

Book Review
By
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Robert D. Kaplan, *Earning the Rockies: How Geography Shapes America's Role in the World* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2017), 201.

There are many constituents of national power, but for Robert D. Kaplan “geography is the starting point of history and culture” and largely determines the role and influence of different states in global politics. Kaplan’s fascination with geography and geopolitics has been a constant theme and recurring motif in his works, be it in *Revenge of Geography*, *Balkan Ghost* or *Asia’s Cauldron*. Kaplan’s geopolitical insights are a result of his historical knowledge and extensive travels across the world.

Earning the Rockies: How Geography Shapes America’s Role in the World is no different except for the fact that, this time he turns inward and undertakes a journey across America. Kaplan’s meditations and reflection on geography rendered in eloquent prose and his silent observance interspersed with historical vignette make this book an engrossing read. The theme that courses throughout the book is how American geography has been pivotal in enabling it to become a global power with preponderance of influence. Inspired by his truck-driver father and childhood experiences of travel, Kaplan embarks on a road trip from east to west America. The geopolitical works of Bernard Devoto, Walter Prescott and Wallace Stegner accompany Kaplan and inform his insight about

American landscape and how it bestows United States of America the power to exert its influence in the world.

Treading the path of pioneers that undertook the arduous journey from east to west, Kaplan says that the expansion of first thirteen eastern colonies into the Great Plains or Great American Desert and Rocky Mountains (from which the title of the book derives) in the west should not be reduced to a story of gore, massacre of indigenous people and savagery, because it also entailed adapting to a harsh, semi-arid and water-scarce land, which would not only hold out further European settlements but would also, as Kaplan quotes Webb, “predetermine the defeat of confederacy”. The deficiency of water in Great Plains halted slavery, because cotton production required huge amounts of water. Thus, people inhabiting the Great Plains established an economic system that was based on “free labor, small farms and a rising industrialism”, which would prove to be a death knell for slavery prevalent in southern America, which relied on “plantation, staple crops” and most importantly “slave labor”. In addition, the conquering of arid land and dry landscape also ensured American access to Pacific Ocean, presaging a gargantuan maritime power in the making. A maritime power that came out of World War II relatively unscathed; thanks to its geographical isolation protected by Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. For Robert D. Kaplan America is a “continent endowed with forests and fertile lands, not to mention deposits of iron, coal, land, silver and gold and hydrocarbons.... the lower 48 states boast more miles of navigable inland waterways than much of the rest of the world put together”. In other words, it is a state, empire and continent wrapped in one.

Moreover, the western orientation also inculcated the element of communalism among the people, in the process intuiting the limits of geographical expansion which, Kaplan claims, should give policymakers a hint of limits of American capability to flex its military muscle every now and then.

The two-thirds of this book covers his journey from vertical landscape to horizontal landscape. The author calls the eastern landscape vertical because it is, in essence, “built upward with tall trees and thus enclosed, claustrophobic in many places, lacking far-off vistas”. Unlike eastern landscape, west America is relatively flat-land that offers views of vistas and horizons. The last part discusses the geopolitics of contemporary world and where and how does America fit into this. Among the geostrategic issues that find space in this book are Chinese ambitions to expand and dominate South and East China Seas, which “will unlock both the larger Pacific and the Indian Ocean to its ever-expanding navy”. But China is also beset with serious internal problems, which if left unresolved, could possibly lead it to adopt an aggressive posture towards foreign and defense policy issues to rouse jingoism and quash internal dissent.

Kaplan also dilates on the potential tussle between Russia and Europe over the *intermarium*- a term used by Josef Pilsudski for states between Baltic and Black seas. Besides the threat of Russian aggression, Europe faces other serious issues: greater number of migration from war-torn areas of Middle East and North Africa, unravelling of European Union and a weak defense. For the author, America will be playing the role of a counter-balancer to neutralize greater Chinese influence through a network of alliances with South-east Asian and South Asian states. Moreover, awesome American military might and

as its leadership of NATO will ultimately prove to be a bulwark against Russian designs in Eastern Europe. Though Kaplan is averse to repeating the American military adventurism to “solve world’s problems”, United States of America cannot just afford to isolate itself from these issues. Does an alternative course of action exist for America? There does exist an alternative way, Kaplan claims. Taking a leaf from the American history, Kaplan asserts, western expansion of American colonies was made possible because Indian tribes cooperated with the colonizers, and American role should be to make alliances and commit minimum of forces in the form of Special Forces(SF) to achieve military objectives and making the allies share greater burden.

Despite the useful geopolitical insights, emanating from his extensive travels and knowledge of history, *Earning the Rockies* at times seems an apology to the shenanigans of the “continental empire”. For Kaplan, American warships are not just war fighting machines, but “guardians of freedom”. Drawing a parallel to ancient Greek history, he quotes archaeologist John R. Hale, who considers Athenian navy as “emblem of liberty and democracy” and explains “it is not an exaggeration to say that the US Navy has served a similar function”. So, for the author dispersal of American military bases is for altruistic motives, not for maintaining its hegemony in the world. American history of supporting brutal dictators from Pinochet to Suharto, and Zia to Mubarak, defies Kaplan’s claims of it being an emblem of liberty and freedom aka ancient Greek.

The author claims, “we struggle diplomatically and through our military deployments to prevent the kind of domination of the Eastern Hemisphere by a rival power that we ourselves enjoy in the Western Hemisphere”. Rather than seeing a glaring

contradiction in this assertion redolent of imperial designs, Kaplan explains it away with embedded American universal values and says “continued humanitarianism requires the continued amoral acquisition and maintenance of American power”.

While discussing the contemporary geopolitics, the author makes interesting contrasts between American desire to “export human right” and how “imperialism and missionary impulse which go hand in hand” and Russian aggression and Chinese domination of South and South East China. So, American policies are grounded in humanistic values to do good to the world, whereas all else is power politics and aggression. But what else could one expect from an author who whole-heartedly supported Iraqi invasion. He is reminded by the war memorials to Korea and Vietnam in Muskingum banks of “America’s conception of a new purpose” - may be, blundering efforts to bomb people into democracy and liberty.

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