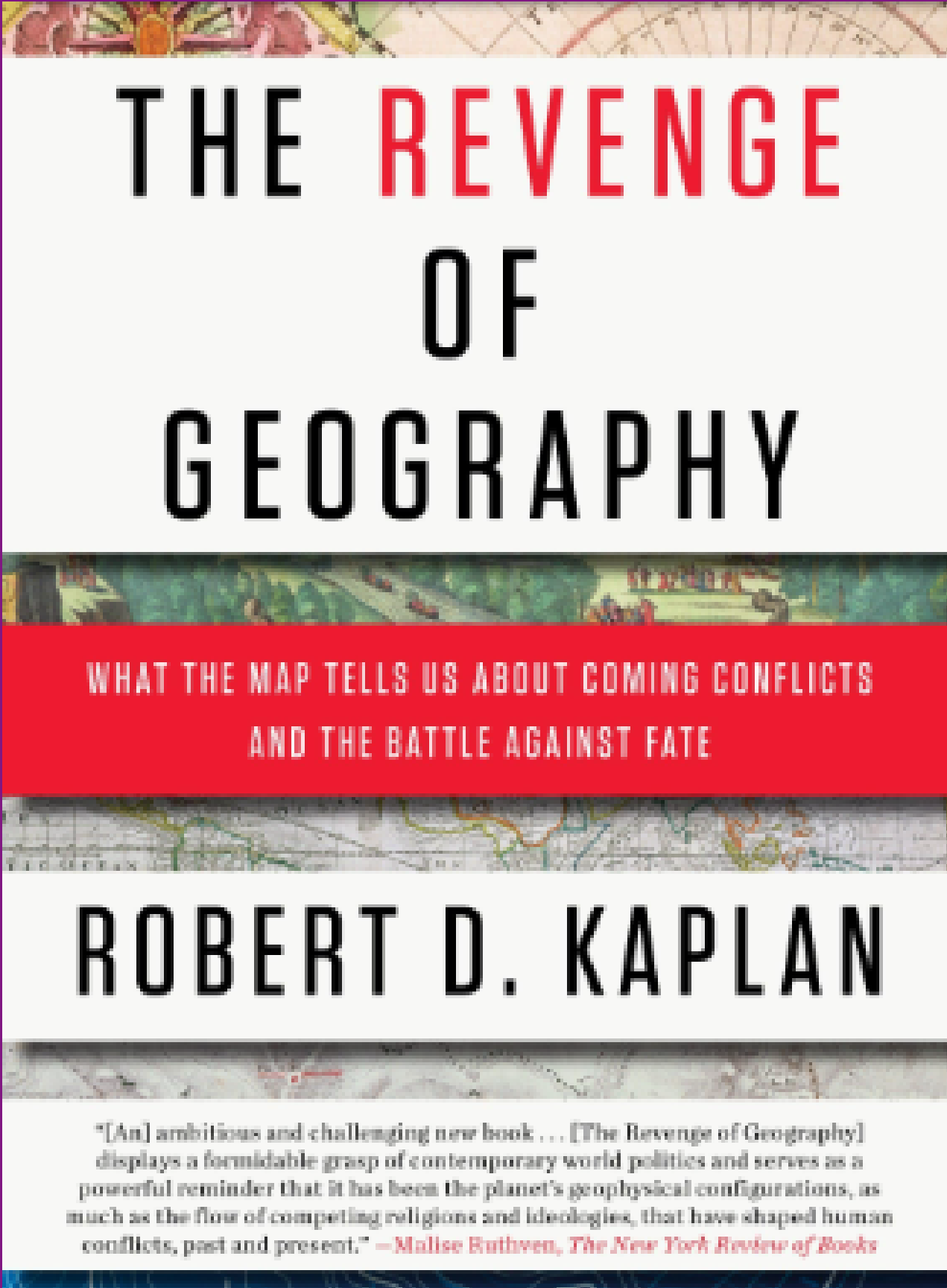


BOOK REVIEW

The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells Us About

Coming Conflicts and the Battle Against Fate

Authored by *Robert D. Kaplan*



THE REVENGE OF GEOGRAPHY

WHAT THE MAP TELLS US ABOUT COMING CONFLICTS
AND THE BATTLE AGAINST FATE

ROBERT D. KAPLAN

"[An] ambitious and challenging new book ... [The Revenge of Geography] displays a formidable grasp of contemporary world politics and serves as a powerful reminder that it has been the planet's geophysical configurations, as much as the flow of competing religions and ideologies, that have shaped human conflicts, past and present." —*Malise Ruthven, The New York Review of Books*

Author and context

Robert D. Kaplan wrote this book after a quarter-century as a foreign correspondent for *The Atlantic*, a period on the Defense Policy Board under Secretary Robert Gates (2009–2011), and a senior fellowship at the Center for a New American Security; in 2012, the year of publication, he joined Stratfor as chief geopolitical analyst. The book draws on the reportage of four earlier works, *Balkan Ghosts*, *Soldiers of God*, *Eastward to Tartary* and *Monsoon*, and its preface, “Frontiers”, reworks material from all of them, so the argument is anchored throughout in ground-level travel across Iraqi Kurdistan, the Carpathians, the Caspian and the Khyber Pass. Its central claim is that the post-Cold War faith in a “flat”, borderless, technology-flattened world was an optimism that Iraq exposed, and that classical geopolitics, built on terrain, climate and proximity rather than ideology, deserves rehabilitation as a corrective. The fifteen chapters fall into three parts. Part I, “Visionaries”, is a genealogy of geopolitical thought running from Herodotus through Mackinder’s Heartland, Haushofer’s “Nazi distortion”, Spykman’s Rimland, Mahan’s sea power and the demographic “crisis of room”. Part II, “The Early-Twenty-First-Century Map”, applies that lens region by region to Europe, Russia, China, India, Iran and the former Ottoman lands. Part III, “America’s Destiny”, closes with a single chapter reading Braudel, Mexico and American grand strategy together. The argument is supported throughout by a series of regional maps drawn by David Lindroth, and the volume takes its epigraph from Marguerite Yourcenar’s *Memoirs of Hadrian*, whose expectation that ruin and order will alternate indefinitely sets the tone of qualified fatalism the book sustains.

The central argument

Kaplan’s opening chapters use the Iraq intervention to argue that Morgenthau-style realism, which treats geography and history as setting hard limits on what any policy can achieve, retained its explanatory force where liberal universalism did not. He then works back through Mackinder’s 1904 Heartland thesis (control of the Eurasian interior as the key to world power) and Spykman’s Rimland counter-thesis (that the maritime periphery, not the interior, decides outcomes) to build the framework applied country by country in Part II. The ambition here is synthesis, not new fieldwork, and Kaplan is candid about it: he is deliberately reviving a body of thought that Western academia set aside after 1945, when geopolitics became suspect through its association with Nazi Lebensraum theory. Recovering that tradition while distinguishing it from its misuse is one of the book’s stated purposes, and the chapter on Haushofer confronts the distortion directly instead of evading it.

Analytical strengths

The genealogical chapters are the book’s most durable contribution. Mackinder, Spykman, Mahan and Braudel are rarely presented together in a single accessible narrative, and Kaplan’s compression of them is accurate, readable and immediately usable in teaching and in policy drafting. The travel writing is not decoration either: the passages on the Kurdish massifs, the Carpathian passes and the Khyber approach do genuine analytical work, showing terrain setting the practical limits of a state’s reach instead of simply asserting that it does.

On South Asia, Kaplan frames India as the “ultimate pivot state”, a Rimland power in Spykman’s terms, and locates its structural dilemma exactly where Indian strategic writing locates it: the Northwest Frontier and an incomplete natural boundary that leaves Pakistan, Bangladesh and, to a lesser degree, Nepal pressing inside the subcontinent and absorbing the “vital political energy” India would otherwise direct outward across Eurasia. It is a clean, citable formulation of an argument the strategic autonomy literature usually takes considerably longer to make. The Iran chapter is comparably useful, reading Tehran as a pivot astride the chokepoints of the Persian Gulf and connecting the position of the Iranian plateau to that country’s long reach into Mesopotamia and Central Asia. The closing chapter argues that Washington’s absorption in Iraq and Afghanistan obscured a more consequential long-run geographic fact: Mexico’s demographic and territorial proximity. That is the book’s most provocative claim, and it reads considerably better in 2026 than it did in 2012.

Critical observations

The framework’s principal tension is determinism, which Kaplan acknowledges more readily than he resolves. Discussing Fairgrieve’s 1917 account of Indian civilisation, he concedes that the analysis may seem “overly deterministic, and perhaps inherently racist in its stark simplicity”, then affirms that it remains essentially valid, flagging the ideological baggage of a source without fully separating the geographic insight from the racial-essentialist scaffolding on which it was originally built. Kaplan’s own position is more careful than that of the thinkers he recovers; he insists repeatedly that geography is only “the beginning of wisdom”, not a verdict, and the Kurdish example in the preface is explicit that mountains were the backdrop to Saddam’s campaign, not its cause. The reader is nonetheless left to do some of that disaggregation independently.

The second limitation is one of period. Written before the shale revolution reshaped Gulf leverage, before cyber and grey-zone operations became central to great-power competition, and before networked non-state actors demonstrated how far geographic logic can be compressed, the book has comparatively little to say about domains in which distance matters less. Call this a boundary on the argument’s scope rather than a flaw within it; it is one Kaplan implicitly accepts by treating geography as a constraint on policy and not as a complete explanation of it. Readers already working in Eurasian or South Asian security will likewise find the regional chapters well compressed, if not novel.

Contemporary relevance

Fourteen years on, the central wager, that physical geography constrains policy more than post-Cold War optimism assumed, has aged well. China’s Belt and Road is legible almost entirely through Mackinder’s Heartland logic. Russian conduct towards its western approaches still follows the buffer logic laid out in the Heartland chapter. The Iranian pivot chapter, meanwhile, is directly usable for anyone working the Strait of Hormuz question today. Even where newer domains dominate current debate, they have tended to layer onto geographic competition instead of replacing it, since undersea cables, semiconductor fabrication and energy corridors are all contests over specific terrain. That continuity is one the book anticipates in structure, if not in vocabulary.

Assessment

This is a well-executed synthesis by a writer who has seen most of the ground he describes, and its chapters on India, Iran and Mexico remain genuinely citable. The determinism it inherits from its sources is named rather than fully resolved, and its coverage necessarily stops short of domains that have since risen to prominence. Within those limits it does what it sets out to do. It restores terrain to a serious place in strategic analysis, and it remains the most convenient single volume in which to encounter the classical geopolitical canon and its application to the contemporary map.

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