



Thoughts from Linda:

**Prisoners of Geography**  
*Ten Maps That Explain Everything  
About the World*

Tim Marshall  
2010

Wikipedia defines *Geopolitics*: "It is the study of the effects of earth's geography on politics and international relations." In this book, Tim Marshall focuses on the impact of geography on regions and nation-states and reveals 10 maps of different areas of the globe that help explain much of what is happening today.

For example, why is Vladimir Putin so interested in the Ukraine? Why does the Danube River explain so much about the development of Western Europe? Why does the Mercator map of the world so distort our understanding of Africa and other countries? And why would we still use this map today, as it was created in 1569 by the Flemish cartographer and geographer Gerardus Mercator? What is going on in the Arctic today, and how is melting the ice likely changing our future and the state of global power politics?

These are just a few of the intriguing questions Tim Marshall asks and answers in this award-winning book. He has written six other books and a children's illustrated version of this book, which emerged in 2019. *Prisoners of Geography* was a best seller in both *The New York Times* and a #1 Sunday *British Times* bestseller.

As opposed to an academic approach, he brings a rich and practical background from which he draws to explain these geopolitical relationships. He is a British journalist, author, and broadcaster specializing in foreign affairs and international diplomacy. He wrote for many news services, including the BBC, and was at Sky News for 24 years, where he served as the Foreign Affairs and Diplomatic Editor. His field experience is impressive, as he worked in Europe, the United States, Asia, and the Middle East.

He covered three American elections and was located in Kosovo during the 1999 Kosovo crisis. He was one of the few Western journalists who stayed to report from one of the locations of the NATO bombing raids. He was in Kosovo on the day that NATO troops advanced into Pristina. Additionally, he reported from the front lines during the invasion of Afghanistan. He spent time in Iraq, Israel, and many European cities as he headed the Sky News European news bureau.

The Foreword to this book was written by Sir John Scarlett, the former Head of the British MI6, the British Secret Intelligence Service, and a long-time colleague of Marshall.

The book contains 10 Chapters: Russia, China, USA, Western Europe, Africa, The Middle East, India and Pakistan, Korea and Japan, Latin America, and The Arctic. He writes crisply, and the overall feeling of reading this book is similar to receiving a 'briefing' on the area involved. In other words, he tells a sharp, focused story of the area and includes his witticisms based on his experience. He offers his assessments and projections of the future in each scenario covered.

While acknowledging that the world is indeed "flat," as Tom Friedman postulated years ago, he illustrates the fundamentals of geography on both land and the sea, connecting our current global politics to these phenomena. He does devote space to the 'digital geography' that can supersede some limitations. Yet, as he notes, the land issues facing Peter the Great in Russia in 1682 are many of the same ones facing Vladimir Putin today.

I was particularly drawn to the chapters on Russia and China and his treatment of the geographical implications of today's current events. Regarding Russia, his very first paragraph indicates his style, as he opens by noting that "Vladimir Putin says he is a religious man, a great supporter of the Russian Orthodox Church. If so, he may well go to bed each night, say his prayers, and ask God: Why didn't you put some mountains in Ukraine?" He says, "If God had built mountains in Ukraine, the great expanse of flatland that is the North European Plain would not be such encouraging territory to attack Russia repeatedly. As it is, Putin has no choice: he must at least attempt to control the flatlands to the west."

He lays out the view of the Russian leaders, back to the early Tsars, based on the nation's geography. The country is immense, spanning 6 million square miles and 11 time zones. It is the largest country in the world.

Looking at the nation's security is every leader's job, and this book helps us understand the significance to Russia of a safety net on their western borders. It helps explain the specific Russian relationship with Poland, which has the 'thin wedge' of land that breaks up the natural barrier offered by the north European plain. From the Russian perspective, he notes, Poland represents the relatively narrow corridor into which Russia could drive its forces, thus preventing an enemy from advancing in a land assault on Moscow. Of course, history has shown that it is tough for any enemy to successfully make the treacherous trek to Moscow, as Napoleon and Hitler both discovered.

He illustrates the Russian relationship to the Far East and the geographic risks there, noting how geography both poses risks and at the same time, protects Russia. To their south and east, they are well protected. Getting an army up into Russia from Asia would be difficult due to natural barriers such as deserts and long stretches of uninhabitable land. Additionally, the weather would impede the long supply lines required to execute such an invasion. He explains how the Russians worry about the Western border instead of that of the East or South and, thus, watch with increasing anxiety the actions of NATO, which they interpret as a genuine risk.

He takes us inside Russian thinking and illustrates how it is a European power but not an Asian one, even though 75% of its territory is in Asia. It is illustrative to read about the policy of 'weaponizing' the use of native-speaking Russians and how Stalin and subsequent Russian leaders carefully re-located ethnic Russians after WWII and recently into Crimea and Ukraine, among other spots. You will learn about Moldova and the significance of current activities there. He reminds us of the old Russian dream: that Russian soldiers could one day put their toes into a warm ocean—something they still do not possess. Marshall notes that the lack of a warm-water port with direct access to the oceans has always been Russia's achilles heel. While they possess Sevastopol, it is restricted by a 1936 treaty that gives control of the Bosphorus to Turkey, thus counterbalancing this port's utility.

He focuses more on China as the future of geopolitical risks than Russia, even though he notes that the Russians have leverage today and are strongly playing a 'weak hand.' Today, Russia provides significant amounts of oil and gas to European countries. While the need is diminishing, their ability to cut off energy represents much of their strength along with their nuclear arsenal. He noted in the book very prophetically, "Putin is not finished yet with Ukraine." The book came out in 2015, and that warning has proved to be quite correct in light of the current Russia & Ukraine war.

"China is a civilization pretending to be a nation," said the noted sinologist and MIT professor Lucian Pye.

There is much to learn in this chapter about the country that has emerged as one of the two most powerful nation-states in this and likely the next century as well. While it has taken China 4000 years to evolve to its current state, it is now making the moves to solidify what it believes is its rightful place as a leader on the planet. It is the era of 'the middle kingdom' (Zhongguo in Mandarin), the translated name of China.

You'll learn about the North China Plain, called the Central Plain by the Chinese, which is today one of the most densely populated areas in the world. This heartland has good soil to allow two growing seasons and supported the growth of the Han people, who now make up 90% of the Chinese population. The importance of this area cannot be exaggerated. It houses over 1 billion people despite being half the size of the United States.

Part of China's interesting story is about its move to build and sustain a blue water navy, which explains its acquisition of rights in so many cities scattered all over the globe today. Historically, the Chinese have not had an appetite for foreign entanglements and have focused more on economic needs for expansion and seaworthiness. This focus is still true today, although Marshall predicts a century of Chinese superiority on the seas in a very compelling chapter.

He takes us through an understanding of the "One Belt, One Road" economic strategy of the Chinese, which focuses on the concept of the Silk Road, which today is both a land and a sea route that goes straight through the region of Xinjiang (the Uighur Autonomous Region) and connects ultimately with a massive deep-water port under construction by the Chinese in Gwadar, Pakistan. We can expect to hear much more about these and other Chinese ocean strategic issues in the coming years.

There is so much more to say about this book, but I'll leave it to you to listen to or purchase this small, compactly packaged trove of knowledge for yourself. Thanks to Janet Sayer, one of my Aussie friends who gave me this book. It will help you understand more about our world and current geopolitical climate. I highly recommend it.