



LAND AND POWER

GEOGRAPHY MAY BE THE CAUSE OF SOME OTHERWISE INEXPLICABLE POLITICAL DECISIONS, SAYS ALISTAIR MACLENAN

At the end of January and in my capacity as the chairman of the UKGEOforum, I invited ex-foreign correspondent for TV broadcaster Sky News, Tim Marshall, to give a lecture.

During his career of more than 24 years with Sky, Tim reported from all over the world and many times from conflict zones that were created by the often-contentious decisions taken by presidents, prime ministers and royalty. He witnessed the consequences of those decisions for the people and communities involved and he conveyed those stories back to an audience sat comfortably in their front rooms.

I asked him to be the speaker after reading his third book, *The Prisoners of Geography*, in which he explains the influence and constraints that the physical geography of countries, their neighbours and the wider regions has had and continues to have on the decisions that their leaders can and, in some cases, must take.

On a freezing cold night, Tim walked a packed room through the geography of the three superpowers and explained that protecting their self-interest meant taking decisions that could appear overly aggressive, obstinate or downright odd – if you didn't consider the geography.

As the Ukraine continued its political journey westwards and made ever-warmer overtures to the EU, why did Russia react so swiftly and aggressively? Why was it imperative for Putin to annex Crimea, irrespective of the inevitable penalties?

Well, when you consider their access to the sea, it becomes a little clearer. If you want to be a great power, you need a navy that can operate 365 days a year. That is impossible if nearly all the vast coastline to the north of your country is unusable for many months of the year. Russia's only warm, deep-water port is Sevastopol, which is in Crimea. It's likely that even the most democratic of Russian leaders would have moved to protect their access to the high seas of the world as their

neighbour moved towards an organisation they see as a threat.

Rightly describing the US as the 'best piece of real estate in the world', given its farmlands, flat plains and rivers, Tim showed that even in the 'Land of the Free', access to the oceans can bring the world to the brink of disaster.

Whilst the Cuban Missile Crisis was the first time two superpowers had used nuclear weapons as bargaining chips, the location of Cuba had worried many a US president. It sits just off the coast of Florida and potentially gives it the power to control both the Yucatan Channel in the Gulf of Mexico and the Florida Straits.

These are the only two ways to reach the port of New Orleans, which sees in the region of 60 million tons of cargo a year pass through its docks.

Had Russia (or the Spanish in the past) been allowed to control Cuba, it would have made those two straits of water either side of the island very narrow indeed for US sea traffic from one of the busiest deep-water ports in the US.

And however many Hollywood actors proclaim that Tibet should be free of Chinese rule, its role as a buffer between the Sino-empire and the other emerging world superpower, India, means that Richard Gere is likely in for a long wait.

Tim was keen to stress that geography was only one of the factors to influence these decisions – pure self-interest, greed and megalomania can never be completely ignored – but understanding how man interacts with the natural world around the land he calls home will provide a valuable insight into the politician's mind. I cannot recommend *The Prisoners of Geography* highly enough.

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