Commandant’s Professional Reading List

- Revenge of Geography - Discussion Guide -

*Revenge of Geography:* This guide is intended to help Marines think about and synthesize ideas from the book. All answers or responses during discussion should be embraced as *relevant*, and open for further discussion. To the guide leader: **There is no single right answer.**

Encourage the Marine to read, from this book and other books. Encourage them to think and challenge and debate, and arrive at a common understanding. Encourage them to consider the ideas of others (authors and peers) and to push themselves intellectually.

Avoid leading the discussion group to a particular interpretation. Support continuous conversation.

This guide does NOT support a lecture with mile-deep detail on every possible issue and scenario in the book *Revenge of Geography.*

The point of this guide is to help the readers synthesize the purpose, perspective, and insights of the book with their own perspectives on strategy and come out of this session or sessions of small group PME with a better sense of the importance of understanding the relationship between strategy and geography.

**Prep Work:**

a. Read *Revenge of Geography*
b. Review MCDP 1-1, Strategy
c. Review *On War*
d. Review *Thucydides*
e. Review Mahan (*The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660-1783*)
f. Review *Diplomacy* (Henry Kissinger)

**Discussion Questions:** All answers/ responses during discussion should be embraced as *relevant*, and open for further discussion.

1. **Epigraph:** The world might be flat; but Geography still matters…maybe even more.

   **Key Take-Away:**
   Air travel may have “shrunk” the world and the internet may have “flattened” the world; but “…Geography, climate, population, determine communications economy, political organization” (pg. 323). And, political organization determines political objectives; and war serves political objectives. (Refer to MCDP 1-1, Strategy and *On War*)

2. **Quotes pg. 23-30:**
   - “…the legacies of geography, history, and culture really do set limits on what can be accomplished in any given place.”
   - “Geography is the most fundamental factor in foreign policy of states because it is the most permanent.”
   - “What could be a more central fact of European history than that Germany is a continental power and Great Britain an island?”

   **Key Take-Away:**
   There is an important relationship between strategy and geography. Geography influences the challenges and opportunities that a state faces for both its prosperity and its security. Germany is centrally located
on the European continent which enhances its economic benefits as well as surrounding it with potential enemies on all borders. Great Britain’s maritime character allowed it to build a global empire based on its sea power; yet that same empire could be threatened by land powers such as Russia, France and the U.S.

Key Questions:
1) What is the relationship between the US’s geography and its strategy?
2) What is the relationship between Iraq’s geography and its strategy?
3) What is the relationship between Afghanistan’s geography and its strategy?
4) What is the relationship between geography and strategy for states like Russia? China? India?
5) Are these relationships permanent? Or do technological advances in the speed of physical travel and speed of information change these relationships? If so, how?

3. Quote pg. 67, “It was an old story this, Europe versus Russia: a liberal sea power – as were Athens and Venice – against a reactionary land power – as was Sparta and Prussia. For the sea, in addition to the cosmopolitan influences it bestows by virtue of access to distant harbors, provides the sort of inviolate border security necessary for liberalism and democracy to take root.”

Key Take-Away:
“Liberal democracies” are more likely to take root and flourish with secure borders and access to the sea.

Key Questions:
1) Do “maritime powers” such as Great Britain, Japan, and the US have a geographic advantage for establishing and maintaining “liberal democracies?” Why or why not?
2) Are nations like Iraq, Afghanistan and Russia at a geographic disadvantage for establishing and maintaining “liberal democracies?” Why or why not?
3) What does Mahan’s theory on sea power say about this? What does Clausewitz say about this? What does history say about this?

4. Quote pg. 202, “Could geography once again drive apart Russia and China, whose current alliance is mainly tactical? And could the beneficiary be, as in the past, the United States? Though this time, with China the greater power, the United States might conceivably partner with Russia in a strategic alliance to balance the weaker against the Middle Kingdom, so as to force China’s attention away from the Fist Island Chain in the Pacific and toward its land borders.”

Key Take-Away:
Historic geo-political land rivalries could provide the key to counter the China’s Anti-Access/Area Denial(A2AD) advantage in the South China Sea.

Key Questions:
1) What other “Balance of Power” opportunities could the US employ in Asia? The Pacific region? How should we use our military to exploit these opportunities?
2) Does China have other “land based” vulnerabilities? External? Internal?
3) Does China’s aggressive investment in land based energy pipelines and road networks in Asia make it more independent or more dependent?

5. Quote pg. 242, “Only in the Western view is Afghanistan part of Central Asia; to Indians it is part of their subcontinent. Afghanistan’s geography makes it central not only as a principal invasion route into India, for terrorists in our day as from armies in days past, but as a strategically vital rear base for Pakistan, India’s primary enemy.”
Key Take-Away:
To understand geography, we must understand the history that geography has helped shape; and how other versions of history might be different from our own.

Key Questions:
1) How does an Indian version of history help us understand the strategic relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan?
2) How might other countries such as Iran, Russia and China use Afghanistan to their advantage?

6. Quote, pg. 259, ‘In the Middle East we have… a “vast quadrilateral,” where Europe, Russia, Asia, and Africa intersect… The Middle East is characterized by a vast array of kingdoms, sultanates, theocracies, democracies, and military-style autocracies, whose common borders look formed as if by an unsteady knife. To no surprise of the reader, this whole region… constitutes, in effect, one densely packed axis of instability, where continents, historic road networks, and sea lanes converge. What is more, this region comprises 70 percent of the world’s proven oil reserves and 40 percent of its natural gas reserves.”

Key Take-Away:
Geography can influence the stability of a region or where many regions/continents intersect; especially when it contains an extremely high concentration of a resource responsible for driving the global economy.

Key Questions:
1) How do we bring stability to this vital region? Should we? Why? Or why not?
2) Which element of national power should take the lead role in providing stability in the Middle East? Our military? Our economy? Our Diplomacy? Our information?
3) What elements of geography in the Middle East can we use to our advantage?

7. Quote, pg. 325, “Why not fix Mexico instead? How might we have prospered had we put all that money, expertise, and innovation that went in to Iraq and Afghanistan into Mexico?”

Key Take-Away:
“Strategy, broadly defined, is the process of interrelating ends and means.” (pg. 37) The United States has tremendous “means” at our disposal – but they are not unlimited. Our “means” must be used wisely in order to ensure strategic success. A strategic assessment informed by a good appreciation of geography can help inform the limits of strategic reach.

Key Questions:
1) Is the status Mexico a vital national interest? Why or why not?
2) What does geography have to say about the US?
3) What are our advantages and disadvantages?
4) What are our challenges and opportunities?

Revenge of Geography - Discussion Key Take-Aways:

1. Geography is a key factor when formulating strategy. It might not always be the most important factor; but it is always the most permanent.
2. Geography always presents both challenges and opportunities; a good strategist identifies, develops and exploits the opportunities and attempts to mitigate the challenges.
3. Geography limits to what is possible; a good strategist recognizes those limits.