

Zbigniew Brzezinski, Strategic Vision: America and the Crisis of Global Power (New York: Basic Books, 2012), 208 pp., \$26.00

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 21<sup>st</sup> century, and how should the U.S. 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/East Europe. These trends portend instability, yet human survival will require global cooperation. Europe is a spent political model for the world taking shape, and U.S. 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 Iraqi/Afghan "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 September 17, 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 terrorism, 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 democracy promotion and put 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 U.S. must avoid "military involvement," or, quite differently, any conflict "on the mainland" between rival Asian powers. The U.S., 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 not aimed at China. 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 EU and NATO and 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/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.”<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> The Euro debt crisis has frayed already tenuous bonds and has 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 that 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 decision-making about policy and personnel matters block necessary political/economic reforms. Necessary 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. A Sino-American “partnership” presupposes that China is a status quo power, but a rising China seeks to regain its former preeminence. China’s belligerent actions in the South China Sea over the last several years indicate a bid to dominate that vital area. As the realist John Mearsheimer points out, “An increasingly powerful China is likely to try to push the U.S. out of Asia, much the way the U.S. pushed European powers out of the Western Hemisphere. Why should we expect China to act any differently than the United States did? Are they more principled than we are? More ethical? Less nationalistic?”<sup>3</sup>

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.”<sup>4</sup> The only plausible scenario for U.S. military action in Asia is a high-end naval/air/space/cyberspace engagement. Gates outlined the “forward deployment” of the U.S. military across the Pacific Rim to maintain maritime security and open access to international waterways. U.S. forces will become “more geographically distributed” and “operationally resilient,” extending from Northeast to Southeast Asia and into the Indian Ocean. To counter emerging (i.e., Chinese) anti-access technologies, the Navy and Air Force have developed a high-tech, joint war-fighting doctrine, “Air-Sea Battle,” to move and strike at great distances.<sup>5</sup>

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 only the ability of 51% of the people to eat the other 49%. A post-American world without Uncle Sam as traffic cop 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.

## Notes

1. George Orwell, "England Your England," in A Collection of Essays (New York: Harvest Books, 1981), p. 252.
2. Geoffrey Wheatcroft, "Eating Vichyssoise in Athens," National Interest (May/June, 2010), 68-75.
3. Quoted in Robert D. Kaplan, "Why John J. Mearsheimer Is Right (About Some Things)," The Atlantic (Jan./Feb., 2012), p. 86.
4. Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, speech at the United States Military Academy, West Point, New York, 2/25/11.
5. Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, "Remarks at the International Institute for Strategic Studies," Singapore, 6/4/11.