Zbigniew Brzezinski’s latest release *Strategic Vision: America and the Crisis of Global Power* lives up to the name of its luminary author in many ways. As a former National Security Advisor, a trustee of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and Professor of American foreign policy- not to mention mentor to notable figures including former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright- anything written by Brzezinski augurs a powerful, masterfully written read.

In this book, Brzezinski surveys the forces today that will shape the geo-political landscape of the near- and medium-term future. Reviewing the rise of Asia, America (and the West)’s relative geo-political decline, worldwide political uprisings-and the corresponding diffusion of global power- Brzezinski predicts a world beyond 2025 will be “not Chinese, but chaotic” (p. 75); in other words, not dominated by a hegemonic China as many shriller commentators have suggested, but rather an increasingly chaotic geo-political order with high levels of uncertainty and corresponding risks to global well-being. He argues that as uncertainty and therefore the potential for miscalculation
increases, “the United States must seek to shape a broader geopolitical foundation for constructive cooperation in the global arena, while accommodating the rising aspirations of an increasingly restive global population” (p.1). Specifically, a more “dynamic and strategically minded America, together with a unifying Europe, can jointly promote a larger and more vital West, one capable of acting as a responsible partner to the rising and increasingly assertive East” (p. 5). While Brzezinski’s policy prescriptions are thoughtful, and perhaps even desirable, the book is very thin when it comes to describing how they could realistically be implemented effectively. Strategic Vision’s brevity certainly doesn’t help to convince the reader that these solutions are possible given current geo-political realities.

Brzezinski devotes the first half of the book to surveying the current global landscape, primarily the West’s receding power in the face of a rising Asia. He also describes the effects of an increasingly political conscious globally, and a greater awareness of America’s relative decline in power. While compelling, these sections add little to what has already been said by others on this topic.

Rather, is most interesting contribution is in Part 3, where he predicts what the geopolitical landscape will look like in a 2025, ‘post-America’ world. While many commentators who predict the rise of Asia automatically assume a new world order dominated by a hegemonic China, Brzezinski argues (not unlike Charles Kupchan’s recently released, No One’s World) that in fact, such a world will be increasingly chaotic, not dominated by any hegemon or even global hierarchy.

According to Brzezinski, this will have ominous implications for several aspects of world affairs. First, America’s decline will herald a global scramble for influence. China, observing Deng Xiaoping’s maxim “be good at maintaining a low profile, and never claim leadership,” will be both unwilling and unable to fill the vacuum America’s role will leave. The ensuing scramble for influence could provoke global tensions, particularly within Asia, as an overt conflict between China and India, for example, might be catalyzed by China’s growing relative influence. Second, several weaker states currently rely on America to guarantee their security against powerful neighbors. From Georgia and the Ukraine to Israel, a declining America would tempt their powerful neighbors to abandon any restraint (Russia and the rest of the Middle East region, respectively), resulting in a “wide-ranging drift toward an international reality characterized by the survival of the strongest” as no powerful is strongest to impose heavy costs on aggressive nations (p. 90).

Third, a declining America would lead to a “weaker, less stable, less economically viable and more anti-American Mexico,” as Mexico’s capacity to control illegal immigration and the narcotics trade would diminish without American support (p. 108). Finally, the United States has played an essential leadership role over the past several decades in protecting and maintaining the strategic and environmental commons. In a less hierarchical (or, perhaps, non-polar) world order, emerging powers will be motivated to do everything from exploiting natural resources and the openness of the internet, to acquiring nuclear weapons and refusing to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, even as the catastrophic impact of climate change became ever more omnipresent. Given this dire future outlook, explication of his vision for future geopolitical issues, Brzezinski’s argument that “in this increasingly complicated geopolitical environment, an America in pursuit of [a] new, timely strategic vision is crucial to helping the world avoid a dangerous slide into international turmoil” difficult to dismiss (p.120).

However, because Brzezinski takes on a great deal in just 200 pages- describing the current geopolitical landscape, a likely scenario for its future, and prescriptions for what America’s role in such a landscape should look like-his analysis is necessarily superficial. This does not become problematic until Part 4 of the book, when Brzezinski presents his policy prescriptions for Washington. Part 4 posits several arguments without very much detailed explanation or thoroughly described examples to bolster such arguments. Many of the author’s prescriptions are certainly desirable, however, their feasibility is hardly a foregone conclusion. Unfortunately, Brzezinski offers little in the way of advice on how Washington could implement them, and consequently his points tend to raise more questions than they answer.

Brzezinski argues that in the near-term future, the United States must play a dual role in the international arena: it must “revitalize itself and ... promote a larger and more vital West while simultaneously buttressing a complex balance in the East, so as to accommodate constructively China’s rising global status and avert global chaos” (p. 184). This
is a noble goal but also a tall order to be sure, and Brzezinski’s argument as to how America will be able to manage all this in the midst of its own (and Europe’s) decline in hard as well as soft power resources is not completely convincing.

He argues, for example, that Europe must seek to integrate Turkey and Russia into the European Union. While the author’s argument centers around demonstrating why this would be beneficial for Europe and America, he does not explain what the EU would have to offer Turkey and Russia in return. True, Ankara did once aspire to join the EU; it’s defies credulity to imagine that this desire persists as the Euro crisis unfolds. Furthermore, Turkey has increased its international diplomatic stature over the past half decade, and has successfully weathered the events of the Arab Spring while becoming a more important regional ally for the US. Joining the EU would do little to increase this stature further, and Turkey may even see continuing with its application to join the EU as an unacceptable insult given years of rejection by the EU prior to the Euro crisis. Conversely, Russia has been seeking to distance itself from the United States and, to a lesser extent, the EU over the past year. It has become an increasingly vocal opponent of Western interventions, a conviction that will only strengthen as Putin seeks to consolidate his position after the protests surrounding his elections. Nationalism will likely play a key role in Putin’s efforts. In both cases, the author seems to be embedded in a post-Cold War, rather than post-Arab Spring paradigm, hindering his analysis of these countries’ motives.

Brzezenski’s second argument, that the United States should promote a stable and cooperative new East through engagement, is more convincing. Indeed, the Obama administration’s pivot to the Asia-Pacific has broad support among much of the American foreign policy community. Yet the author’s specific prescriptions on how to reorient American foreign and defense policy towards Asia exhibit more caution than ambition. While he does recommend actively engaging with regional institutions, his other suggestions for conflict mitigation in Asia are marked by passivity, from avoiding military involvement in conflicts between Asian powers, to playing a “cautious and detached” role in the conflict for regional primacy between India and China. Furthermore, on China, he recommends that the United States must “disentangle which aspects of China’s external ambitions are unacceptable and pose a direct threat to vital American interests, and which aspects reflect new historical geopolitical and economic realities that can be accommodated, however reluctantly, without damage to key US interests” (p. 174). In this vein, he argues that the United States should quietly accept China’s emerging political and economic preeminence in Asia, while remaining steadfast in its support of regional allies Japan and South Korea. While this seems like a quite reasonable goal, Brzezinski does not explain in any detail how the United States can maintain these security ties without antagonizing China, an essential question for America’s overall relationship with Asia and for regional tensions within Asia itself.

While parts of Strategic Vision’s analysis are thin, the overall impact of the book is strong. With his credentials and a history of predicting-or being present at-some of the most important geopolitical changes over the past several decades, Brzezinski presents a masterfully written, if overly concise, vision for the future of geopolitics and America’s role in the world. Students of international relations will find the book compelling, or at the very least intensely thought-provoking.

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