

Why Journalists Should Talk About Geography

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This article is by Polis Summer School student Paul Sorbo (@PaulJSorbo) on a talk given by Tim Marshall at the LSE to launch his book *'Prisoners of Geography'*

Former foreign correspondent Tim Marshall thinks we need to get our maps out more when we report on international affairs. In his new book he argues that politicians and generals are often 'Prisoners of Geography' and that the physical conditions from mountain ranges to mineral resources are an important and historically overlooked factor in international relations.

Speaking before his lecture, Marshall posed that geography was overlooked for Russia, for example. Noting the country's lack of warm water ports, he said, "You can't be a global power if you can't have a Navy for 12 months of the year." He further explains how this naval geography affects Russian leadership's decision-making towards Ukraine: "No Russian leader will go down as the man who lost their only warm water port."

[tim marshall](#)

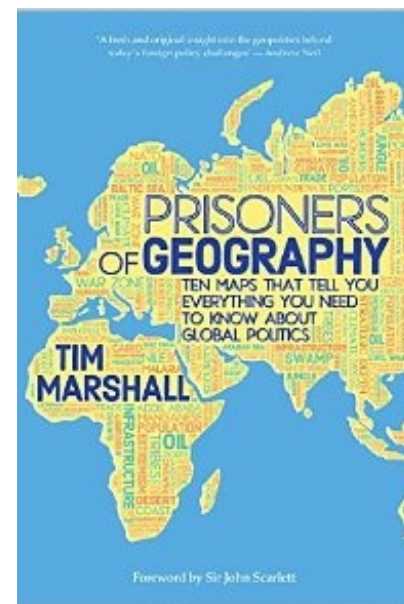
He also thinks geography is overlooked in explaining conflict in Darfur. "It's partially due to a change in physical geography," he says. "The desert is pushing down into the pastoral lands; the people that had the lands to graze there have less room, so they go further afield, and then they come into conflict with people."

Perhaps Marshall's most lucid example refers to the historic relationship between China and India. For neighboring countries, China and India have maintained a relatively peaceful relationship, with only a handful of conflicts to name. Marshall cites geography as a main reason for this. He remarks, "You can't get an armored division across the Himalayas...that turns your whole foreign policy somewhere else." One can see the implication this has. Even in an age of advanced warfare and intelligence technology, states' actions are still limited by the physical landscape.

Even the economic crisis in Greece has geographic components. Beautiful mountains, steep valleys, and narrow coastal plains are aesthetically pleasing, but create agricultural problems. He says, "They are not blessed in geographical terms as far as economics is concerned. They're certainly blessed as far as tourism is concerned—it's a wonderful place."

Geography can too help predict the future of the so-called Islamic State: "They don't have armored divisions...they don't have planes, they are limited in what they can do because of their technology...technology bends those iron bars of the prison of geography. But the Islamic State doesn't have the technology to bend those bars. It's only within that pretty much flat land that they can get from 'A' to 'B' quite easily."

Could geography has an impact on issues besides foreign affairs, such as football? Marshall dispels this notion: "Less so, except for the density of population; it's pretty hard to run a football league if it's just 2 or 3 villages." Maybe football falls outside the purview of geography, but Marshall is keen to use football to explain his outlook on international relations generally, saying, "We enjoy our differences...in football and in International Relations. And unfortunately, in both of these, it always goes over the top as well...Because of the natural human fear of the other, and the rapacious nature of some of us at some times, we also clash on an international level. *Good fences make good neighbors*. Go back to the India-China theory. It's a pretty good fence, the Himalayas."



@PaulSorbo

[Listen to Tim Marshall's talk on 13th July 2015](#)

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