

Geopolitics

by Bill Bentley

Phil Kelly, *Classical Geopolitics: A New Analytical Model* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016)

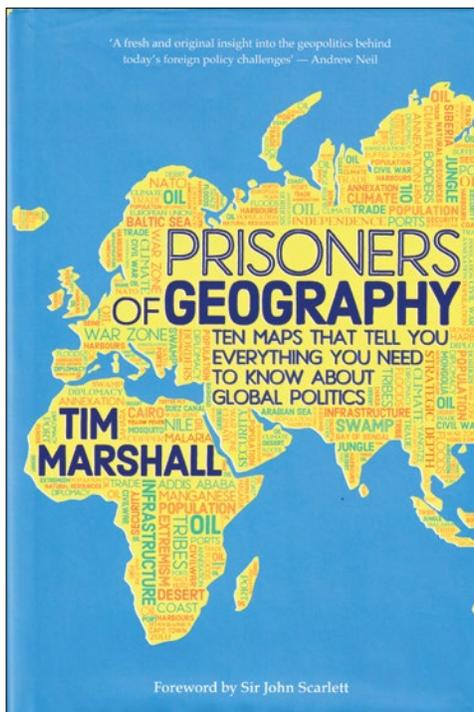
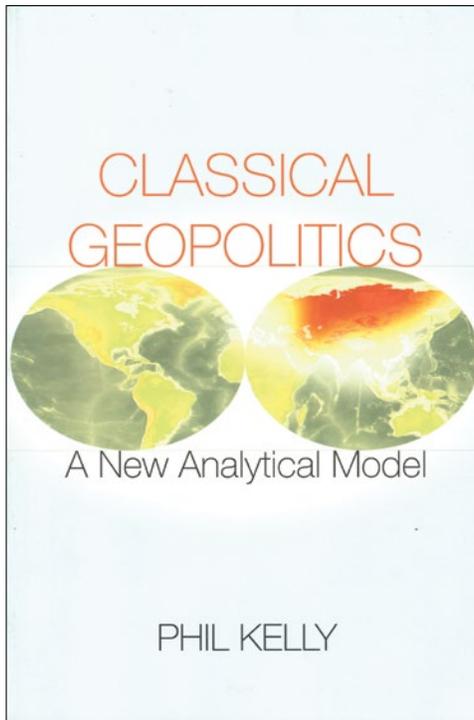
Robert D. Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells Us About Coming Conflicts and the Battle Against Fate* (New York: Random House, 2012)

Tim Marshall, *Prisoners of Geography: Ten Maps That Tell You Everything You Need to Know About Global Politics* (London: Elliott and Thompson, 2015)

Admiral James Stavridis, USN (Ret.), *Sea Power: The History and Geopolitics of the World's Oceans* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017)

Geopolitics as a scholarly discipline, distinct from other international relations models and theories, can trace two paths of origin, both arising around the beginning of the 20th Century. The first, based upon the work of two Germans, Friedrich Ratzel and Rudolf Kjellen, reflected a Germanic interest in putative scientific laws that applied to a state's survival in a competitive international system. This approach, inevitably, led to the Nazis' embracing the legitimacy of taking "living space" (*lebensraum*) from weaker states to maximize the power and growth of their state. The second path, pioneered by Admiral Alfred Mahan (American), Halford Mackinder (British), and Nicholas Spykman (Dutch-American) depicted geographic placement of states and regions as *conditioning*, but not necessarily *dictating* foreign affairs action. By the end of the Second World War, the German approach was completely discredited and the Anglo-American one largely overshadowed by Realist, and subsequently, Neo-Realist theories in International Relations theory (IR).

Phil Kelly is a professor of political science at Emporia State University. In *Classical Geopolitics*, he intends to refurbish the standing of the discipline of geopolitics. His purpose is to construct a model to demonstrate the utility of geopolitics as a viable IR theory. After reviewing the work of several post-Second World



War geopolitical theorists, he provides what he describes as a "consensus" definition: "Geopolitics is the study of the impact or influence of certain geographic features, positions and the location of regions, states and resources, plus topography, climate, distance, states' size and shape, demography and certain cultural aspects upon states' foreign policies and actions as an aid to statecraft." Kelly discusses 60 concepts associated with his geopolitical model. Some of these are quite familiar to most readers, including choke points, buffer states, and sea lanes of communication. Others are less so, such as action spaces, checkerboards, fluvial laws, and shatterbelts. Taken together, however, they constitute a reasonably compelling theoretical framework to generate various IR hypotheses. *Classical Geopolitics* is a substantive, abstract treatment of the subject and its relationship to Realist theory in IR. It is of considerable value for specialists, but less relevant for students and practitioners of grand strategy, military strategy, and foreign policy, more interested in the practical manifestations of the underlying theory.

The other three books by Kaplan, Marshall, and Stavridis respectively, fit comfortably into Kelly's framework, but *specifically* address the existing, contemporary world. Robert Kaplan and Tim Marshall are both seasoned journalists; the former, American, and the latter, British. Kaplan is better known, and is the author of 13 other books, two of which stand out particularly: *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power*, and *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey Through History*. Admiral James Stavridis, USN (Ret.) is a four-star admiral with extensive operational experience, including as Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) in NATO. He is the only naval officer to ever hold that post. He also has a Ph.D and is currently the Dean of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University.

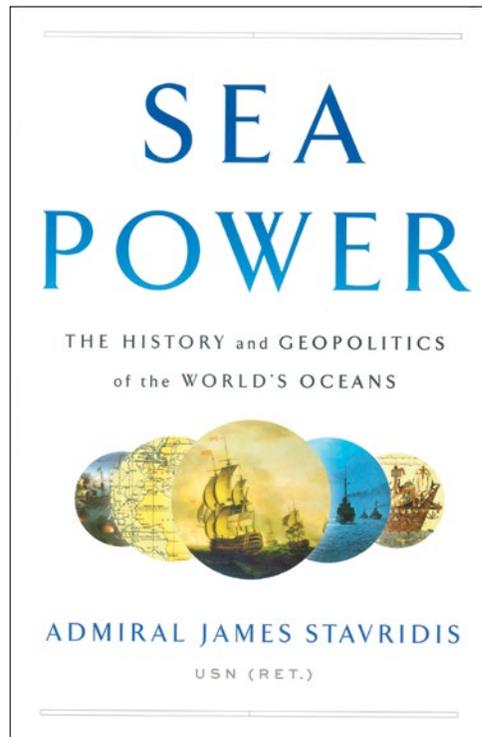
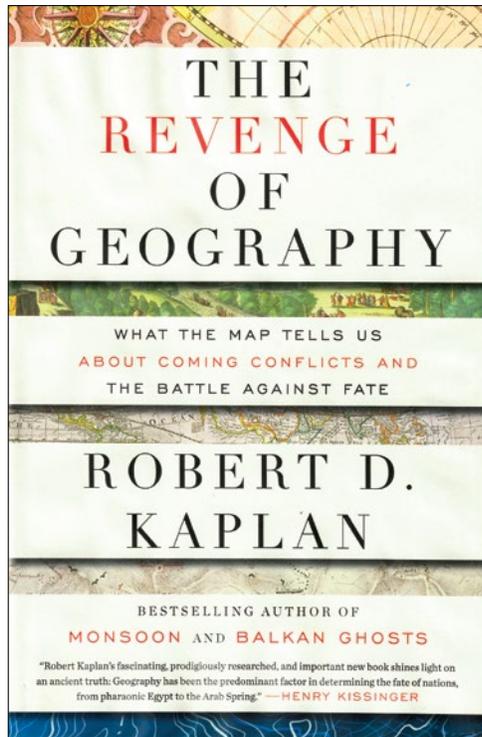
Tim Marshall's book is certainly the most straightforward of the three, and the 10 maps he chooses to explain his perspective on the world are not surprising. He starts with Russia, China, and the USA, and then addresses compound maps of Western Europe, Africa, the Middle East, India and Pakistan, Korea and Japan, Latin America, before closing with the Arctic. Marshall helpfully

reminds us that a variety of factors that have driven globalization, such as the internet, air travel, space, and the global flow of capital have all bent the iron rules of geography. In the final analysis, however, geography and the history of how nations have established themselves within that geography remains crucial to our understanding of the world today and our future. All the other authors reviewed here would agree wholeheartedly with that view.

Robert Kaplan structures his book quite differently than Marshall because he is more focussed, as he writes, "...on what the map tells us about coming conflicts." His book is divided into three parts. Part 1 reviews the geopolitical literature, especially the classic theories of Mackinder, Spykman, and Mahan. Mackinder argued that whoever controls the *Heartland*, that is, Eurasia, could control the world. Spykman counters by arguing that it is, in fact, control of the *Rimland* surrounding Eurasia that would prevail. By integrating Mahan's thesis of command of the sea into his argument, Spykman was confident that the US could maintain global dominance.

In Part 2, Kaplan turns to the geopolitical regions of most concern to him. These are Russia, China, India, Iran, and Turkey. Written in 2012, Korea did not loom nearly as large as a potential threat as it does in 2017, and it is not covered in any depth. The Arctic also was apparently not perceived as a source of imminent conflict, and Kaplan makes no mention of this region. Significantly, Admiral Stavridis in his book, published in 2017, pays close attention to both regions.

In Part 3 (America's Destiny), *The Revenge of Geography* takes a surprising turn and concludes with a chapter entitled "Braudel, Mexico and Grand Strategy." In direct opposition to any early call for the building of a "Wall," Kaplan asserts that fixing Mexico is more important than fixing Afghanistan and Iraq. He sums up his overarching thesis by stating baldly that the USA must be a balancing power in Eurasia, and a unifying power in North America. Specifically, Mexico must play a central function in any grand strategy the USA decides upon.



Admiral Stavridis's book is a topical, stimulating read by a naval officer of superior intellect and erudition. A thorough-going Mahanian, the author takes us through all the oceans and major seas – Pacific, Atlantic, Indian, Arctic, Mediterranean, South China, and the Caribbean. As a seagoing naval officer all his adult life, he unobtrusively weaves personal anecdotes of his experiences in every ocean and sea, from the rank of midshipman at the Naval Academy (Annapolis), to his 'four-star' command of Southern Command. It is clear that *Sea Power* is clearly something of a 'labour of love' for Stavridis, reflecting his love for the sea, the USN, his country, and, indeed, his concern for all of humanity inhabiting this earth.

Touching upon most of the major past sea battles and voyages of exploration, Stavridis is more concerned with assessing the potential opportunities and threats posed in and around the oceans for contemporary policy makers and geo-strategists, both military and civilian. These assessments are always balanced and never bellicose or militaristic. At all times, he remains committed to multilateralism and being a supporter of traditional allies. The admiral's reflections with respect to the Indian Ocean are especially noteworthy, if only because the region tends to be overshadowed by events in the Pacific, Atlantic, and Mediterranean. Of course, as he reminds us, the Indian Ocean region includes the Arabian Gulf and its critical link to the Middle East. In the final analysis, Stavridis is convinced that the 21st Century will be more about the Indian Ocean than of the other three. "...and the sooner we fully realize that in the United States, the better."

Of particular interest for Canada is the admiral's discussion of the Arctic region. He is acutely aware of the growing importance of this geopolitical entity – economically, environmentally, and in security terms. As a matter of fact, of the nine chapters in the book, the one on the Arctic is the longest. Russia, naturally, looms large in his analysis; lamentably, Canada does not! Characteristically, he stresses the need for cooperation among all members of the Arctic Council, Permanent members, as well as those with Observer status.

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Nonetheless, he does conclude that the time may be approaching when the US will need to assign a numbered fleet (the 9th) to the Arctic region.

Throughout, the Admiral's treatment of the geopolitics of the world's oceans is not merely descriptive. He is not averse to prescription, and he ends each chapter with carefully considered holistic policies and strategies for dealing with all challenges and opportunities.

There are, to be sure, a number of books and authors dealing with the subject of geopolitics published over the last few decades. Harold and Margaret Sprout and Henry Kissinger come immediately to mind. More recently, Eliot Cohen's book *The Big Stick: The Limits of Soft Power and the Necessity of Military Force* deals with his subject from a largely geopolitical perspective. However, the four books reviewed here provide an excellent basis for understanding the subject and pursuing it through other sources. They are enough to convince readers that you do not have to be a geographical determinist to realize that geography is vitally important. The more we remain preoccupied with current events, the more that individuals and their choices matter; but the more we look out over the span of the centuries, the more that geography plays a role.

Bill Bentley, MSM, CD, Ph.D., passed away suddenly earlier this autumn. A great contributor over the years to the *Journal* and a true champion of professional development, Bill was, until his death, the Senior Staff Officer Professional Concepts at the Canadian Defence Academy Headquarters in Kingston, Ontario.



Bill Bentley being Bill Bentley.

Courtesy of a DND colleague