

Review - Strategic Vision

Written by Shiran Shen

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SHIRAN SHEN, AUG 7 2012

Strategic Vision: America and the Crisis of Global Power

By: Zbigniew Brzezinski

New York: Basic Books, 2012

In an August 2000 speech, George W. Bush announced: “Our nation is chosen by God and commissioned by history to be a model for the world.” However, much of the contemporary international relations literature—supported by copious evidence—predicts a declining West and a rising East. In his new book *Strategic Vision: America and the Crisis of Global Power*, Zbigniew Brzezinski—national security advisor to President Jimmy Carter —eloquently demystifies the ostensible inevitability and irreversibility of power transition from the West to the East. In his signature crisp and penetrating style, Dr. Brzezinski seeks to outline the needed strategic vision to get the U.S.—or the West at large—back on the global leadership track, looking beyond 2025. Specially, Brzezinski explores four major questions, which correspond to the layout of his arguments: 1) what are the implications of the changing distribution of global power from the West to the East? 2) why is America’s global appeal waning? 3) What would be the likely geopolitical consequences *if* America declined from its globally preeminent position? and 4) how should a resurgent America define its long-term geopolitical goals beyond 2025?

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While acknowledging China's extraordinary continuing augmentation in national strength, Brzezinski warns the limitation of Chinese international leadership and ineffective projection of power; he subsequently argues that America's role in the world will remain essential in the years to come. Despite China's growing willingness and influence in international institutions, Chinese foreign policy is still and will likely continue to be largely focused on core state interests, such as international trade, regional stability in Northeast Asia, and Taiwan. In addition, China, after all, is still a developing nation, whose GDP per capita is only about 12 percent that of the U.S. Given China's limited willingness and capability to lead, Brzezinski concludes in a quite provocative way that the world order after 2025 will be chaotic rather than Chinese-dominated *if* America declines from its globally preeminent position. Given the limitations of Chinese leadership, the world thus still needs an America that is "economically vital, socially appealing, responsibly powerful, strategically deliberate, internationally respected, and historically enlightened in its global engagement with the new East" (2-3).

Before providing a prescription, Brzezinski assesses America's weaknesses and strengthens. Brzezinski points out six major dimensions of America's increasingly threatening liabilities: 1) unsustainable national debt, 2) flawed financial system, 3) widening income inequality accompanied by stagnating social mobility, 4) decaying national infrastructure, 5) a public that is highly ignorant of the world, and 6) America's increasingly gridlocked and highly partisan political system. America's residual strengths include: 1) its overall economic strength, 2) technological and innovative prowess derived from an entrepreneurial culture and superiority in institutions of higher education, 3) relatively strong demographic base, 4) capacity for reactive mobilization, 5) nationally cohesive population, and 6) association with a set of values, such as human rights, individual liberty, political democracy, and economic opportunity.

According to Brzezinski, the U.S. and China are unlikely to go to war because neither side can afford doing so. A potentially comprehensive US-China global partnership is made more possible if the U.S. at the same time retains a significant geopolitical presence in the Far East by maintaining ties with Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Singapore, and Indonesia. Given the historical antagonism between China and Japan, China feels safer with a strong US-Japan alliance to put a cap on Japanese military than without, as Japanese military resurgence is one of China's worst nightmares. Without a strong U.S. security umbrella, these countries will find it necessary to either fall into China's orbit or increase their own military capabilities, which will inconveniently feed Chinese suspicion and trigger a security dilemma scenario.

For the U.S., Brzezinski holds that decline is a choice, not a fate. The central challenge and geopolitical imperative of the U.S. in the decades to come is to revitalize itself and to promote a larger and more vital West while in the meantime buttressing a complex balance in the East. As Brzezinski eloquently puts it,

"Since America is not yet Rome and China is not yet its Byzantium, a stable global order ultimately depends on America's ability to renew itself and to act wisely as the *promoter* and *guarantor* of a revitalized West and as the *balancer* and *conciliator* of a rising new East" (192).

To achieve the former goal, Brzezinski believes the U.S. needs to pursue closer ties with Europe, a continuing commitment to NATO, and a cautious embrace of Turkey and a truly democratizing Russia into the West. To achieve the latter, Brzezinski argues, the U.S. needs to promote an active role in Asia not only in order to maintain stability in the region, but even more so to create an environment conducive to a peaceful and cooperative US-China relationship, which can eventually elevate to a wide-ranging political and economic global partnership.

Overall, *Strategic Vision* reflects Brzezinski's extraordinary understanding and interpretation of global affairs, thanks to his decades-long professional and academic experiences in U.S. foreign policy. Brzezinski makes his points cogently without belaboring his analysis, which makes the whole book a quick read.

Nevertheless, there are certain places where lack of explanation for adjectives and terms makes his arguments less accessible to the readership. For example, on page 54, Brzezinski writes "Alternatively, China is often considered the wave of the future. However, given its social retardation and political authoritarianism, it is not America's competitor as a model for the relatively more prosperous, more modern, and more democratically governed states."

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“Social retardation” usually refers to someone’s lack of social skills to be able to function in regular social settings. Brzezinski might have meant that China is a relative latecomer to numerous international institutions and is thus quite dysfunctional in an environment regulated by rules set previously by the Western powers. It will be very helpful if Brzezinski explains certain vague terms and adjectives.

Moreover, with due respect to Brzezinski’s extraordinary understanding of Chinese history and strategic thinking, he nevertheless pictures an overly rosy picture of China, both at the current time and in the future. Brzezinski does briefly discuss China’s potential internal weaknesses, such as declining institutionalization of the People’s Liberation Army, but they are not cited to rebut Brzezinski’s overall very positive view about the political and economic situation in China. The defection of the Chongqing police chief Wang Lijun and the subsequent downfall of Bo Xilai—a prominent prince-ling and a forthcoming candidate for the nine-member Politburo Standing Committee—tellingly demonstrate increasing political factionalism and lack of basic governance within the Party. Brzezinski’s assessment of China can be more convincing if he takes more of China’s internal weaknesses into account.

All in all, *Strategic Vision* provides a very straightforward and candid assessment of the role of America in the international arena as well as an insightful strategy for America to maintain its irreplaceable leadership in the short and medium terms, making the book a must-read for anyone in the United States foreign policy field.

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