

**American Geographical Society (AGS)  
Policy Statement**  
**on**  
**Geographically Informed Regional Studies**

OVERVIEW

Despite the explosion of available information about our increasingly interconnected world, general knowledge of distant places and regions is often dangerously simplistic. Modern tools of data gathering and analysis allow for increasingly sophisticated understandings of individual phenomena (land cover changes, population distributions, transportation networks, etc.), but such understandings are not adequate unto themselves. It is critically important to grasp how individual phenomena relate to one another on and near the surface of the earth—in the process creating a global mosaic of diverse environments, places, and regions. Understanding the complex character of the places and regions that make up the planet is essential to any serious effort to evaluate the changing nature of the world in which we live, the potential impacts of policy decisions, and the problems and prospects of new forms of interregional interaction. These points are well recognized in selected educational institutions, government agencies, and private research institutes, where sophisticated geographical analysis can be found. Nonetheless, geographically informed regional studies programs have been marginalized in many educational institutions, geographical perspectives frequently receive limited attention in public debates over policy issues, and the grasp of geography in the general public is often insufficient to allow for a meaningful understanding of global developments. Therefore, the American Geographical Society calls for a comprehensive program to rebuild the regional geography capabilities of our educational institutions and expand the presence of geographical perspectives in private and public organizations involved with the formulation and public consideration of foreign policy.

ARTICLE

**Introduction:** Every day governmental officials and business leaders make thousands of consequential decisions based on understandings of distant places, peoples, and environments. Since we live in a democratic society, many of those decisions are ultimately opened to public scrutiny, which can only be as good as the public's understanding of the variable character of the planet. What are the understandings that inform the decisions of policy makers and business elites? How good is the general public's understanding of distant places, peoples, and environments? A careful consideration of such questions raises clear and compelling concerns.

Governmental and business leaders often have a very good grasp of individual issues or problems, and they have at their command a wealth of information about the nature and distribution of particular phenomena. But issues and problems are rooted in real places, which typically embody a complex mix of peoples, cultures, infrastructure, and environmental characteristics. The only way to begin to appreciate the real impacts of an issue or problem, then, is to consider how it will play out in particular places or regions. Such an undertaking requires both a broad and a deep appreciation of the complex geographies of individual places and regions (cultural, social, economic, and environmental). Moreover, in a well-functioning

democratic society, citizens need enough of an understanding of the geographical character of the world around them to be able to develop meaningful evaluations of the claims and proposals of decision makers and to participate meaningfully in an increasingly globalized world.

**The Current State of Affairs:** A frequently referenced electoral map of the United States shows the country divided into blue states along the coasts and in the northern Midwest, and red states everywhere else. Behind this map lies a much more complicated reality, but the map is sufficiently impressed on people's minds that it has a significant impact on how US politics and society are understood. By the same token, public and official reactions to developments around the world are often based on a generalized, single-variable view of countries and regions. To use one recent example, whatever position one might take on the 2003 decision of the Bush administration to invade Iraq, an even moderately nuanced understanding of the country would have headed off any speculation about Iraqis seeing American soldiers primarily as liberators or about post-war Iraq being anything like post-World War II Japan or Germany. Yet such assumptions were widely made, and they were clearly influential in the decision to invade the country. Similarly, there is little evidence that most Americans have an adequate appreciation of the geographical complexities driving the politics and economics of countries ranging from China to Venezuela to Mexico to Turkey to Ethiopia to India – putting them in a poor position to participate meaningfully as citizens in debates over the United States' foreign engagements.

The state of affairs described in the last paragraph has been made possible by a short-sighted marginalization of geographically informed regional study over the past several decades. In the educational arena, regional geography was virtually eliminated in the K-12 curriculum, regional geography's presence declined at colleges and universities, and area studies programs became divorced from their geography roots, and many of them subsequently went into decline. As a result, in public forums where foreign policy is discussed and debated, geographical understandings are often in short supply. Instead, the focus tends to be on particular social or economic circumstances. This, in turn, leads to a situation in which citizens, and even policy makers, are much more likely to know what is going on in capital cities and financial markets of countries around the world than about internal ethnic issues or the relationship between a country's people and the environment in which they live.

**Need for Geographically Informed Regional Studies:** Enhanced attention to regional study and analysis is needed for a variety of critical reasons:

- To enhance public understanding of the potential impacts of foreign interventions (military, economic, the provision of aid, etc.) on the peoples and places where such interventions are occurring in our increasingly interconnected world.
- To gain greater understanding of regional security issues in a world in which access to weapons with enormous destructive potential is widespread.
- To enhance our ability to assess the changing global economic landscape in an era of increasing globalization.

- To decrease the likelihood that decisions will be taken out of context and without proper consideration of potential unintended consequences.
- To heighten appreciation of the ways in which regional human-environment relations are implicated in global environmental problems.
- To improve understanding of economic, social, and political trends that can lead to regional political or social instability and attendant out-migration.
- To strengthen democratic society by providing citizens with the information and understandings that will allow them to exercise their civic responsibilities in meaningful ways.
- To deepen our understanding of local and regional conditions and aspirations so our humanitarian interventions will lead to sustainable development and actually improve the lot of the populations we intend to help. [You may be able to improve the wording while retaining the concept.]

**Implementation Requirements:** The following steps would help address the problem of limited geographically informed regional study:

- Develop a program to support on-the-ground, geographically informed regional study of places around the world, using a combination of locational analysis/GIS and qualitative analysis.
- Develop and implement a plan to expand the teaching of regional geography at the K-12 level and at the college/university level. As part of the plan, ensure that area studies programs have a strong foundation in geographic teaching and research.
- Establish regular forums where scholars and practitioners can exchange ideas and information about regional developments and the practice of regional geography.
- Develop a national campaign to highlight the problem of widespread ignorance about other parts of the world, and work to address that problem both in established educational institutions and in other arenas (the media, continuing education programs, etc.).

**Summary Recommendation:** The American Geographical Society recommends that the government, the private sector, and the academic community work individually and collectively to promote geographically informed regional study through the expansion of regional geography programs in colleges and universities, the development of greater regional expertise in foreign policy and international business circles, and the invigoration of geographically informed regional study in K-12 education.

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Writing Team:

Alexander Murphy, lead  
John Kelmelis  
Greg Smith  
Joe Wood

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