

Marshall, T. (2017)
(Maria Luiza X. de A. Borges, trad.)
Prisioneiros da Geografia. Dez mapas que lhe revelam tudo o que precisa de saber sobre política internacional.
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Given his experience in war reporting, Tim Marshall states that “The land we live in always mold us” (p. 11) and it’s in this context that international conflicts are explained. Marshall, having experienced Balkans war, affirms that geography explains the divisions that exist. The journalist also experienced how the US saw their intervention limited in Afghanistan, when a sandstorm conditioned the onslaughts. In 2012 in Syria, Marshall denoted that a fight of great strategic importance was created by a certain valley, which would allow the reunification of the country.

This book could have certainly constituted a reference in the early 20th century, when the perspective of geographic determinism assumed a scientific character and, consequently, went on to shape states’ behavior and international politics. Marshall’s speech goes back to the ideals of Ratzel, where geography imprisoned the leaders and where the survival needs of the states determined the conflicts.

Structurally, the book is organized into ten chapters, each focusing on a distinct macro-region. There is no reference to Antarctica and Oceania, which is a limitation of the book.

All chapters begin with political maps of the macro-region, identifying only state and disputed boundaries and some basic information, notably the most important physical barriers, which makes them insufficient for a full understanding of geo-

political conflicts. So, it seems that the ten major scale maps that are presented in some chapters are the ones that truly explain the most significant conflicts. In addition, at the beginning of each chapter, a predominantly biophysical geographic description is presented.

The deterministic paradigm is, from the outset, evident in the introduction, where the author states that the main explanatory factor of geopolitical matters is geography. In addition to recognizing it, he further states that they’re the most ignored. Thus, Marshall seeks to exalt the role of geographic factors in geopolitical conflicts.

Despite this, the exclusively geographic emphasis on the explanation of conflicts in a globalization context seems excessive. The author explores a geography that is static, regardless of when and who leads the states. It shows, therefore, an explanatory deficit in the new typology of conflicts between states. For example, Marshall highlights the growing importance of technology to overcome geographical constraints, illustrating it through the way in which the US and France have made use of the drones in controlling the expansion of Boko Haram terrorist group, but ends up not discussing network society. As an example, Latin America “is at the end of the world” (p. 204), which denotes an endemic geographical limitation that seems to ignore globalization’s impacts on the geopolitical assertion of this region.

In this way, Marshall reconciles geopolitics as a science that studies the ways in which international politics can be understood by geographical factors, giving the example of the Himalayas, a physical barrier that dissuades any clashes between China and India. Consequently, the interpretation of international politics follows a classic and determin-

istic line that, today, shouldn't be used exclusively to interpret the conflicts.

Marshall's perspective therefore has some limitations. On the one hand, Egypt's weak regional rise was due to the lack of trees, which is why it did not have a great navy. On the other hand, "Iran is defended by its geography, with three-sided mountains and marshes and water from the fourth" (p. 149), but the author doesn't explain how the Mongols in the 13th century managed to invade the country. It is still too much to say that Iran is protected from possible military attacks by geography, since if we proceed to the chapter dedicated to Korea and Japan, it is not correct to infer that North Korea's mountainous geography is a sufficient reason for the US and its allies don't probe Pyongyang. Another example stems from the inability of determinism to explain the reasons why China, nowadays, doesn't challenge US hegemony. The motives are clearly post-geographical, as is the case in the Arab-Israeli conflict, about which the author doesn't explicitly state why no state across the West Bank invades Israel. It seems also limiting that Marshall associates the diplomatic quality between states in function of the distance. For example, it is argued that Pakistan didn't provide the information requested by the US on Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan because the former would have to maintain good relations with the latter to prevent India from approaching Afghanistan, which would undermine Pakistan's territorial integrity. Applying this criterion, determinism fails to explain the recent conflicts in the Korean peninsula or the US-Mexico tension. Finally, Marshall says that USAN's failure stems from the great distances, height of the mountains and the density of the jungles between countries, not explaining, for example, the success of other supranational organizations such as the EU.

Conflicts are analyzed in a classical geopolitical approach. State power is fundamentally analyzed through critical mass, namely by the size of population and army, and by natural resources. Nigeria is the largest regional power in North Africa because of its size and territorial resources. Consequently, state expansion stems from a vital necessity. For Marshall, the fact that geography didn't attribute

natural wealth to China compels it to a maritime expansion. The same analogy is found in the Japanese expansionism in the 20th century.

For Marshall, nation's power is also measured by its access to the ocean, namely as a way of expanding and securing a better geopolitical position, giving as examples the annexation of the Crimea by Russia, given its need to have a non-frozen commercial port, or the example of Chinese investment in the aeronautical industry. On the other hand, the US superpower condition derives from its blessed geography, since it has a long coastline and strategic depth. According to Marshall, the importance attached to the navy explains that Russia is the best positioned state in the Arctic conflict, accounting for 32 icebreakers, the largest number in the world, as well as being the state with the largest area to operate in the region. This view assumes particular expression when, in spite of China having defined an air identification zone that covers territories that are claimed by three countries, the author ends the chapter with the expression "Some maritime agitation is foreseen" (p.198). Another example of this maritime view seems to explain why Mexico doesn't aspire to conflict with the US, because the former doesn't have enough navy to protect the Gulf.

In addition to the limitations to the deterministic discourse, some contradictions are identified. Firstly, alluding to South Africa, Marshall states that "the cape is still an essential part of the world map" (p. 124). The term "still" may result in a fallacy that seems to denote a loss of importance of that geographical form. Then, after criticizing the delimitation of African and Middle East borders, Marshall states that "Africa of the past had no choice - its geography shaped it" (p. 124), not exploring the future of this continent, ignoring the impact of globalization on the minimization of geographical factors as conflicts' determinants.

Besides these aspects, there's an error in the chapter dedicated to Africa: José Eduardo dos Santos is no longer the president of Angola. In future editions, this error may be reversed. There is another error when one reads that "In 1989, in Western Europe, there was a new form of totalitarianism: communism" (p. 156). In this case, communism lasted until 1989, especially in the

former Soviet socialist republics, in Eastern Europe. Finally, it is worth to underscore the author's uncertainty about North Korea's ability to miniaturize its nuclear technology. It seems that today is no longer a doubt, but a certainty.

In a global analysis, it is well known that Marshall presents a staggering deterministic perspective, although he recognizes that the biophysical environment is changing, the frozen ports or the northern European plain, which both bother Russia, are immutable realities.

Prisoners of Geography constitutes, therefore, an excellent characterization of the contemporary geographic conflicts in a perspective of classic geopolitics with a great focus in the historical and regional geography. However, it seems that in a markedly global context, Ratzel's geographical determinism doesn't absolutely explain situations of existing or latent geopolitical conflict.

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