All leaders are constrained by geography. Their choices are limited by mountains, rivers, seas and concrete. Yes, to follow world events you need to understand people, ideas and movements—but if you don’t know geography, you’ll never have the full picture.

If you’ve ever wondered why Putin is so obsessed with Crimea, why the USA was destined to become a global superpower, or why China’s power base continues to expand ever outwards, the answers are all here. In ten chapters (covering Russia; China; the USA; Latin America; the Middle East; Africa; India and Pakistan; Europe; Japan and Korea; and the Arctic), using maps, essays and occasionally his personal experiences, Prisoners of Geography looks at the past, present and future to offer an essential insight into one of the major factors that determines world history.

Rather than a classic book review – the following pages summarize my takeaways. Thanks for reading. I welcome your feedback and comments.
The Arctic is the last chapter in the book but since I visited it in August 2015, and it’s the only time Canada is mentioned – I’ll cover it first.

The ice is melting. The effects of climate change are now showing more than ever in the Arctic. The first cargo ship not to be escorted by an ice breaker went through the Northwest Passage in 2014. By 2040 the Passage is expected to be open two months of the year. The route is about 40% shorter than through the Panama Canal, which means that as access becomes easier, both Egypt and Panama will feel the pain with less shipping traffic through the Suez and Panama canals.

The Russians are coming! President Putin just added the Arctic region as a sphere of Russian influence in its official foreign policy doctrine. Russia’s Arctic budget is growing to pay for the boost in Arctic military muscle and its fleet if 32 icebreakers (takes U.S.$ 1 billion plus 10 years to build an icebreaker). The United States has ONE, down from the eight it had in the 1960s.

The author makes the point that the Arctic has The Arctic Council composed of mature and mainly democratic countries. The international laws regulating territorial disputes, environmental pollution, laws of the sea and treatment of minority peoples are in place. He doesn’t think the Arctic will turn out to be a battleground for nation states but he leaves room for some doubt, especially with the discovery of energy deposits and the development of technology to get at them.
Vladimir Putin claims to be a religious man. If so, his prayers to God would ask, “Why didn’t you put some mountains in the Ukraine?” If it had been so, then the great expanse of flatland that is the North European Plain would not be such encouraging territory from which to attack Russia.

In 2014 when the Ukraine came close to signing a massive trade agreement with the European Union, one which could lead to membership, Putin began turning the screw. When Ukrainian President, Viktor Yanukovych, fled for his life in February 2014 and other anti-Russian factions took over the government, the die was cast. About 60% of Crimean’s population is ‘ethnically Russian’, so the Kremlin was pushing against an open door. Putin would not go down in history as the man who ‘lost Crimea’ and, with it, the only proper warm-water port his country had access to.

Russia’s most powerful weapons now, leaving to one side nuclear missiles, are not the Russian army and air force, but gas and oil. More than 25% of Europe’s gas and oil and 50% of Germany’s gas consumption comes from Russia. Enter the Americans, with a win-win strategy for the USA and Europe. Washington is approving licences for export facilities, and Europe is beginning a long-term project to build more liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminals. Plus the European terminals could also receive supplies from North Africa and the Middle East. The Kremlin would no longer be able to turn the taps off. Russia is planning pipelines heading south-east and hopes to replace European revenue with sales to China.

In 1939, Winston Churchill, made his now famous observation of Russia:

“It is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma; but perhaps there is a key. That key is Russian national interest.”

Seven years later Churchill went on to say, “I am convinced that there is nothing they admire so much as strength, and there is nothing for which they have less respect than for weakness, especially military weakness.”

If we are wondering why Putin’s popularity is at an all-time high despite very bad economic times in Russia today, maybe Churchill was right.
The importance of Tibet. The Himalayas run the length of the Chinese-Indian border cutting the two most populous countries on the planet off from each other both militarily and economically. Of course the border is really the Tibetan-Indian border – and that is precisely why China has always wanted to control it. If China didn’t then India would.

From the Tibetan Plateau, India would have a base from which to push into the Chinese heartland. The Chinese do not see Tibet through a prism of human rights, but that of geopolitical security and believe Westerners are trying to undermine their security. Against physical odds the Chinese have built a railroad that brings tourists but also Hans (Chinese) into Tibet making Tibetan independence less likely over time.

The Han people of China who emerged from the heartland or the North China Plain now make up 90% of China’s population and they are expanding northward into Manchuria, Mongolia and Xinjiang. Like the Tibetans the Uighurs in northwest China also want their independence but it is too strategically important to the Chinese to allow that. It also has oil and is home to China’s nuclear weapons testing sites. The strategy of having moving Hans into the area is working. Now 40% and growing of Xinjiang is Han.

China requires resources of all kinds to maintain an increasing standard of living for its population. Today there are around 500 mostly peaceful protests a day across China over a variety of issues. Introduce mass unemployment and it will get violent. They have used up much of their own resources (more than 40% of farm land is polluted or has thinning topsoil) so they want to secure ocean trade routes. The geography in the news around China is the sea between China and the Pacific or the archipelago that Beijing calls the "first Island Chain". There is also the 'Nine Dash Line', more recently turned into ten dashes in 2013 to include Taiwan, which China says marks its territory. This dispute over ownership of more
than 200 tiny islands and reefs is poisoning China's relations with its neighbours. This passageway provides access to the world's most important shipping lanes. In peacetime the route is open in various places, but in wartime they could very easily be blocked, thus blockading China. All great nations spend peacetime preparing for the day war breaks out.

Japan is also in dispute with China over the uninhabited island chain it calls Senkaku and the Chinese know as Diaoyu, north-east of Taiwan. Another potential flare-up with Japan centers on the East Chia Sea's gas deposits. Beijing has declared an 'Air Defense Identification Zone' over most of the sea requiring prior notice before anyone else flies through it. The American and Japanese are trying to ignore it, but it will become a hot issue at a time of their choosing or due to an accident with if mismanaged.

The Chinese are determined to have Taiwan but are nowhere near being able to challenge for it militarily. Instead they are using soft power by increasing trade and tourism between the two states. China wants to woo Taiwan back into its arms. China claims almost the entire South China Sea, and the energy supplies believed to be beneath it, as its own. However, Malaysia, Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines and Brunei also have territorial claims against China and each other.

The maps of the region that the Chinese now print show almost the whole of the South China Sea as theirs. This is a statement of intent, backed by aggressive naval patrols and official statements. Beijing intends to change its neighbours' ways of thinking and to change America's way of thinking and behaving - pushing and pushing an agenda until its competitors back off. At stake here is the concept of international waters and free passage in peacetime; it is not something which will easily be given up by the other powers.

If China can avoid a serious conflict with Japan or the USA, then the only real danger to China is itself. If there is mass and long-term unemployment, in a age when the Chinese are a people packed into urban areas, the inevitable social unrest could be—like everything else in modern China—on a scale hitherto unseen.
The Ottoman Empire (129 – 1922) was ruled from Istanbul and it took in what are now Algeria, Libya, Egypt, Israel/Palestine, Syria, Jordan, Iraq and parts of Iran. In 1867 these regions were divided into administrative areas which were usually based on where certain tribes lived be they Kurds in present-day Northern Iraq or the tribal federations in what is now part of Syria and part of Iraq.

In 1916 the British diplomat Colonel Sir Mark Sykes drew a crude line across a map of the Middle East. It became the basis of a secret agreement with his French counterpart, Georges Picot, to divide the region into two spheres – the north under French control and south under British hegemony. The term Sykes-Picot agreement betrayed promises given to tribal leaders and partially explain the unrest and extremism of today.

Islam is the dominant religion but in 632CE the Sunni and Shia Muslims split over the succession issues around the death of the prophet Muhammad. The Orthodox Muslims are the Sunnis and they are 85% of the population. The word Shia refers to the son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad. That son-in-law was assassinated and thus denied what the Shia family feel is their birthright – to lead the Islamic community. [This sounds like a division that is going to be around until the end of mankind].

The author’s view is that Al Qaeda and Islamic State have garnered support partially because of the humiliation caused by colonialism. Arab leaders have failed to deliver prosperity or freedom, and the siren call of Islamism is attractive relative to the toxic mix of piety, unemployment and repression. Sunni Islamist fighters from across the globe, drawn like moths
To the light of a billion pixels, have taken advantage of the thee-way split between Kurds, Sunni and Shia in Iraq. They offer the Sunni Arab the heady mix of the promise of restoring them to their ‘rightful’ place as the dominant force in the region, and the re-establishment of the caliphate in which their version of all true believers (Sunni Muslims) live under one ruler. The Middle East situation is complicated to say the least. I encourage you to read this book if the topic interests you. The author covers all the countries and their issues. He ends the chapter with these comments: In impoverished societies with few accountable institutions, power rests with gangs disguised as ‘militia’ and ‘political parties’. While they fight for power many innocent people die. It looks as if it will be that way in Libya, Syria, Yemen, Iraq and possibly other countries for years to come. [He doesn’t mention the mass migration of refugees but if he’s right this will continue too.] Sykes-Picot is breaking: putting it back together, even in a different shape will be a long and bloody affair.

5. INDIA & PAKISTAN

The relationship will never be friendly, but were it not for the thorn of Kashmir in could potentially be cordial. India will not let Pakistan have a border with China or control the valuable water supply from the Indus River.

Kashmir looks destined to remain a place where a sporadic proxy war between Pakistani-trained fighters and the Indian army is conducted – a conflict which threatens to spill over into full-scale war with the inherent danger of the use of nuclear weapons. Both countries will also continue to fight another proxy war – in Afghanistan – especially now that most NATO forces have left.

The author takes a long term view of Pakistan which is very interesting but concludes with his best guess of the future being: The Americans lose interest, the pressure on Islamabad relents and the government compromises with the Taliban. The situation returns to normal, with the North West Frontier left alone but Pakistan continuing to push its agenda in Afghanistan. Normal was only disrupted because the Taliban decided to house the training of an international terrorist organization (Al Qaeda).

Twenty-five years ago India embarked on a ‘look east’ policy, partially as a block to what it could see would be the imminent rise of China. It has ‘taken care of business’ by dramatically increasing trade with China (mostly imports) while simultaneously forging strategic relationships in what China regards as its own backyard. India has strengthened its ties with Burma, the Philippines, and Thailand, but more importantly it is working with Vietnam and Japan to check China’s increasing domination of the South China Sea.
Conclusion - The Americans are staying in both Korea and Japan. Japan and Korea have plenty to argue about, but will agree that their shared anxiety about China and North Korea will overcome this.

Even if the Korea problem is solved, the issue of China will still be there, and this means the US 7th Fleet will remain in the Bay of Tokyo and US Marines will remain in Okinawa, guarding the paths in and out of the Pacific and the China Seas. The waters can be expected to be rough.

Marshall’s final conclusion: The challenges ahead are such that we will perhaps have to come together to meet them: to travel the universe not as Russians, Americans or Chinese but as representatives of humanity. But so far, although we have broken free from the shackles of gravity, we are still imprisoned in our own minds, confined by our suspicion of the ‘other’, and thus our primal competition for resources. There is a long way to go.