders across maps in disregard of physical and social geography – including topography, culture and the physical reality of the territory – results in what is today one of the greatest reasons for war. However, ethnic homogeneity and different geographical features prove to be problematic in a world competing for power and control of natural resources.

Given the impossibility of exploring each instance of geopolitics in the world, Marshall focused on the powers and regions that best illustrate the legacy of geopolitics from past, present and future stressors.

The first chapter is dedicated to Russia, explaining how its freezing climate limits its ability to be a truly global power and, at the same time, how climate is opening new opportunities for Moscow.

Winston Churchill observed: "[Russia] is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma, but perhaps there is a key. That key is Russian national interest. I am convinced that there is nothing they admire so much as strength, and there is nothing for which they have less respect than weakness, especially military weakness"[1]. This idea can be easily applied to Russia today, which, despite being wrapped in a now threadbare cloak of democracy, authoritarianism, imperialism and nationalism remain at its core.

Throughout history, Russia has experienced several invasions from the West; also, the inaction of Mikhail Gorbachev in the face of the establishment of NATO and the fall of the Berlin Wall is largely considered "a major geopolitical disaster of the century"[2]. Indeed, as with all great powers, it thinks in terms of the next hundred years and understands that anything could happen. In doing so, it is facilitated by its geographical grandiosity, which posed an imperative expressed by Putin himself in the speech about the 2022 Ukraine annexation: "Russia found itself in a position it could not retreat from. If you compress the spring all the way to its limit, it will snap back hard. You must always remember this"[3].

In China, instead, we observe a civilisation in its attempt to evolve into a state, with the limitations power suffers in the absence of a global navy. A feature perpetuated from the past is the prosperity of the coastal regions in comparison to the inland areas; this added to the massive influx of people into urban areas and accentuated regional disparities.

The region is further delineated by the Yellow Sea, East China Sea and South China Sea, which collectively border the Pacific and Indian Oceans. China has a plethora of well-protected harbours, which have historically been utilised for commercial purposes.

[1] Tim Marshall, Prisoners of geography: Ten maps that tell you everything you need to know about global politics, London, Elliott&Thompson , 2025, p. 4.
[2] *Ivi*, p. 7.
[3] *Ivi*, p. 15.

However, beyond these harbours lie several substantial challenges, including Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, and Japan. As the jungle of Laos border reaches Myanmar, the hills become extreme mountains and begin to merge into the Himalayas, which run the length of the Chinese-Indian border (and the problem of Tibet) before descending in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Tajikistan.

The book further shifts toward the United States, which illustrates how shared decisions to expand territory in key regions allowed it to achieve its modern destiny as a two-ocean superpower.

The territory may be divided into up to three parts. First, we can find the East Coast Plain leading to the Appalachian Mountains. Then, we have the Great Plains stretching all the way to the Rocky Mountains, which contain the Mississippi Basin, with navigable rivers all the way down to the Gulf of Mexico, sheltered by several islands. Once over the massive mountains, we get to the desert, the Sierra Nevada Mountains and the shores of the Pacific Ocean. In the North, above the Great Lakes, lies the Canadian Shield and, in the South-West, the desert. The geographical characteristics of the region had determined that if a political entity were able to gain control of the land extending "from sea to shining sea", it would become a great power, the greatest in history.

Western Europe exemplifies the value of flat land and navigable rivers in connecting regions and developing a shared culture. The region is defined by the Strait of Gibraltar in the south, the Arctic Ocean in the north, the Atlantic Ocean in the west, and the Ural Mountains in the east. Its climate blessed the territory with the right amount of rainfall to cultivate crops on a large scale, and the right type of soil for them to flourish in. This allowed the population to focus on ideas and technology, facilitating its growth over millennia and maintaining division "only" between its geographical and linguistic regions.

In contrast, Africa provides an example of the effects of isolation: the vast majority of the continent, excluding the Sahara, underwent development in a state of isolation from the Eurasian landmass, where ideas and technology were exchanged from East to West and vice versa, but not North to South. Being a huge continent, it has always consisted of different regions, climates and cultures, but what they all had in common was their isolation from each other and the outside world, especially in the most continental regions, such as the Congo and Sudan. Colonialism did not help in overcoming this challenge, with many Africans now partially prisoners of the political geography established by the Europeans. The ethnic conflicts within Sudan, Somalia, the DR Congo, Nigeria, Mali and many other countries are evidence that the European idea of geography did not fit the reality of Africa's demographics. To some extent, modern civil wars are now occurring because the settlers told different nations that they were one nation in one state; following the expulsion of the European powers, a dominant ethnic group emerged, seeking to exercise absolute rule over the region, thereby perpetuating a cycle of violence.

The Middle East is another example of why drawing lines on maps while disregarding topography and geographical cultures is a recipe for trouble. Its very name is based on a European view of the world. They created some of the most artificial borders the world has seen; therefore, it should not be surprising that attempts to redraw them followed in bloodshed. Before the arrival of the Europeans, the region had experienced instances of

violence and extremism. However, the arbitrary establishment of borders in a territory where communities had not developed a sense of coexistence could not be considered a sustainable solution for achieving justice, equality and stability. During its nationalist struggles, Europe experienced centuries of fighting as nations looked for a state, while in the Middle East new states looked for a nation. But given the existence of numerous linguistic, ethnic and religious groups within these states, the establishment of a shared national identity has proven to be a challenging endeavour. Some of the region's structures date back centuries, so when the Europeans imposed the idea of a nation-state with a central government, it failed to take hold, thereby creating the conditions in which modern violent Islamism has its roots. L. P. Harthley once said, "The past is still with us. In some places it's not a foreign country", and the Middle East is one of the places where the past is now[4].

This phenomenon is also evident in the chapters regarding India and Pakistan, where colonial powers drew artificial borders on paper, ignoring the physical reality of the region. They share a border along 2,000 miles; however, something new in the past decade happened: while Pakistan still obsesses about India, India has moved on to progress on the world stage.

This region is a peninsula surrounded to the west by the Arabian Sea, to the east by the Bay of Bengal, and to the south by the Indian Ocean. The topography of Pakistan includes its narrow coastline that extends from the Iranian border, the hills rising through the province of Balochistan, and the mountains that connect the country to Afghanistan and the Karakoram Range, which then leads to the Himalayas that extend all the way to Myanmar. From there, India curves around Bangladesh, and the terrain descends to the Bay of Bengal. Finally, the interior frame contains India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan. The region has always been divided by ancient disparities between Punjab and Gujarat, Islam and Hinduism; when the British arrived, they decided in 1947 to break the subcontinent into two, and later three, major political entities: India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Japan and Korea present a distinct case, being ethnically homogeneous yet exhibiting divergent geographical features. Following the defeat of Japan in 1945, the Korean Peninsula was divided by the 38th parallel, a decision that was made by two junior officers within the White House. The northern region was placed under the oversight of communist regimes, with the Soviets and Communist China presiding over it. In contrast, the southern region was established as a pro-American dictatorship. They have a territorial dispute with Japan over the Dokdo or Takeshima Islands that lie between them. The South Koreans currently control the rocky outcrops, good fishing grounds and possible gas reserves, while Japan seeks control to protect itself and develop a suitable navy.

Meanwhile, Latin America constitutes an anomaly: its far south is cut off from the outside world, while its internal geography remains a barrier to creating a trading bloc as successful as the European Union. This demonstrates that it is possible to transfer the Old World's knowledge and technology to the New, but if geography is unfavourable, then the success of this endeavour will be limited, a situation that will be exacerbated

[4] *Ivi*, p. 224.

if the political situation is not taken into consideration. The settlers' primary objective was the extraction of wealth from each region for subsequent transportation to foreign markets. Even after independence, the predominantly European coastal elites failed to invest in the domestic economy, and inland population centres remain poorly connected with each other. One of the few things they have in common is language, but this connection disguises the differences in a continent that has five separate climatological regions. The topography of the Andes, which is relatively flat, and the temperature climate of the lower third are in stark contrast to the mountains and jungle further north. The Pacific coast is characterised by a unique geographical situation, with the ocean and the Andes forming a natural border between the population centres. The exception to this is the northern half of Argentina, which is home to more than 80% of the population. However, if one were to travel north from there, the population density would quickly decrease, and this trend would continue almost to the Venezuelan coastline.

Finally, the Arctic has historically been the most overlooked territory on Earth, but the recent discovery of energy reserves in the region has the potential to position it as a pivotal region in twenty-first-century diplomacy. Here, the effects of global warming are showing more than ever: with the ice melting, easier access is allowed and new energy deposits are found. This is the reason why it will become at the centre of global politics; however, the consequences of the melting ice will be felt in countries as far away as the Maldives, Bangladesh and the Netherlands, which are at risk of increased flooding as sea levels rise. As the land ice melts and the tundra is exposed, two factors are accelerating the process of the greying of the ice cap: firstly, residue from industrial work lands on the snow and ice, further reducing the amount of heat-reflecting territory. The darker-coloured land and open water will then absorb more heat than the ice and snow they replace, thus increasing the size of the darker territory.

Indeed, geography has always exerted a profound influence on global politics, and it is inevitable that with the change in geography, global politics will undergo a corresponding transformation, in terms of border management, fault lines, and conflicts, such as shown by the challenge recently posed by Ceuta[5].

References

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[5] Rosadi M., "Staging Ceuta: The Border Spectacle, Empathetic Distance, and Hegemonic Narratives", in *Bbeyond Journal*, Vol. 9, September 2026, pp. 1-5.