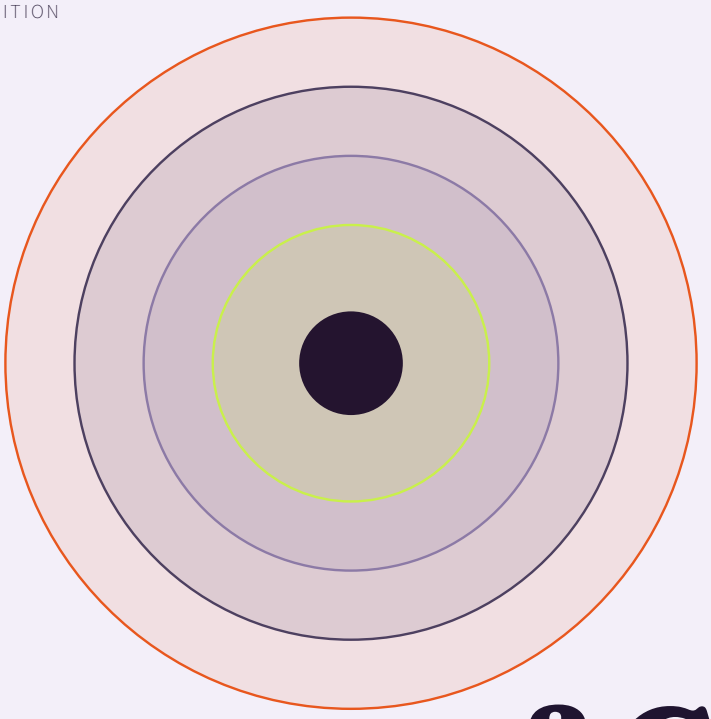


Prisoners of Geography: Ten Maps That Explain Everything About the World

A reading of the book by Tim Marshall (2015)

1. ACTION BOOK

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ABOUT THIS EDITION

This is HourLife's reading of Prisoners of Geography: Ten Maps That Explain Everything About the World, in our own words. It is not a substitute for the book.

BEFORE YOU START 01

The book in a minute

Tim Marshall is a British journalist and a former diplomatic editor of Sky News who spent years reporting on wars and foreign affairs. Prisoners of Geography argues that the physical world, its mountains, rivers, seas, plains and climate, sets the limits within which nations and their leaders have to act. The book works through ten regions, one map each: Russia, China, the United States, Western Europe, Africa, the Middle East, India and Pakistan, Korea and Japan, Latin America and the Arctic. For each it asks what the land makes easy and what it makes hard, from Russia's search for ports that do not freeze to the river network that helped make the United States rich. Marshall draws on history, from old invasion routes to borders drawn by colonial powers, to show how the same constraints keep shaping choices.

Below are the 9 ideas HourLife readers vote up most, each in our words with a note on what it asks of you, and then the steps that put them to work.

WHAT READERS KEEP

The takeaways

1

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Mountains, rivers, seas and plains set the limits inside which every leader has to choose.

This is the book's starting point. Leaders are not free to do anything they like, because the land decides what is cheap, what is costly and what is close to impossible. Marshall does not claim geography decides everything, but he argues it is the factor most often left out of the news.

2

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Russia looks west across a wide, flat plain and sees an open door.

The North European Plain runs from France to the Urals, and armies have crossed it into Russia more than once, including Napoleon's in 1812 and Germany's in the twentieth century. Marshall argues that this is why Moscow wants the narrow stretch around Poland to be friendly or neutral: a short front is easier to defend than a wide one.

3

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

A great power without a port that stays free of ice will keep looking for one.

Russia's northern ports freeze for much of the year, and Vladivostok in the far east for part of it. Its warm-water fleet is based at Sevastopol in Crimea, yet ships leaving the Black Sea must pass through the Bosphorus, which Turkey controls. Marshall reads Russia's moves in Crimea in 2014 largely through this need.

4

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

China's crowded heartland is guarded by the wide, thinly peopled regions around it.

Most Chinese people live on the plains of the east, watered by the Yellow River and the Yangtze. Tibet, Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia and Manchuria ring that core, and Marshall argues that holding them keeps any rival far from it. Tibet matters twice over: the Himalayas keep India at a distance, and great rivers rise on its plateau.

5

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

The United States drew a winning hand: two oceans, weak neighbours and rivers that carry its harvest to the sea.

Marshall describes the Mississippi basin as a network of navigable rivers that moves goods cheaply to the Gulf of Mexico. The Louisiana Purchase of 1803 brought that basin under American control. With oceans to the east and west and no rival power on its borders, the country could grow without fear of invasion by land.

6

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Africa's great rivers carry water more easily than they carry trade.

Many of the continent's largest rivers are broken by waterfalls and rapids, so boats cannot run far inland, and the smooth coastline has few deep natural harbours. The Sahara cut much of the continent off from the Mediterranean world. Marshall is clear that this is a story about terrain, not about the people who live on it.

7

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

A line drawn on a map does not change who lives on the ground beneath it.

In the Middle East and in Africa, many borders were drawn by European powers with little regard for where peoples, faiths and tribes actually lived. The Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916 between Britain and France is Marshall's best-known example. He argues that many later conflicts grew from states whose borders made little sense to the people inside them.

8

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Ice is a border too, and this one is moving.

As the Arctic's summer sea ice retreats, shipping routes along the top of Russia and through Canada's islands open for longer, and the seabed becomes easier to reach. The countries with Arctic coastlines have made claims that overlap. Marshall treats the Arctic as the place where geography is changing fastest.

9

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Geography sets the limits, but people still choose within them.

Marshall accepts that technology, ideas and individual leaders matter. Aircraft fly over mountains and the internet ignores rivers. His point is that the old constraints have been softened, not removed, so anyone trying to understand a country should start with its map rather than end there.

PUT IT TO WORK

Your action book

Do the setup steps once, then keep the habits going. The setup changes your week; the habits keep it changed after the first good one.

The download puts this whole reading and a printable action book in one PDF: the setup checklist, then a page of real calendar days for each habit, starting on the day you choose.

SET UP ONCE

- [ ] Put a physical map where you read the news
- [ ] Write one line for each of the ten regions
- [ ] Find four chokepoints on a map
- [ ] Read your own country's map
- [ ] Pick one region to follow for a month

KEEP UP DAILY

- ◯ Open a map before you form a view
- ◯ Ask the four questions of any headline
- ◯ Check the people as well as the terrain

30 days · Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026

Part two, after the reading, prints each of these as a page to fill in by hand.

THE LAST WORD

Before you go

Pick one step from the action book and do it today. An idea from a book starts to count once it changes what one ordinary day looks like.

PART TWO

The action book

Change the setup once, then keep it up. 5 setup actions to do once, and 3 habits to mark each day for 30 days.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026

Print it, or write on it in any PDF app.

SET UP ONCE

The setup checklist

Each of these is done once. Do one a day, and check it off when it is done.

- [ ] SETUP 1

Put a physical map where you read the news

Hang a world map or keep an atlas by the place you usually read or watch the news.

A map you can see without opening an app is one you will actually check.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 2

Write one line for each of the ten regions

Work through the explorer on this page and write a single sentence per region in a notebook: the feature that matters most and what it forces.

Ten lines is a usable cheat sheet.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 3

Find four chokepoints on a map

Locate the Bosphorus, the Strait of Malacca, the Strait of Hormuz and the Panama Canal.

For each, write down which countries hold its shores and what passes through it.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 4

Read your own country's map

List your country's main mountains, rivers, coasts and neighbours.

Next to each, note one thing it has made easier and one thing it has made harder.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 5

Pick one region to follow for a month

Choose one of the ten regions and follow it through a single reliable news source for four weeks.

Each time it appears, ask which feature of its map the story touches.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

DAILY HABIT 1 OF 3

Open a map before you form a view

When a story names a place you can't picture, find it on a map first.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
						1
2	3	4	5	6 ○	7 ○	8 ○
9 ○	10 ○	11 ○	12 ○	13 ○	14 ○	15 ○
16 ○	17 ○	18 ○	19 ○	20 ○	21 ○	22 ○
23 ○	24 ○	25 ○	26 ○	27 ○	28 ○	29 ○
30 ○						

December 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
	1 ○	2 ○	3 ○	4 ○	5 ○	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	31			

EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP

DAILY HABIT 2 OF 3

Ask the four questions of any headline

Where are the mountains, the rivers, the ports and the plains?

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
						1
2	3	4	5	6 ○	7 ○	8 ○
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EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP

DAILY HABIT 3 OF 3

Check the people as well as the terrain

After you have read the map, ask what it leaves out: the leaders, the ideas and the technology involved.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
						1
2	3	4	5	6 ○	7 ○	8 ○
9 ○	10 ○	11 ○	12 ○	13 ○	14 ○	15 ○
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30 ○						

December 2026

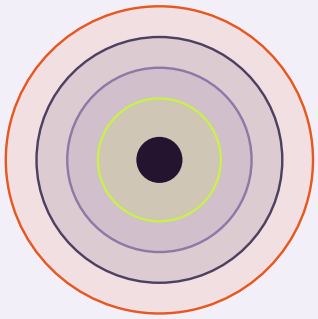
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28	29	30	31			

EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP



Before you judge a country's choices, look at the ground it has to stand on.

HOURLIFE NOTE AFTER TIM MARSHALL