



New York: Basic Books, 2012

208 pages

\$26.00

## ***Strategic Vision: America and the Crisis of Global Power***

by Zbigniew Brzezinski

**Reviewed by John Coffey**, retired Foreign Affairs Officer at the US State Department

Is America up or down? Will China eclipse America as the world's hegemon? What is the shape of the global landscape emerging in the twenty-first century, and how should the US chart its course in this new world? These questions of critical moment are addressed by the eminent scholar and practitioner of statecraft, Zbigniew Brzezinski, in *Strategic Vision*. His book invites comparison with Robert Kagan's recent work, *The World America Made*. While Kagan calls for a muscular defense of a historically unique liberal world order made by America, Brzezinski offers a new strategic vision for a world where American dominance is no longer attainable.

According to Brzezinski, our interactive, interdependent world is marked by a shift in geopolitical power from West to East, with the rise to global preeminence of China, India, and Japan. This redistribution of power is accompanied by the mass political awakening of previously repressed peoples in the Arab world and Central or Eastern Europe. These trends portend instability, yet human survival requires global cooperation. Europe is a spent political model for the world taking shape, and US global supremacy is no longer possible. American society still appeals to the world's peoples, provided it can revitalize itself and adopt a new strategic vision.

Brzezinski ascribes greater significance to the nation's domestic problems than does Kagan: a crushing national debt; a financial system driven by self-destructive greed; widening inequality; decaying infrastructure; a citizenry ignorant of the world; and a gridlocked political system. The author denounces America's Iraq and Afghanistan imperial wars and repeats the canard that President George W. Bush's global war on terrorism fostered anti-Islamic sentiment, tarnishing our international reputation. In fact, the Bush administration scrupulously tried to avoid this. On 17 September, six days after 9/11, President Bush visited the Islamic Center in Washington to assure members that America understands the vast majority of Muslims are peaceful and that we are at war with radical jihadist terrorists, not Islam. The President and his aides reaffirmed that message in numerous speeches and remarks.

Surveying the world "after America," Brzezinski predicts not Chinese dominance, but instead, like Kagan, a chaotic multipolar world where several roughly equal powers compete for regional hegemony. This conflict will jeopardize international cooperation and the promotion of democracy while placing the fate of the global commons up for grabs. East and South Asia will be the flashpoints of geopolitical rivalry with Japan, India, and Russia wary

of a rising China. Brzezinski states as axiomatic that the United States must avoid military involvement or, quite differently, any conflict on the mainland between rival Asian powers. The United States, he argues, should accept Beijing's preeminence on the Asian mainland and its emergence as Asia's leading economic power. We should balance this by maintaining close ties with Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Singapore, and Indonesia, as well as by cultivating cordial relations with India. Brzezinski entertains cautious optimism that continued modernization and prosperity of a peaceful rising China will foster political pluralism and make it more amenable to the international democratic mainstream.

What role will America play in this new world? Brzezinski advocates enlarging the West by drawing Turkey and Russia closer to the European Union and North Atlantic Treaty Organization while balancing Asian rivalries through a cooperative partnership with China that reconciles it to its Asian neighbors. This realistic strategy, he claims, promotes a "revival of the West and facilitates the stabilization of the East within a broader cooperative framework." Looking beyond 2025, the author envisions a larger configuration of the West that includes Turkey and Russia. Casting an eye further ahead, this realist rhapsodizes about the "gradual emergence in the decades ahead of varied forms of a universal democratic political culture."

What should we make of a realist strategic vision calling for integration in a world riven by the centrifugal forces of nationalism and sectarian, racial, and ethnic animosities? Seventy years ago George Orwell wrote, "One cannot see the modern world as it is unless one recognises the overwhelming strength of patriotism, national loyalty . . . one must admit that the divisions between nation and nation are founded on real differences of outlook." Nowhere is this truer today than in the Muslim world. Nonetheless, Brzezinski attributes European, especially French and German, reluctance to absorb Islamic Turkey into the West to an ambivalent or ambiguous state of mind about an unassimilable alien culture. Europeans have had enough of the elite EU project, ignoring Eurocrats and repudiating it whenever given the opportunity. The Euro debt crisis has frayed already tenuous bonds and proved that Greeks will never behave like Germans any more than Sicilians will behave like Chinese. Moreover, the EU, already suffering enlargement indigestion, has had enough of Muslim immigrants. Small wonder that France and Germany, Europe's largest countries with populations of 65 and 81 million respectively, are loathe to merge with 80 million Muslim Turks.

Prospects for drawing Russia into a Western embrace appear no more auspicious. Brzezinski concedes numerous obstacles, not least the absence of the rule of law and the current power elite's opposition, thwart the political modernization of Russia necessary for genuine collaboration with the West. Yet despite whatever the intelligentsia and Dmitry Medvedev may tell Brzezinski in their private chit-chats, the odds are long against regime change in this "wild country," as Ambassador Michael McFaul indelicately called it. The Russian regime is fragile and contains the seeds of its own destruction. Russia depends

entirely on energy exports and has failed to modernize its Third World economy. Systemic corruption and secrecy in decisionmaking about policy and personnel matters block necessary political and economic reforms. Reforms are not possible without loss of political control. Corruption is the political glue holding the regime together, but exposure of corruption would destroy the criminal syndicate ruling the country. The regime's survival requires its suicide.

If a larger configuration of the West, including Turkey and Russia, is pie in the sky, a Sino-American partnership likewise strains the bounds of optimism. One need not exaggerate the Chinese threat to give due weight to the potential for regional conflict in Asia, particularly in the South China Sea. Brzezinski warns against American military involvement on the mainland between rival Asian powers. We can presume, however, that thoughtful observers agree with former Defense Secretary Robert Gates's admonition that "any future defense secretary who advises the president to again send a big American land army into Asia or into the Middle East or Africa should have his head examined." The only plausible scenario for US military action in Asia is a high-end naval, air, space, or cyberspace engagement. Gates outlined the forward deployment of the US military across the Pacific Rim to maintain maritime security and open access to international waterways. US forces will become more geographically distributed and operationally resilient, extending from Northeast to Southeast Asia and into the Indian Ocean.

Finally, what does Brzezinski mean by a "universal democratic political culture?" Does he express the American ethnocentric belief that the peoples of the world all want to be like us rather than vent their own passions and appetites? The author's democratic universalism ignores peoples' political culture—their values, habits, customs—and the propitious material circumstances that make decent, stable, effective self-government possible. His vision suggests merely some form of electoral democracy, head-counting, which produces not the blessings of Western liberal democracy, but the ability of 51 percent of the people to control the other 49 percent. A post-American world without the United States imposing order will be a nasty, brutish place, not a harmonious, universal democratic culture. Ironically, *Strategic Vision* offers an unrealistic vision of a post-American world.