



Santos Castro Fernández.
Adviser of of the Spanish Institute of Strategic Studies

REVIEW

OF THE BOOK: THE REVENGE OF GEOGRAPHY

Author: Robert D. Kaplan

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Last August, the publisher RBA presented in Spain Robert D. Kaplan's book entitled: "The Revenge of Geography", with the very illustrative and provocative subtitle, "What the Map Tells Us About Coming Conflicts and the Battle Against Fate". In his work, Kaplan gives us the opportunity to return to century-old, but still relevant analyses and debates on the impact of geography on the history of humanity and the coexistence or confrontation of nations, peoples and civilisations.

And he does so accurately, without falling into the all-too-easy pitfall of simplistic geographic determinism. To the contrary, his emphasis on the impact of geography is influenced and balanced at all times by a permanent focus on the human factor and, moreover, an endorsement of the probabilistic determinism of R. Aron, of whom he claims to be a loyal follower.

This book is packed with knowledge, enriched with brilliant strategic vision, evocative, daring in its predictions and rich in ideas, with which you may agree or disagree, but which are open to intense debate, in any event.

Geography is the lens through which Kaplan sees the world; the vast geography that shapes spaces, connects large territories and sets boundaries; geography as the

mother of history, as a backdrop to the unfolding of humanity.

The reader will take great pleasure in finding history and geography reunited in the right balance, in line with the best tradition of the Annales School, one of whose founders - Fernand Braudel – Kaplan pays tribute to, acknowledging his indebtedness to his monumental work on the Mediterranean.

The course taken by Kaplan is comprehensive and current. Even though he looks back to the past, to lost civilisations, his interest in the palpable present, such as the War in Syria and instability in Iraq, is evident.

He presents his views on Europe, China, India, Iran and the United States with clarity and audacity. Of particular interest is his opinion, with a certain perspective, on two decisive military interventions of recent decades: the first being in the Balkans and the second in Iraq, the two extremes, the two – western and eastern - borders of the old Ottoman Empire broken up after World War I. These are two clear examples of how geography has affected the course of history of nations and states.

Kaplan describes himself as a “realist” and embraces the maxim of this approach, that is, the belief that geography, history and culture act as constraints to military intervention.

When confronted with political considerations, Kaplan always favours realism over any form of humanistic idealism. He is aware of the consequences of doing so and of the controversy surrounding realism, which is regarded as amoral and therefore not well received. He is in fact more focused on interests than on values, but his logic is unquestionable and his interpretation of how states behave is probably accurate.

Rightly or wrongly, Kaplan, like many Americans, cannot or does not even try to hide his Euroscepticism, his distrust of a European Union that refuses to assume its responsibility as a major player in the global arena. Indeed, when talking about a reluctant Europe, he makes the odd uncharacteristic error, such as not mentioning Italy as one of the founding members of the European Union, or having a biased view of Catalonia.

His interpretation of the Cold War is particularly interesting, not from an ideological perspective, but from a geopolitical one; he points to the pressure of Russia's continental power in Eurasia and the pressure of the United States' sea and air power in the Middle East and Southeast Asia. To use his own words, “the destinies of Europe and China would both be affected by the very spread of Soviet power over the Heartland, even as the Greater Middle East and Southeast Asia in the Eurasian rimland would feel the pressure of American sea and air power”. (page 226)

Since the Cold War, geopolitics has prevailed over ideology, that is, “geography has had its revenge”; once again it draws the master plans of history, perhaps it never ceased to do so.

Nevertheless, Kaplan's central idea is not undermined by the odd distortion.

In short, we should not underestimate the impact of geography because it is geography that enables us to speak about the strength and vigour of the so-called emerging countries. The reputations of Halford J. Mackinder and Alfred Mahan are restored, and in their wake we have this engaging work by Robert D. Kaplan.

