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Robert D. Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells Us About Coming Conflicts and the Battle Against Fate*

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Book Reviews

Kaplan, Robert D., *The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells Us About Coming Conflicts and the Battle Against Fate* Random House, 2012

Reviewed by Laina Farhat-Holzman

It is apparent when one looks at a map of the world that geography matters. The people who live in the oxygen-thin *altiplanos* (the Himalayas and the Andes) have a different relationship with their natural world than those who live in jungles or deserts. Island natives have a different relationship with the sea than those who have never seen great bodies of water. However, the modern world is divided by man-made boundaries into nation states that, if they have geographic integrity, are easier to govern than those cobbled together out of often-contrasting geographies. We are learning this to our pain in today's conflicts.

Robert Kaplan, a journalist-historian, has a constitution that permits him to travel, often on foot, across the globe in some of the world's least savory territories. In one of his books, *From the Ends of the Earth*, he began a trek from West Africa, living on quinine and bottled Coca Cola, all the way to the borders where China meets Central Asia. He walked, hitched rides from truck drivers, talked to urban cabbies, and asked questions based on his keen curiosity.

This man knows the geography of the earth---on the ground---probably better than any other geographer alive today. His book is a summary of what he has learned from his many treks and voluminous reading. Kaplan is also one of the world's best geopolitical experts; his suggestions and advice are taken seriously by political and military planners.

In this book, Kaplan demonstrates how geography plays an enormous role in explaining current conflicts, conflicts that those ignorant of history do not recognize as not new at all. Beginning with the great Greek historian and traveler, Herodotus, Kaplan provides us with summaries of the most influential geographers, masters of an art that has somehow declined from its heights in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Kaplan is no geographic determinist. He never claims that geography is the only factor in how human beings organize their lives; there are always powerful individuals, cultures and religions, and the effects of earth-bound events (volcanic eruptions, tsunamis, prolonged droughts, sudden global cooling), and the effects of choices, often bad ones, that human societies make.

However, geography is always there as a backdrop for human history. To ignore it is to make decisions that can doom actions to failure.

Scholars and Visionaries

The Revenge of Geography reviews in some depth the scholars and visionaries who enriched the scholarship of history with the addition of geography: W. Gordon East (1902-1998); Nicholas J. Spykman, who wrote in the 1940s); John Keegan, who noted that America and Britain could champion freedom only because the sea protected them from the land-bound enemies of liberty; Herodotus, the great geographer of ancient Greece; William H. McNeill; and Marshall G. S. Hodgson, who made geography an important part of history. Hans Morgenthau, a practitioner of geopolitics, defined realism for the present age.

Kaplan's discipline is the intersection of geography and politics. In its negative state it treats geography as the only determinant of politics. Sir Halford J. Mackinder wrote a single essential article, "The Geographical Pivot of History," *The Geographical Journal*, London, 1904. His thesis is that Central Asia, forming the Eurasian Heartland, is the pivot on which the fate of great world empires rests. Mackinder's point is that out of that heartland, traveling both west and east, the grasslands people affected both European and Chinese history. "Man and not nature initiates, but nature in large measure controls."

Nicholas J. Spykman, who founded the Institute of International Studies at Yale in 1935, said that history is made in the temperate latitudes where moderate climates prevail. Sub-Saharan Africa and the Southern Cone of South America matter today, but they cannot have the effect on world issues that the northern zones have. The Nazis distorted this view to equate racial mental ability with geography.

Europe

Kaplan's book next explores the geographic realities of Europe and explains why the various regions have had such different historic experience. This very elaborate interface between land and water, and the fact that Europe is protected from---and yet accessible to---a vast ocean has led to maritime dynamism and mobility among Europe's peoples, and contributed to an intense range of landscapes inside Europe itself. Although Europe is a *mélange* of strikingly different human communities with a history of outbreaks of power politics from antiquity to almost today, Europe is also an *idea*.

Geography explains much. When the Warsaw Pact broke up, the former captive countries advanced economically and politically almost exactly according to their positions on the map: Poland and the Baltic states, Hungary, and the Bohemian end of Czechoslovakia performed best. Balkan countries did the worst. Despite the Nazi and

Soviet impacts, the legacies of Prussian, Habsburg, and Byzantine and Ottoman rule are still relevant.

Russia

Russia is a case in which geography looms very large indeed. Russia comprises a vulnerable landmass that has suffered catastrophic invasions from its very beginnings, leaving its rulers understandably paranoid.

Russia is the world's preeminent land power, extending 170 degrees of longitude, almost halfway around the globe. Russia's principal seacoast is in the north, unusable for most of the year. Russia is insecure, as all land powers are. Forever dissatisfied, Russia needs to expand or risk being conquered instead. Russia's flat expanse has no natural borders and affords no protection.

Russia's geography is more important than its history. Russia, severely cold, lies north of the 50th parallel (Canada is at the 49th). "Harsh seasonal cycles, a few, distant rivers, and sparse patterns of rainfall and soil fertility controlled the lives of the ordinary peasant; and the ebb and flow of nomadic conquerors often seemed little more than the senseless movement of surface objects on an unchanging and unfriendly sea." This made for a landscape of anarchy, in which every group was permanently insecure.

China

Unlike Russia, which is a giant land power with little access to oceans, China has the Pacific Coast, as well as land access to central Asia. (The US has three oceans.) While Russia lies north of 50 degrees north latitude, China lies to the south of it, as does the U.S. China's various latitudes equal those of the U.S. (from Maine to the Florida Keys).

In the U.S., rivers run north to south, early opening much of the country in those directions. China's rivers run west to east. Until the Chinese built a north-south connecting canal, they couldn't fully develop their country; the canal made it possible. The US east-west transcontinental railroads had a similar effect, an illustration of human effects on geography.

China, a demographic behemoth with the world's most energetic economy for the past three decades, is, unlike Russia, extending its territorial influence much more through commerce than coercion. They have already extended into Mongolia (both Inner and Outer) in the quest for vast natural resources. The Han population is already moving in and may overwhelm the natives.

China's next extension lies in the Russian Far East. China will move into that area if it can, and as Russia loses population, this seems inevitable.

India

India's geographical dilemma is that it is a pivot state, a Rimland Power, according to Spykman. Located in the center of the Indian Ocean littoral, it is critical for the seaward penetration of both the Middle East and China. What is essential for the U.S. is to understand India's highly unstable geopolitics re: Pakistan, Afghanistan, and China.

India has a geographical logic, framed by two seas and by the mountainous Burmese jungles to the east and the Himalayas and Hindu Kush to the north and northwest. India is internally vast, but it lacks a singular nursery of demographic organization (such as the Wei Valley and lower Yellow River in China).

The Ganges does not provide enough of a platform for the expansion of a unified Indian state. India's various other rivers divide not unite it. The Ganges is Hindi-speaking; the others are not.

We cannot overlook the role of hot tropical climate on ambition and the need for organization of resources, unlike the temperate zones of China and Europe. India has been subject to perennial invasions, much rarer in China, and lacks the cultural unity of China.

Pakistan

Pakistan is home to four ethnic groups, mutually hostile: Punjabi, Sindhi, Baluchi, and Pashtun. Islam technically unifies it, but in reality does not. Without the Punjab-dominated army, Pakistan could not exist as a polity. Being Muslim is not enough to keep ethnic hostilities at bay. India has handled such problems better.

India is the birthplace of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism. Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians also have lived in India for millennia! India accepts this reality and celebrates it; Pakistan does not. This is why India is stable and Pakistan is not.

Afghanistan

With a life expectancy of 44 years, literacy rate of 28 percent (much less for women), and with only 20 percent having access to potable water, its urbanization only 30 percent, Afghanistan does not have much going for it. Out of 182 countries, Afghanistan ranks next to last on UN Human Development Index.

Kaplan compares the relative success of our occupation in Iraq and the obvious relative failure in Afghanistan, which has much to do with geography and socio-geography. Afghanistan could disappear from the maps of the future with the Pashtuns having either a country of their own or a larger Pakistan. Then the rest of Afghanistan might return to its roots as eastern Iran.

The Iranian Pivot

William McNeill noted that India, China, and Greece all lay “on the fringes of the ancient civilized world, protected by mountains, deserts, and sheer distance.” They all suffered invasions, but not enough to disrupt their innate cultural character. The invaders were largely horsemen and because they were culturally less developed than the ancient civilizations, they were ultimately absorbed.

In the space between these great civilizations was the parched temperate zone of the Afro-Asian landmass, from North Africa to the margins of western China, the Nile-to-Oxus. But this area has a pivotal influence on each of these civilizations.

The Iranian Plateau has only one country, Iran. 74 million, 2-1/2 times that of Saudi Arabia. Population growth is well under control. Turkey has the same low population growth and a higher literacy and a stable agricultural economy and is more industrialized than Iran. Turkey does not have oil; Iran is No. 3 in the world.

Arab World

The Middle East is characterized by a disorderly and bewildering array of kingdoms, sultanates, theocracies, democracies, and military autocracies. This is one densely packed axis of instability. The region contains 70 percent of the world’s proven oil reserves and 40 percent of its natural gas reserves. These states are prone to pathologies of extremist ideologies, crowd psychology, overlapping missile ranges, and profit-driven mass media. Except for Korea, nuclear proliferation is more of a factor in the Middle East than in any other area. There is also a youth bulge with 65 percent under the age of 30. Between 1995 and 2025, the populations of Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Syria, the West Bank, Gaza, and Yemen will have doubled.

If the Iranian Greens ever take power, Iran, because of its strong state and dynamic idea, would have the means to shift the whole groundwork of the Middle East away from radicalization, thus providing political expression for a new bourgeoisie with middle class values. Despite all its advantages, the suffocating clerical rule of Iran hinders its international progress. Iranian Technicolor has been replaced by grainy black and gray.

If the Shah had not been toppled, Iran could by now be like South Korea. The Shah's regime was open to reform; the Ayatollahs are not. Iran could indeed become a major empire of sorts, doing good in the world, if the ayatollahs disappear.

Turkey (Former Ottoman Empire)

The Iranian plateau is a major pivot in the Greater Middle East (and is completely one country); the Anatolian land bridge is likewise, and is also completely one country, Turkey. One would have to go from Egypt to the Atlantic to equal in power Iran and Turkey together, with a population of 150 million, more than all 12 of the Arab states.

Both countries are agricultural and industrial, with tech know-how. Both could produce nuclear weapons if they wanted, which the Arabs cannot. Turkey, like Iran, has an enormous cultural influence in the Balkans, the Black Sea coast, Ukraine, southern Russia, the Caucasus, and the Arab Middle East. And it seems stable.

The aggressive energy that characterizes the leaderships of Turkey and Iran has for decades been absent in the Arab world. But as time passes, the geographies of Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Syria, and other countries will reassert themselves. Tunisia and Egypt are ancient clusters of civilizations. Libya and Yemen are but vague geographies, whose statehoods were not established until the 20th century.

Iraq

Iraq has never been left alone. Mesopotamia cuts across one of history's bloodiest migration routes, pitting man against man and breeding pessimism. Mesopotamia was a constant victim of occupation from as early as the third millennium BCE. From Persia to the Mongols and the Ottomans, Iraq has been a tragic victim. Its geography is also fragmented. The fragility of the social order has always been part of Mesopotamia. Only a ferocious dictator could manage it.

Syria

Geography and history tell us that Syria, population 20 million, will continue to be the epicenter of turbulence in the Arab world. Aleppo in the north is a bazaar city with greater historic links to Mosul and Baghdad than to Damascus. When Damascus is down, Aleppo prospers. Aleppo's souks are dominated by Kurds, Turks, Circassians, Arab Christians, Armenians, and others. Damascus, however, is the world of Sunni Arabs.

Today Syria is a ghost. After Syria breaks up, there might be a new Alawite mini-state (with part of Lebanon). It will become the target of Islamists (wanting revenge). What could save Syria would be a world of multiple ethnic and religious identities united by commerce, such as Aleppo already has.

A weakened Syria could mean emergence of Beirut as the cultural and economic capital of Greater Syria. But with the Shiites of Lebanon and the Sunnis of Damascus, Greater Syria could become far more unstable.

America's Future

Kaplan believes America pays far too much attention to the Middle East and China and not enough to Mexico, our nearest neighbor. He has long contended that what is south of us is far more important than what is across the world. The only danger comes from ignoring danger from the South (Mexico and South America), as Rome ignored the north, the Germanics.

“Truly, Mexico registers far less in the elite imagination than does Israel or China, or even India. Yet Mexico could affect America's destiny more than any of these countries.” Mexico, together with the United States and Canada, comprises the most crucial of the continental satellites hovering around Mackinder's World-Island.

Conclusion

Kaplan certainly makes his case that foreign policy must not overlook geography if we are to understand the nature of a country and its geopolitics. We could have avoided some of the mistakes we made in trying to occupy both Iraq and Afghanistan, both terribly different from our occupations of Germany and Japan after World War II. America will also do well to consider his geopolitical advice on not overreaching and not ignoring our need to help Mexico. We need a successful country on our border, which he thinks will eventually result in a country made up of the U.S., Mexico, and Canada.

Kaplan has done what I as a woman could not do: he has walked, hitched rides, traveled on rickety busses, across some of the most uninviting backwaters of the world, suffering only from his malaria medicines and too much bottled Coca Cola. However, he has almost never talked to women in such places. I think Kaplan has been traveling in such places too long: his remarks about Israel appearing sterile and too orderly upon coming there from Jordan reflect the danger of going native. Order and cleanliness are not sins. But Geography still lives.