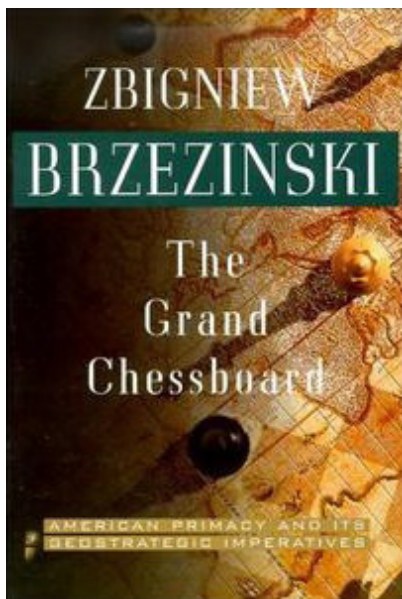


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THE AMERICAN STRATEGY FOR EURASIA



Zbigniew Brzezinski. 1997.
*The Grand Chessboard:
American Primacy and Its
Geostrategic Imperatives.* New
York: Basic Books, p. 240.

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Zbigniew Brzezinski published his book *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* when the United States of America found itself at a political crossroads. Remaining as the sole global superpower, it was in a position to define its future role. Some of its actions, such as the intervention in Iraq in 1991 and Bosnia in 1995, suggested that Washington and the American political and military elite have been ready to use the US power at the international level more frequently. Representatives of the traditional isolationist attitude, which was widespread among the citizens as well, and proponents of a new push for a true multilateralism advocated an altogether different future role for the United States. Zbigniew Brzezinski, a John Hopkins University professor and former National Security Advisor to Jimmy Carter, as his biography shows, always tended to put his academic and theoretical knowledge of international relations and foreign policy in the service of his country and try to influence public policies. *The Grand Chessboard*, as its dedication clearly states “For my students—to help them shape tomorrow’s world”, is supposed to help future generations define US foreign policy that will be

beneficial both to the US and the world.

His main argument, presented and elaborated in the book's seven chapters, is that, given the central role Eurasia has for global dominance, America as a non-Eurasian superpower must formulate a clear and successful strategy for this part of the world. This strategy must enable its hegemony to last without the rise of a serious rival on the Eurasian continent, while simultaneously prepares for and takes into account the inevitable decline of the American power that must eventually come. Now, more than two decades after its publication, questions arise whether the predictions and solutions laid out in *The Grand Chessboard* were accurate and correct, whether the US government and foreign policy makers heeded and implemented the advice Brzezinski gave in his book, and what are the consequences and implications of these two aspects on international relations today.

At the start of the first chapter *Hegemony of a New Type*, the author gives a brief account of America's progress from an isolationist state to global power. The Cold War, which emerged on the results of the Second World War, was the war

between leading maritime and land powers: "North America versus Eurasia, with the world at stake" (p. 6). The US victory over the USSR meant the emergence of the world's first truly global power. Brzezinski backs this claim by highlighting the difference between America and old hegemons, such as the Roman, Chinese, and Mongol Empires or any of the European colonial empires of modern history. According to him, the United States is the first real global superpower because it has absolute dominance in all four of the crucial domains of global power: military, economy, technology, and culture. None of the previous empires had succeeded in this accomplishment. On the other hand, the system the US has established is "a global system of distinctively American design that mirrors the domestic American experience" (p. 24). It is based on an interconnected structure of military alliances, regional economic cooperation, international financial and judicial institutions and the attractiveness and supremacy of American mass culture.

The second chapter titled *The Eurasian Chessboard* focuses on the geopolitical importance of Eurasia. Drawing upon the works of eminent

geopolitical theorists such as Halford Mackinder and Karl Haushofer, Brzezinski explains that control of Eurasia is crucial for the world dominance. As the largest continental area on Earth, it contains most of human population, wealth and energy resources, as well as the world's most assertive states. The end of the Cold War, which paved the way for American global dominance, meant that for the first time in history a non-Eurasian power controls Eurasia. The consequence is that the US hegemony is extensive but not deep. For it to endure, Washington must develop a meaningful and comprehensive strategy that deals adequately with crucial Eurasian states, divided into two groups.

The first group consists of the geostrategic players, which exercise influence beyond its borders. As members of this group, he identifies France, Germany, Russia, China, and India. Especially timely is Brzezinski's explanation of why Great Britain is not a part of this group. He argues that its reluctance to commit itself to European integration fully and its lack of other major options made London irrelevant. His advice for American policymakers to treat the UK as an important ally, but

one that does not require special and sustained attention is notably interesting in today's context, after the completion of Brexit. The second group includes the geostrategic pivots. These are the countries that are important because of their geographical location, vulnerability and impact on other states. This group includes Ukraine, Azerbaijan, South Korea, Turkey and Iran. By focusing on these two groups of crucial states, he identifies key questions that must be addressed to preserve the American global predominance. They are the attitude towards European integration, the future role of Russia, the handling of Central Asia and the treatment of China and the situation in the Far East. Each of these questions is analyzed in four subsequent chapters.

Europe is the most important American partner in Eurasia and its main vessel for the projection of power on the continent, as Brzezinski states in the next chapter *The Democratic Bridgehead*. Though the expansion of the EU and NATO American power and influence are directly expanded as well. While being an economic powerhouse, the EU is at the same time politically non-influential and militarily dependent on the

USA. The direction and success of its further integration were still in question in 1997. The author argues that the US should unambiguously commit its support for the development of a more interconnected and homogenous EU that will rise to become a true partner and not an over-reliant ally. That would mean a more equal role in NATO between the two parties and American willingness to accept the gradual lessening of its direct control.

For it to succeed, America must carefully handle two crucial European geostrategic players France and Germany. Their reconciliation and partnership is the foundation for a united Europe, but their visions and interests diverge in some areas. Brzezinski overestimated the French opposition towards the American role in Europe. While undoubtedly existing, the lack of a strong French president in the 21st century prevented the push for a more autonomous and self-reliant EU, which in turn kept it dependent on the US for providing security. With Macron coming to power and general European antagonism towards Donald Trump, that may change, but it remains to be seen. On the other hand, Brzezinski gave a respectably accu-

rate chronological prediction of EU and NATO enlargement to the Central European countries. However, his recommendations for a careful treatment of this process and insistence on assurances for Russia and its role in the future European security system were shortsightedly ignored.

As the author explains in the fourth chapter *The Black Hole*, Russia as a country at the center of the Eurasian landmass holds a uniquely prominent role. He describes three different schools of thought concerning the Russian geopolitical role in the post-Soviet world. Although rather divergent, the common trait is how unrealistic they are, considers Brzezinski. The first is leaning on a “mature strategic partnership” with the US, in which these two countries would manage global issues on an equal level. The second advocates for a concentration on a “near abroad” consisting of former Soviet republics. These newly-formed states should be kept in the Russian sphere of influence primarily through economic integration. The third puts the focus on the creation of an anti-US coalition. With Russia, crucial actors in this counter-alliance would be China and Iran. Interestingly, the author

brushes off this option because “a coalition allying Russia with both China and Iran can develop only if the United States is short-sighted enough to antagonize China and Iran simultaneously” (p. 116). Having in mind current Trump’s policies towards these two countries and the developing ties between Moscow, Beijing, and Tehran, it seems that a counter-alliance of this sort is not out of the question in the upcoming years, at least in some non-institutionalized form.

Brzezinski argues that the only way for Russia is the further alignment with the US and Europe that will lead this country to reject its imperial past and ambitions and to fully embrace the potentials of democracy and opportunities this brings. For this scenario to succeed, the United States must nudge Russia in the European direction by committing to policies that will make other options Russia has too costly and unattainable. In that sense, Ukraine is especially important for Russia’s self-perception. Without Ukraine and more than 50 million Slavs living there, Russia loses important aspects of its Europeanism. Ukraine is critical as a balance of sorts to the Russian domination in Central Asia because, without it, Russia

becomes more and more Asiatic. For that reason, American continuing support for Ukraine’s independence and sovereignty is crucial. Without Ukraine, Russia cannot be a true imperial power. American policies did push Ukraine towards the EU and NATO. However, it didn’t inspire Russia to become more pro-European or democratic. On the contrary, the disappointment and resentment sparked the rise of a more authoritarian and geopolitically ambitious Russia that is determined to recover its former status and reestablish its distinct sphere of influence in the “near abroad”. The clash of interests culminated in the Ukrainian crisis in 2014.

The fifth chapter *The Eurasian Balkans* deals with the region of Central Asia. Brzezinski sketches a region of diverse ethnic groups, rising nationalism and Islamic revival, a region rich with energetic resources and with multiple neighbouring powers, namely Russia, Iran, Turkey, and China, competing for dominance. While Russia’s influence is undoubtedly the strongest, it is not strong enough for Russia to establish complete control over the region, as in the time of the USSR. For America, which is too far away from this region to

project its influence decisively, it is essential to keep the balance of power and to prevent any specific actor to become a regional hegemon. The United States managed to achieve this objective, although the region itself did not benefit much from it, as the countries remained economically undeveloped and under the rule of the ex-Soviet authoritarian elites, contrary to Brzezinski's hopes.

The next chapter *The Far Eastern Anchor* focuses on the American strategy in this part of Eurasia. Brzezinski points out two countries, namely China and Japan, as crucial for stability in the Far East. While he recognizes China's superiority in the economic and military terms over most of its neighbours and predicts that this disbalance of power will make China an indispensable factor in the security of the region with its sphere of influence, Brzezinski remains skeptical about its potential for a status of global power. His expectations of an upcoming instability in China due to the rising regional disparity, slowing down of economic growth, and requests for democratization and greater respect for human rights were unfounded. The author underestimated the ability of Chinese leadership to

manage the rising living standards and economic development while avoiding the rise of meaningful calls for a more democratic political system.

Regarding Japan, Brzezinski considers it of utmost importance to preserve existing levels of American military presence on the island. The fear and animosity the rest of region feels towards Japan makes it less than an ideal candidate for the role of regional power and counterbalance for China. United States should encourage Japan for a more proactive role as an international actor which participates in peace missions around the world and plays a positive role as an economic powerhouse. Such development would enable the US to facilitate a functioning relationship with China, one in which its increasing dominance in the region is accepted as long as it is not in contradiction with American interests. From today's perspective, it seems that the American policymakers were led by an altogether different strategy, opting to antagonize China and confront it directly on a number of issues, such as the South China Sea dispute. Japan, on the other hand, while remaining an important economic factor, did not embrace the role akin to

one Brzezinski recommended the US nudge it to. Instead, it remained entirely dependent on the American power security wise and actively participates in the balancing of China in the Far East.

In the conclusion, the author states that America's strategy for Eurasia must consist of short, middle and long term phases. In the first, the priority is to maintain the US as the dominant power by preventing the rise of a serious rival coalition through careful management of relations with other powers. The middle term goal is the creation of an American-led Eurasian security system that includes other powers as important partners. This leads to the long term goal, which is the rise of "a global core of genuinely shared political responsibility" (p. 198). The author draws these phases and recommendations from the conclusion that America's power would diminish eventually, and that its best legacy would be an enduring and sustainable global security system.

However, Brzezinski failed to take into account that the successful implementation of the first phase would create in these countries animosity towards the US that would prevent the second and third

phase. This stems from the author's general overestimation of the possibilities and positive changes that the democratization would bring to America's main potential challengers Russia and China. Especially in the case of Russia, his predictions, or hopes, that the closing of other options for this country through larger economic and political incentives for Ukraine and Central Asian states would lead Russia to completely turn towards Europe and accept this new political reality proved to be wrong. The second key miscalculation was the concentration on Russia and the underestimation of China. Given Brzezinski's theoretical inclination towards geopolitics and the influence of authors such as Mackinder, the importance he gives to Russia as the largest country at the center of Eurasia is understandable and expected. Although he correctly predicts that China would be a senior partner in any Sino-Russian coalition, Brzezinski misjudged the Chinese potential and ambition to take a more assertive role in the international system.

On the other hand, the author's observations on Ukraine's importance for Russia, so much greater than the Baltic countries or Central Asia,

proved to be astonishingly accurate. Russia's reaction to the events in Ukraine in 2014 is much more understandable if seen through the lens of *The Grand Chessboard*. Furthermore, one could hardly argue with Brzezinski's precise categorization of geostrategic players and pivots and insightful observations of their interests, available strategies, and possible future roles. For these reasons, *The Grand Chessboard* remains relevant today as it was in 1997 for anyone hoping to gain a better understanding of America's role in and strategy for Eurasia, and for those looking to grasp the different views of the future US-dominated world that were formed at the end of the 20th century and influenced American policymakers.

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