

**Marshall, Tim – Prisoners of Geography**

*Elliot & Thompson Limited, 2015, [Surrounding Knowledge] Grade* ★★★★★

There are many prisms through which our complex world can be understood. Out of those that really matter geopolitics is perhaps the most underappreciated one in the democratic western world. For anyone that wants to understand how Putin or Xi thinks about civilizations this is a great place to start. In *Prisoners of Geography* the journalist and former foreign affairs editor Tim Marshall with experience from the frontlines in the Balkans, Afghanistan and Syria gives the reader a crash course in the Real Politik of region after region such as the Middle East, Korea etc., and by this briefly covering the power politics of the entire globe including the predominant power struggle of the future between the US and China.

After a foreword by a former head of MI6 and a short introduction the chapters of the book each covers one relevant region after another. The chapter starts with a map to set the stage. Still, the book is best read with a proper atlas at hand and preferably one that also has topographic maps, to be able to clearly see the mountain ranges, deserts, jungles, plains, rivers, lakes and oceans that for centuries have set the stage for and shaped the power politics of regions. Marshall shows that geography but also natural resources and climate to a larger extent than often realized defines what a nation is and can be.

Africa for example is much larger than the US, China and India combined and has ample natural resources plus a hefty head start since it's where humanity originated. However, the continent has few natural harbors, apart from the Nile the rivers cannot be used for transportation due to the violent and frequent waterfalls and the terrain is often not very friendly towards those who try to venture outside their home environment. Further, the amount of arable land is small and the animals of the continent are not easily domesticized. Hence, Africa is a continent with innumerable tribes, clans, religions and peoples but value-creating trade between regions is limited. Roads and railways that connect the continent are still to a

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large extent sorely absent. One of the many misfortunes of colonialism was leaving the power structure of an artificially made up state in a region with multiple rivaling groups that never thought of themselves as in anyway united within a country - a recipe for disaster.

It is also striking how similar geographic locations of the heartlands of Russia and China through centuries have shaped comparable power politics. Both civilizations' core is situated on in principle indefensible plains, without any obstacles for advancing armies, leading them to being attacked multiple times. The North European Plain for example stretches from the Ural Mountains to the Pyrenees. The solution has become to create strategic depth by expanding outwards building moats of subordinated and expendable landmasses where attackers will be worn out before reaching the heartlands. The tragedy of Europe, and the so-called "German Issue", is that Western Europe's mightiest civilization - the German - is situated on the same plain open for attack from two flanks and thus the concept of lebensraum is a geopolitical parallel to for example the invasion of Tibet.

The book gives a stark reminder that even though man has gained the ability to fly and the Internet to some extent changes the playground to a very large extent, the struggle of civilizations over power and resources looks as it has always done shaped by geography but also the cultural, religious and demographic factors of the hand dealt. There is clearly a risk that those with a trusting, short sighted and self-centered post-conflict mindset in the western world are exploited by more cynical rulers who thinks in 100 year time frames and doesn't obey any international rules that would give them a disadvantage in the pursuit of power.

Although undoubtedly presenting the reader with a rather bleak view of the world this book actually brightened up my Easter weekend. You will look differently at the world after reading Marshall's book. Definitely recommended.