

**Book Review
By
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Robert D. Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography* (New York: Random House, 2012), 432.

Robert D. Kaplan is the Chief Geopolitical Analyst for Stratfor (a firm that deals with global intelligence issues), and a non-resident senior fellow at the Center for New American Security in Washington, D.C. He has also been a foreign correspondent for *The Atlantic* for over 25 years. In 2009, he was appointed to the Pentagon's Defense Policy Board, and served on the Board till end 2011. From 2006 to 2008, he remained the Class of 1960 Distinguished Visiting Professor in National Security at the U.S. Naval Academy.

The main argument of *Revenge of Geography* by Kaplan is that geography is the prime determinant of power. The author is of the view that geography is also the only answer to the question why nations that were significant historically are still relevant today. He has comprehensively surveyed the works of scholars like James Fairgrieve, Leon Wieseltier, Professor Nicholas J. Spykman and Professors William H. McNeil and Marshall G.S. Hodgson, Sir Halford J. Mackinder, among others. These scholars have discussed in much detail the characteristics and identities of various regions such as the Rimland of Eurasia, and the Heartland.

The author discusses the importance of geography in history and the contemporary world. He categorizes empires into "land empires" such as Soviet Russia, China, and Roman Empire and "naval empires" such as Britain and the United States. Kaplan argues that it is only because of China's phenomenal geopolitical and economic rise that it is in a position to become assertive in the South China Sea. Kaplan advises United States to engage China rather than taking measures to contain it. In his opinion, geography of China makes its rise inevitable. He builds a similar case for Iran and Turkey. Iran's geo-strategic position is vital, as it controls Strait of Hormuz, which is a major choke point of world's energy routes.

The author's argument makes sense in the current global setting, in view of criticality of geostrategic positions of China and Iran, preeminence of these states in their respective regions, and their increasing share in global power. For China and India, the author says that the natural barriers in the shape of mountains have effectively maintained shelter from direct impact of steppe cavalry but Kaplan's analysis does not fully explain the reasons of construction of the Great Wall of China by the Chinese. Similarly the Russian flatland in his opinion was divided by the forest to the north which formed a formidable barrier against invading cavalries.

He suggests that United States should engage with Iran rather than isolating it which may also help to democratize it. Kaplan has strongly criticized United States policies in this regard. He believes that the United States is too focused on offshore military adventures but it is not paying much attention to its backyard where Mexico is failing as a state, which would have implication for the United States.

For the most part, the author explores the correlation between power and geography. Geography is a tangible factor of power, in his view, which can grow and shrink, but lacks mobility. Even today, the amount of the power a state has, and how it can project that power, is still largely dependent on where a state is located on the map. The reader should think about the geography of world's strategic regions while reading the book and visualize how geography of a region will affect the future course of international and regional politics, just as it has affected history.

The book however does not take into account the role of political culture, national character, and leaders' part in shaping a people's character and world view. Geography alone cannot completely explain the dissimilarities between relative power of nations. In case of China and Europe other realities like philosophical and political setups of China and Europe have also played a role in their histories. Europe, geographically a land of several peninsulas is hard to come together, even after many attempts in the past and current EU experiences, while China, a flat plain was divided several times but is still united.

Although the author mentions that geography only influences events and does not preordain them but thrust of his arguments shows as if it does indeed

determine nation's destinies. This is the major problem of the book. There are some other areas which the book does not fully explain. The author assigns only few pages to France but has discussed Germany's rise in much greater detail. France has been a very important country in the last century. It had vast colonies in Africa and South East Asia and deserved a more detailed treatment of the reasons that led to its decline. One may agree with the author that Japan is now declining but Japan may not become a weak state. It may, in fact, emerge again as a strong state in view of United States' offshore strategies which have placed Japan in a vital strategic position. The book is part romance and geography, and partly an analysis of geography's role in national power of state. It is not only the geography but also inclusive and non-extractive economic policies and political culture of a state which make it grow in power and become significant as argued by Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson in *Why Nations Fail*.

I would recommend this book to anyone with an interest in understanding the role of geography and its ability to influence politics in the emerging international geopolitical landscape. The author has a very interesting style which easily captivates readers attention even on the relatively dry subjects of geography and politics.

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