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“Power Shifts”

by Anne-Marie Slaughter

Book Review of *The Revenge of Geography:*

*What the Map Tells Us About Coming Conflicts and the Battle Against Fate*

(by Robert D. Kaplan)

Those who forget geography can never defeat it. That is the mantra of Robert D. Kaplan’s new book, “The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells Us About Coming Conflicts and the Battle Against Fate.” Each chapter begins with a reading of the lineaments of territory in the way a fortuneteller reads the lines on a palm, a mapping of mountains, rivers and plains as determinants of destiny. But just as the text starts to teeter under the weight of geographical determinism, Kaplan quickly shifts ground, arguing for “the partial determinism we all need” (italics in the original). He retreats to the far more moderate view that geography is an indispensable “backdrop” to the human drama of ideas, will and chance.

Kaplan, a correspondent for *The Atlantic* and a senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security, resurrects 19th- and early-20th-century thinkers like Halford J. Mackinder, whose 1904 article “The Geographical Pivot of History” argued that control of the Eurasian “Heartland” would determine the fate of empires. Similarly, other contemporaneous strategists like Alfred Thayer Mahan and Nicholas J. Spykman may have favored sea power over land power, but they still described world history in terms of the eternal clash between the two (Sparta versus Athens, Venice versus Prussia). Spykman also answered Mackinder’s Heartland obsession with a focus on European, Indian and Pacific “Rimlands.”

Most of what these authors proposed would sound politically incorrect today — imperialist and racist. Mackinder’s theories were appropriated (misappropriated, according to Kaplan) by the Nazis. Still, these geostrategists saw past the ritualized etiquette of diplomacy and the embedded expectations of law to the stark and enduring struggle for survival — tribe against tribe, invaders against inhabitants. Their strength lies in their appreciation of the ways in which the fixed elements of geography and climate shaped the more variable element of human choice — the story Jared Diamond tells today in his classic “Guns, Germs, and Steel.”

Perhaps the best test of their value is the quality of Kaplan’s own geopolitical analysis in their wake. He applies his geography-first approach to different regions of the world, yielding a number of predictions that upend conventional wisdom. On Europe, he sees — accurately, in my view — that the Mediterranean will once again “become a connector,” linking southern Europe and northern Africa as it did in the ancient world, rather than continuing to be the dividing line between former imperial powers and their former colonies. The lands of olive and vine are likely once again to become an economic and cultural community, powered perhaps by the enormous reserves of natural gas and oil under the northern and eastern Mediterranean seabed. More generally, the sheer demographic and economic size of the European Union, notwithstanding gloomy projections on both counts, leads Kaplan to conclude that it “will remain one of the

world's great postindustrial hubs." The shift from Brussels to Berlin as the center of gravity for European politics will thus have global implications.

Moving east, Kaplan renders a verdict on Russia that again undercuts the determinism of his title. Vladimir Putin and Dmitri Medvedev, he writes, "have had no uplifting ideas to offer, no ideology of any kind, in fact: what they do have in their favor is only geography. And that is not enough." That same geography "commands a perennially tense relationship between Russia and China," even as a shared commitment to authoritarian government and sovereign prerogatives pushes their regimes together.

In the Middle East and Southwest Asia, Kaplan's geographic lens uncovers an unexpected similarity between Iran and Saudi Arabia. He describes them both as loose aggregations of tribes, peoples, and lands — centers that often cannot hold their far-flung dominions together. Saudi history is a seesaw back and forth between the Wahhabi "heartland of Najd" and "the peripheries of the Arabian Peninsula." And Iran "has often been less a state than an amorphous, multinational empire." The suffix "istan" is Persian for "place," meaning that the "stans" of Central Asia — Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and the rest — reflect a map drawn in Tehran.

Moving away from the heartland, it is in the Western Hemisphere that Kaplan's framework yields the most surprising results — an unusual amalgam of Samuel Huntington and Fernand Braudel: "America, I believe, will actually emerge in the course of the 21st century as a Polynesian-cum-mestizo civilization, oriented from north to south, from Canada to Mexico, rather than as an east to west, racially lighter-skinned island in the temperate zone stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific." He is right to concentrate on the intersection of demographics and hemispheric geography, but the pressure for greater hemispheric integration is as likely to come from economic competition with Asia and Europe as from demography. And indeed, Kaplan himself concedes part of the point: he sees a world in which an "organic and united Eurasia" will demand an "organic and united North America" as a "balancer."

This geographic tour of the world rests on a very 19th-century concept of what a map is. Kaplan defines it as "the spatial representation of humanity's divisions," by which he means not just a representation of physical territory, but of topography. He sees the world as a relief map, one defined by the sharp peaks and narrow valleys that trap populations and the open plains and broad waterways that impel and allow them to move. His emphasis on humanity's "divisions" is telling, leading directly to his embrace of realism in foreign policy. Kaplan assumes that humankind is in essence divided rather than connected, even though an objective view of the landscape would allow for either. His geopolitical outlook is reinforced by his reliance on the Thucydidean trilogy of "fear, self-interest and honor" as basic human motivations — a take on human nature that is both old-fashioned (at least in the era of neuroscience and cognitive psychology) and very male.

Besides, why is the true map a map of land rather than of people? Social media and mass data flows of all kinds now give us the ability to see and represent human interactions as never before, mapping emotions, desires, aspirations and connections. The intersection of millions of small worlds can now be tracked and visualized: human galaxies every bit as dense and complex as the

stars above. The program Google Flu Trends allows us to map disease outbreaks by tracking when and where incipient sufferers enter a search for flu symptoms. Financial transactions can be mapped through banks; in the coming age of mobile money, they will be mappable through GPS and cellphones.

The result will be a new discipline of sociography. Kaplan himself describes the less-developed megacities of the 21st century as vast citadels of solitary striving, creating a “new urban geography . . . of intense, personal longing.” This section is tantalizing but all too brief, particularly since the maps of that longing will soon be as detailed as the depictions of the cities themselves.

At the same time, we will increasingly understand just how subjective our physical maps are. Google Earth and Google Maps make it possible for people to become their own cartographers, literally putting themselves on the map. Kaplan may argue that the brightly colored patches of sovereign territory on a two--dimensional map obscure Nature’s primordial blueprint, but citizens now have incentives to obscure the lines of their governments with the demarcations of their own communities, imagined and real.

In the end, the revenge of geography will be the revenge of human as well as physical geography: a world much more, and much more democratically, of our making.