
AHMED HIMMI

*On the UN's vote to retire the Mercator
projection*

The Map That Taught You Africa Was Small

*An essay on tools that outlive their
purpose, and the maps we never chose*

2026

On September 4th, 2026, the United Nations General Assembly voted 164 to 1, with 6 abstentions, to stop treating the Mercator projection as the default picture of the world and to encourage member states toward maps that preserve the actual size of continents instead. The lone vote against came from the United States. Nothing about that sentence sounds like it should matter to your life. It is worth working through anyway, because the reasoning behind it does not stop at maps.

Gerardus Mercator drew his projection in 1569 to solve one specific problem for sailors. Before his map, plotting a straight compass course on paper was genuinely hard, because the earth is a sphere and paper is flat, and any flat map of a sphere has to distort something. Mercator's trade was to preserve angles and compass bearings perfectly, so a sailor could draw a straight line from Lisbon to Havana and steer that exact bearing the whole way. In exchange, he let area stretch, more and more, the further you get from the equator. It was not a flaw. It was the whole design. His map was never meant to tell anyone how big a country was. It was meant to get a ship across an ocean without the navigator doing trigonometry every hour.

Nobody today is sailing by paper chart and compass. Almost nobody who has looked at Mercator's map in the last thirty years was looking at it for its original purpose. And yet it became the default anyway, first on classroom walls, then inside the software running underneath Google Maps, Apple Maps, and most of the online map tiles the world scrolls through every day. A tool built to solve a sixteenth century navigation problem became the default mental image an overwhelming share of humanity carries for what the planet looks like.

On a Mercator map, Greenland looks roughly the same size as Africa. In reality, Africa's land area is about 14 times larger than Greenland's. Africa is home to roughly 1.6 billion people. Greenland's population, as of this year, is about 56,000, which means Africa holds something like 28,000 times more people than the landmass it appears to be tied with on the map most of us grew up looking at. Nobody sat a child down and explained that the map on the classroom wall was drawn to help a ship hold a compass bearing, not to teach anyone the true size of a continent. It was just presented as the world, full stop. An entire intuitive sense of what counts as big, central, and important got built on top of a five

hundred year old navigation tool, and almost nobody who absorbed it ever chose to.

The United States' objection to the resolution was not about cartography either. Yaryna Ferencevych, the deputy U.S. representative to the UN's Economic and Social Council, told the Assembly that the resolution "mocks the work and purpose of this institution," and that debating "map projects from the 16th century, and their role in promoting reparations and 'cognitive justice'" was a distraction from real problems of peace and prosperity. She called the resolution and the agenda behind it "barnacles on our work here." The resolution itself asks nothing of anyone. It does not ban the Mercator projection. It encourages member states to consider the Equal Earth projection, a modern alternative that keeps relative area accurate, and leaves the rest to each country's own textbooks and software. One hundred and sixty four countries agreed that was worth saying out loud. One did not, and six more chose not to say either way: Estonia, Georgia, Lithuania, Moldova, Serbia, and Ukraine, six countries whose relationship to their own recent history with a much larger neighbor is complicated

enough that even a symbolic vote about the shape of maps was not one they wanted to cast cleanly.

Equal Earth, the alternative the resolution points toward, is not a radical redesign. It keeps every continent's area proportional to its real size, at the cost of the one thing Mercator was built to preserve: you can no longer draw a straight line on it and sail that exact compass bearing. That trade is the whole point. Mercator's map was correct for the only question it was ever built to answer, and every other property it distorted was simply the cost of getting that one answer right. Equal Earth makes the opposite trade for a different question, the one almost everyone uses a world map to answer now, which is not "what bearing do I sail" but "how big is this place, really, relative to everywhere else." Four hundred and fifty seven years passed between the tool solving its intended problem and the world finally agreeing, at the UN, that the wrong question had been answered by default for most of that time.

The reason this is worth your attention has very little to do with whether your classroom's map gets swapped out. It is the mechanism underneath it. A tool gets built to solve a narrow problem for a specific group of people. It works. It spreads, because it works. Decades or centuries later, almost nobody using it remembers or cares what the original problem was, and by then the tool has become something else entirely, without anyone deciding it should: the picture, the default, the thing nobody thinks to question because nobody presented it as a choice in the first place.

You are carrying more than one of these. Your sense of what counts as a big opportunity, a big city, a big career, was shaped by whatever chart your environment handed you before you were old enough to ask who drew it or why. A résumé is a kind of Mercator projection of a life: it flattens years of uneven, uncertain growth into a straight line of job titles and dates that reads as a clean bearing, because a clean bearing is what the format was built to produce, not because the years moved in a straight line. A newsfeed is a projection too, and the property it preserves is not truth or proportion, it is whatever keeps you looking at the screen a few seconds longer. Everything else, including how large or small a story

should be, gets stretched or shrunk to serve that one preserved property, the same way Mercator stretched Greenland to serve a compass bearing nobody needs anymore.

The vote on September 4th did not change a single map hanging on a wall. What it put on the record, agreed by every country in the room except one, is that the map most of the world grew up with was never neutral. It was built for a narrow job, four hundred and fifty seven years ago, and it outlived that job by centuries while it kept teaching a lesson nobody meant to teach. Once you know that about one map, the harder question is which of your own maps you have never once asked who drew, and why.