

World Knowledge Forum 2013

Robert Kaplan - The Revenge of Geography

With the partisan divide between liberals and conservatives taking place in the media, Robert Kaplan, Chief Political Analyst of Stratfor, sees that as only half of the real issue. The other, more often overlooked side is that of the physical constraints of geography. At the 2013 World Knowledge Forum, Mr. Kaplan used historical and modern conflicts to describe the political and social situations found around the globe. He describes the map as "a beginning to explore natural resources, diseases, economy, all of which emanate from an appreciation of the map."

Mr. Kaplan used the Middle East and Arab Spring of 2010 as the springboard for his geo-centric model of thinking. He argued that the root of the problems found in Tunisia can be traced back to the times of the Roman Empire when the country was what he called an "extension of Italy in a sense." He argued that this influence is still seen today in a division that took place over 4000 years ago. "When vendors who first set themselves on fire in 2010...the Arab revolt began in a part of the country that had been underdeveloped for 2000 years," he said.

This problem can be seen in modern-day Syria as well. Mr Kaplan cites, "Syria has never had a state identity. This is not fatalism. Al Assad gave the country security, but did not use that security to create a state identity." The amalgamation of cultures and rulers of the past have led to the issues affecting Syria today.

The current situation in the European Union (EU) can be seen as an extension of these manmade borders. "An EU is seen as an ambitious concept because it seeks to unite former empires with totally different development paths," he said. "This is the old ninth century empire of Charlemagne." These different empires, along with the size and scope of Europe, have led to divisions that have isolated parts of the continent, especially in the South East. "Hungary has more fear from Moscow than what he can get from Brussels," he suggested.

Russia's geography, with its 11 time zones, has far reaching implications from Western Europe to China. Mr. Kaplan cited, "Now you have a weaker NATO, weaker EU, and Russia is much stronger. The Warsaw Pact may be dead, but as geography tells us, Russia is big, and still next door to the EU, and a factor we shouldn't get rid of."

On the eastern edge of Russia lays China, which has a host of geographical issues to deal with on its own. According to Mr. Kaplan, "One of the positives is that of the 1.3 billion people, 100 million live in Manchuria." However, with minority groups living in the highlands, which are very rich in minerals, there

has been struggle between the ethnic Han and other minorities. The future of China's economy, as Mr. Kaplan sees it, is the most important issue in the world as China begins to spread its powers outwards and build roads, pipelines, and railways all throughout central Asia.

Geography is a key factor in the state of Iran, which he touched on as well. "The Iranian plateau is synonymous to the Iranian state. The area of Iran's political influence today, more or less, approximates the Iranian empires of old. In other words, Iran is a real state," Mr. Kaplan said. That longevity is something that he sees as a positive force in the development of United States-Iranian relations.

As for the future of the world, Mr. Kaplan sees the world as becoming more claustrophobic as a result of the advances in technology. He compares the globe to a watch. "If I took my watch apart, it would be incredibly complex. That's like the earth. The countries are like the gears that go around. It's still very big and we have to be aware of our constraints."