

*Kaplan, Robert D. (ed. 2018).
The Revenge of Geography. What the
map tells us about coming conflicts and
the battle against fate.
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The Revenge of Geography is a bestseller written by Robert D. Kaplan. It emphasizes the importance of the map- how it does not only describe the world, but it can also explain our history and contribute to predicting the future. As Kaplan states in one of the first chapters of his book, "A state's position on the map is the first thing that defines it, more than its governing philosophy even." It is the foundation of all countries, its natural resources, the identity of the people, and the alliances and connections with the countries around. These are all factors laying ground for the existence of a nation- who it is and what it will become.

All countries have different strengths and weaknesses regarding their geographical position, and there are different opinions on what geographical features are highest valued. Going back in time geographers, historians, and other intellectuals have contributed with theories and opinions regarding this. Great names such as Mackinder and Mahan have shared their thoughts on the everlasting debate on sea power versus land power. Mackinder was awed by the strength of Russia, the importance of the heartland and the impact Eurasia had on the whole world. Mahan on the other hand respected sea power above all and argued that this was the dominating power. Scholar after scholar have quoted him since, as I am now.

"Russia's irremediable remoteness from an open sea has helped put it in a disadvantageous position for the accumulation of wealth. This being so, it is natural and

proper that she should be dissatisfied, and dissatisfaction readily takes the form of aggression" (Mahan, quoted in Kaplan, 2018, p. 104).

This belief, grounded in Geography, describes the Russian national character. It represents the qualities that have developed over time, and something they are now recognized by. These characteristics are built on the foundation of Geography, on the weaknesses incorporated in their position on the map. Russia has an extremely large territory, by far the largest of all nations. It is almost twice the size of Canada, the second largest country in the world. Their 17.000.000 square kilometers are impressive, however, not compared to the territory dominating Eurasia in the earlier centuries. Russia has been as large as a country can be, while still leaving some space for the others. Square meters have never been their weakness, though the lack of mountains have. Their territory has been tempting to other nations, and it being as flat as it is made it an easier target. Invaders could walk right in the front door, attacking by surprise and having an advantage from the start. With almost no natural borders and an infrequent settlement, they had the landscape of an anarchy. Looking back in time Russia has been invaded from both east and west more times than most, forcing them to always stay alert and never be unprepared. These are features that started flowing in the veins of the Russian people- they are marked by the vulnerability and exposure they have experienced. Geography is the foundation of their hostile behavior, their paranoid

fear of invasion. There is an insecurity behind it, just like teenage girls talking down on others to make themselves feel better. This might not be the comparison preferred by the strong, almighty Russia. Ivan the Terrible and Alexander the Great would not be proud, but the fact is that their “attack before getting attacked” strategy is as old as tale and can still be seen dominating the Russian foreign policy.

A weakness that has affected them drastically is, as Mahan emphasized, their lack of coastline. Except for the little they have in the east and the north, which is covered in ice almost all year round, they have no access to the sea. Compared to the US and China, the major superpowers today, Russia is lacking domination at sea. Not only militarily in a potential conflict, however also economically. Shipping contributes to accumulating wealth, and it would have been a major strength for Russia when exporting all their natural resources. Their huge land swarms with oil, gas, and minerals- it is probably the richest country in natural resources in the world and being able to transport these resources by sea would have been an unbeatable economic benefit. This might be the main reason for their continuing need to expand. They are already big, they do not need to get bigger, they might want to, however it is not necessary. Access to the sea on the other hand is considered necessary if you want to be an empire, which is something Russia has been motivated by for centuries. Even today Vladimir Putin is doing what he can to restore the pride of the great Soviet Union.

Regarding their size it is easy to think the bigger the better, however, it might be the contrary. A size reaching from Europe to Asia does have its challenges, such as an identity crisis. Do we belong to Europe, or do we belong to Asia? What ways should be our ways, what people do we identify with, and where should we focus our interests? Today we can see that most of the Russian population is settled down in the western part of the country, close to the big cities and the European border. The northern parts are considered no-man’s land as the extreme cold and tundra only seems tempting to the polar bears, and the center of the territory is covered in the taiga forest as far as the eye can see. Except for when defeating the Germans in Operation Barbarossa the inland climate is rarely appreciated. On the eastern parts, close to the Mongolian and Chinese border, we do find clusters of population. The extreme separation of the people, resulting from eastward and southward expansion over centuries have created a truly diverse Russian society. The appearances and features

of the Russian population are different from the east to the west, contributing to the identity challenges and the separation of the people. The fact that the government has stayed centralized and focused mainly on the western parts of the country divides the east and the west even more. It is one country; nevertheless, the people feel identified with two completely different continents.

Looking back at Russian authoritarian history we can see a timeline of powerful leaders. The common denominator is the willingness to do anything, sacrifice everything, so that their country, their empire, will become even greater. The need to expand, to invade, to conquer is passed down to the next leader, as well as the need to achieve greater results than the ones before them. Names such as Alexander the Great, Ivan the Terrible, The Romanov Family, Lenin, Stalin- through decades they have influenced the whole world with their strict and aggressive regimes. It has become the infamous Russian way, giving their neighbor a reason for fear and mistrust. Their belief is that ultimate power, the supreme strength, is achieved when you are feared, that this is the highest valued sign of respect.

Since 1999 Vladimir Putin has been the face of Russia, longing to restore the greatness the country had in the twentieth century. The country was severely downsized in 1991 when the Soviet Union was abolished. Most of the eastern part of Europe belonged to Russia, and many ethnic Russians now live outside the Russian border. This is an argument that has been used several times since then, attempting to move the lines closer to the former border. Especially addressed is Ukraine together with the Crimea Peninsula. In recent weeks Ukraine, Russia, and NATO have been all over the news, however it started years ago.

In 2014 all eyes were on the Crimea Peninsula. In many ways Ukraine is in the same position as Russia, divided between two parts of the world. Ukraine shares borders with both Russia and the EU, splitting the support between the people. The eastern part of the country favored cooperation with the Russians, while the western part long for a closer relationship with the European Union. In 2013 both alternatives were on the table, and the president, Viktor Janukovitsj, was split down the middle. In fear of distancing themselves from Russia the president chose the eastern side, causing the start of massive demonstrations in Kiev. This resulted in the provision of the president, and in the upcoming chaos Russia used the situation in their favor and took control of the Crimea Peninsula. Their legally placed

military base there made the operation quick and easy. Russia annexed the peninsula in March; however, it is not acknowledged by the international community. This was the beginning of a conflict between Russia supporting rebels in the eastern Ukraine and the Ukrainian government. The rebels were supported by the Russian Government, even if Putin declined it until late 2015. This laid the foundation for Western economic sanctions towards Russia, which were clearly responded equivalently.

The relationship between the east and the west, Russia and the US, has been tense for decades. The Cold War might have ended, but the views on one another remain the same. The west is no longer the US only, it is NATO, an extremely powerful military alliance and a danger to Russia. This is the reason for the ongoing tension in Ukraine today. The increase of Russian military forces in the areas near the Ukrainian border has created an international fear of war. The uncertainty of how far they are willing to go to achieve what they want is concerning. The change of situation is based on Ukraine taking steps towards the west, an unwelcome development for the Russians supporting separatist forces in the eastern parts of the country. NATO is expanding east, closing in on the Russian border with Ukraine as a potential new member. This development is alarming for Putin, who is now demanding NATO to exclude Ukraine from any future participation. These demands will never be acknowledged, and the increasing tension remains. Once again, we see the underlying fear of invasion, the behavior absorbed

throughout history, all based on the weaknesses of their geographical position. NATO closing in on them is a reminder of the countless invasions by the Mongolians, the Ottoman Empire, The Lithuanians, The Polish- the list goes on and on. Their apprehension is based on something; however, it does not justify their actions.

Russia has throughout centuries adapted a very specific behavior based on its geographical position, their strengths, and their weaknesses. Being an extremely large, but also flat and split country, divided by their own nature, has been a challenge. Spread out from Europe to Asia the people lack a common identity, they are separated by their own geographical characteristics. The people of Russia have chosen Europe- all the main cities are located in the western parts of the country, and most of them are settled down in this area. Close to the western world and their biggest competitor the need for coastline remains. Through decades the lack of coastline has made their empire incomplete, feeding their inclination for more, but for how long can this be used as an explanation for expansion? This reasoning and excuse have reached its expiration date decades ago. There are countries completely landlocked, living in coherence and respecting their neighbors. Russia has never been forced upon their behavior; they do have the option to change. Hard power has only gotten them so far, maybe a change in foreign policy, the use of soft power and trusting relationships is the way to develop further. The remaining question is, are they willing to try new ways?