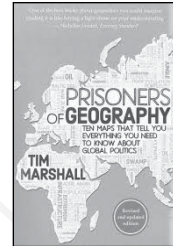

Book Reviews

Prisoners of Geography

Tim Marshall

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‘Ten Maps That Tell You Everything You Need to Know About Global Politics’ claims the cover of the book. Tim Marshall, working on big geopolitical themes or concepts, has based his work on the premise that first, the land on which we live has always shaped us; it has shaped the wars; the power, the politics and social development of the peoples that now inhabit nearly every part of the earth; and second, the choices and decisions of leaders across the world will to some degree always be shaped by rivers, mountains, deserts, lakes and seas that constrain us all—as they always have. Owing to this perspective, the book explains the geographic realities that underline and often dictate the way states behave and interact with each other. That is, it gives a rationale or lack thereof in the conduct of nations in security and strategic terms with their neighbourhood and their relations with the world community in general.

Tim Marshall is a journalist, author and a broadcaster by profession and a leading authority on foreign affairs. With an experience of more than 25 years of reporting from the field on diplomacy and world affairs, having covered events in the Balkans and the MENA region, his understanding and in-depth knowledge of politics, both of regional and global security

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dynamics reflect in his writings. His other notable works are *Shadowplay: The Overthrow of Slobodan Milošević* and *Worth Dying for The Power and Politics of Flags*.

The watchword in the book is ‘geography.’ Taking it as the cue, Tim Marshall narrates the world history in a very simple manner, by logically arguing: why conflicts persist in some parts of the world, the reason behind the prosperity of a few nations and the twist of nature by which certain regions even though blessed with natural resources continue to be underdeveloped.

The underlying factor is that geography is relevant in geopolitics today as much as it was a thousand years ago. The ambitions of nation states driven and dictated by geography, or the lack of it, have influenced the conduct of politics and diplomacy impacting the lives of communities and whole races for all times to come—the resolutions to which though in sight may not be acceptable to the powers that carved out geography where there was none!

The book is divided into 10 chapters. A chapter each, is devoted to illustrate in great detail the evolution of major global players, namely—Russia, China and the United States; while Western Europe, Africa, the Middle East and Latin America have been covered regionally. In addition, the sensitivity of India-Pakistan and Korea-Japan relations have been discussed in separate chapters. While, the Arctic, probably the last frontier, and the rush to control its resources and the resulting dynamics forms the last chapter.

Marshall notes that Russia, since 1812, has been repeatedly invaded from the Northern European Plain on an average of once in every 33 years—explanatory of the Russian expansionist policy to the west. However, despite its size and vast coastline, Russia’s lack of a warm water port has inhibited it from realising its global ambitions; but at the same time its geography has protected its Far East. Furthermore, the author has also taken into account the post-Soviet arrangement of interstate relations,

highlighting the legacy issues in relation to the impractical borders and ethnicity. To cite an example, in case of Russia, the annexation of Crimea is a classic example where the actions have been dictated by geography.

On China, the book suggests that its insecurities and vulnerabilities have been historical. Today, despite being secure along its land borders, China continues to push in the Himalayas and the South China Sea. The possibility of an Indian occupation of Tibet and domination of the Chinese mainland as also the resultant threat to China's water sources by India drives its actions in Tibet. While the ambition to have a blue water navy to protect its growing economic empire across the world dictates its actions in South China Sea. Besides, the Belt and Road Initiative is a means to an end to access the world trade routes circumventing the limitations imposed by geography. While the proposed canal in Nicaragua is a competition to the Panama Canal, the larger aim is to have freedom of navigation beyond the control of the United States.

Geographically, the United States is blessed with an extension from ocean to ocean, has two friendly neighbours and huge reserves of natural resources. While today it owes its prosperity and status to 'homeland' peace and security, it was the shrewd diplomacy of the 1800s which saw an unparalleled purchase of real estate and expansion by settlers towards the west coast enabling the US to subsume the geographic vulnerabilities into a larger entity to form the present-day America, resulting into the rise of the US to its superpower status with an expansive global presence. In view of this, Marshal has also emphasised on the way the US has leveraged its military and economic weight to create alliances to meet its economic and political objectives.

Undoubtedly, Europe has immensely contributed to the modern world. Its influence is still prevalent across large parts of the world, culturally, politically and economically. Western Europe benefited heavily from good weather, inland navigable rivers, knowledge transfer across the Eurasia peninsula and access to warm water ports. This environment

supported the agriculture and trade, leading to its industrialisation wherein the prosperity nurtured colonial ambitions which in turn connected it to the world. However, divided by geography, north and south Europe developed differently. Portugal, Spain and Greece are prime examples of how terrain limited their exchange with mainland Europe; these divisions persist and are the reason why Europe has not been able to truly unite despite the EU—the mutual fears keep the EU and other alliances together. To explain the impact of geography and the role of ethnicity, culture and language in the formation of states/nations, Marshal cites the examples of unification of Germany and the breakup of Yugoslavia. The advantage the UK enjoys by being an island allows it to engage and disengage ensuring that no power greater than itself rises in Europe and the strategic position it enjoys viz. North Atlantic adds to the boon.

Africa is where it supposedly all began. The author argues that the world views Africa through a prism and its vastness is not truly comprehended, given only the Sahara desert is almost as big as the United States. Africa has been blessed with abundant natural resources yet geography has hindered the exploitation of these resources to better the lives of its inhabitants. The rivers are mostly not commercially navigable, the forests and deserts impede free travel and establishment of trade routes has been difficult. The lack of deep water ports limits international trade. The mixing of the tribes socially or economically has been very restricted, even traditional tribal conflicts have been very limited in scope and purpose. The origin of slave trade dating back to salt trade with the Middle East finds a mention. The problem of politics and tribalism, poor leadership and the legacy of colonialism, the creation of nations and states where none existed, adds to Africa's woes. The colonial powers extracted what they could and the same continues even today. Africa still awaits to overcome the hand history and geography have dealt with it.

The Middle East, coined by Europeans, as per the author is a phrase that misrepresents the region. Where ethnicity and religion broadly

defined the extent of the area governed by various tribes and empires from time to time, the European powers carved out nations where none existed. The term 'Sykes-Picot' defines the various decisions which explain the unrest and extremism in the region. The rise of the Islamic state has its origins in the creation of the unviable entities. To substantiate, the chapter delves into the impact of Islam on the dynamics of the region and the conflicts which have defined the region for most of the past 75 years. Furthermore, the author also opines that there may be changes to the maps of the region with old states giving way to new, which may be more aligned to the ethnic, religious and cultural aspirations of the people, or driven by outside powers; however, either way it may be a long and bloody affair.

While discussing India and Pakistan, Tim Marshal has considered the sub-continent in its entirety, explaining the geographical constraints of each nation. The ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity of the region due to geography have been highlighted. Like Africa and Middle East, the subcontinent continues to suffer the impractical borders drawn by the British. The trauma of partition, the conflicts post-independence, the centrifugal forces, growing terrorism and fundamental Islamic groups have been discussed at length. The author states that lack of strategic depth for Pakistan has dictated its policy of domination towards Afghanistan in addition to the role of Russia and the United States in Afghanistan. The chapter also discusses the growing influence of China in the subcontinent and its impact on the security and geopolitical dynamics.

The problem of Korea is best managed because a resolution cannot be seen on the horizon. A conflict between two states will drag the neighbours: Russia, China, Japan and United States directly into the quagmire while it will affect the region in general. It is best defined as a long strategic game played by both sides and their supporters or allies. Tim Marshal argues that North Korea is an enigma and attempts to unravel it

may further complicate the situation. The 38th parallel is another example of a border drawn arbitrarily and the people suffering the consequences. In arguing so, Marshal hypothetically gives some details of the consequences of a war between the two Koreas. Besides, the chapter also reflects on the history and sensitivity of the relation between Japan and South Korea as well as the Japanese military expansionist past and their rise from the ashes of World War II. Notwithstanding the differences in view of Marshal, what keeps the peace in the region is mutual fear of the adversaries despite the distrust for the allies.

In the chapter on Latin America the author has included all nations—Mexico and southward's including South America. Here, Marshal is of the view that Latin America has been dealt a hand by geography which has limited its growth. He argues that geography, coupled with colonialism and prejudices of the foreign powers with no attempts to better the lives of the original inhabitants has withheld Latin America from achieving its potential. The lack of hinterland connectivity, despite the wealth of natural resources, is the major reason why the region has not developed. As a result of which, the legacy of border disputes continues to tire down regimes and economies embedded in influence of the drug cartels and the US on the politics and trade of the region.

Lastly, the Arctic is perceived as one with a very hostile environment but with a huge potential of natural resources and thawing ice resulting into shortened trade routes, that has brought the major powers to stake claim to this remote region. For instance, Russia, Canada, United States, China and the Scandinavian countries have pushed in to explore and exploit the natural resources; however, as compared to all, Russia's presence remains unmatched. The race has just begun and there have been competing claims, while the coastlines have receded, requiring relocation of inhabitants. In the future, accidents and incidents will be difficult to manage and their impact will be felt by communities not even remotely connected to the Arctic.

The book also covers in some detail the fears and apprehensions of smaller nations and the dilemmas they face in pursuing independent foreign policy versus making alliances. Marshall also suggests that given the limited resources, unless the world learns to share and use technology to cooperate including space and the Arctic, conflict is imminent. To which, he posits that ‘water’ may be a major source of conflict in the years to come. As evident from the rising disputes over utilisation of two major river systems in Africa and the Middle East; wherein, Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt contest the utilisation of waters of the Nile; Turkey, Syria and Iraq contest the water rights of the Tigris and the Euphrates.

Tim Marshall is forthcoming in his articulation; however, he also admits that there is no certainty to the outcomes in the future. As Marshall argues that while technology helps in ‘bending the bars of the geographical prison’ it cannot bring it ‘out of the equation,’ as evident from the example of the Himalayas in the India-China context and the China Pakistan Economic Corridor.

The book is indeed very educative and explains the world as it exists today. It helps the reader to place into perspective the ‘why’ and ‘what if’ of the current geo-political happenings around the world. As to why India and China are engaged in the high Himalayas or why Putin’s Russia is engaged in Ukraine, and that while China is obsessed with the South China Sea, it is also interested in the Arctic. To rightly argue, it is not what nations will or should do, but what they ‘can do’ determines how the world prepares and practices foreign policy.

It is a must-read for anyone practising or studying national security and strategy, geo-politics, international relations and diplomacy. Even an occasional reader will find the narrative insightful and a good read.