

EXCLUSIVE INTERNATIONAL COLUMN

America's global balancing act

A Conversation with Zbigniew Brzezinski

WITH Russia's invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea, the disintegration of Iraq's and Syria's borders, and increasing Chinese assertiveness in the South and East China Seas, the post-Cold War era appears to have ended in 2014. Is that true?

The post-Cold War era was not really an "era," but rather a gradual transition from a bilateral Cold War to a more complex international order that still involves, in the final analysis, two world powers. In brief, the decisive axis of the new order increasingly involves the United States and the People's Republic of China. The Sino-American competition involves two significant realities that distinguish it from the Cold War: neither party is excessively ideological in its orientation; and both parties recognize that they really need mutual accommodation.

America's supposed "pivot to Asia" took a back seat in 2014 to the crises in Ukraine and the Middle East. To what extent has uncertainty about the US commitment in Asia stoked tension between China and America's Asian allies?

I disagree with the premises of the question. I do think America has made it quite clear that it is in the interest both of America and China to avoid situations in which they will be pushed toward a collision. The recent indications of some initial dialogue between China and India, and between China and Japan, suggest that China also realizes that escalating old grievances is not in its interest. The more serious problem with the "pivot to Asia" was its actual wording, which implied a military posture designed to "contain" or "isolate" China. The Chinese have come to

realize more clearly that we were not deliberately attempting to isolate them, but that we had a stake in the avoidance of collisions in the Far East that could produce a wider spillover.

Xi Jinping has used his war on corruption to concentrate more power in his hands than any Chinese leader since Deng Xiaoping, 30 years ago. How do you see Xi's presidency evolving?

Power in China is somewhat informally defined, and its limits are set more by political realities than by constitutional arrangements. That makes it difficult to say whether Xi's power is greater than any Chinese leader's since Deng. He certainly has an authoritative personality and without doubt is more active on the international scene than some of his predecessors. He has also been very decisive in attacking the growing corruption that has become a major source of internal malaise, reaching even the highest levels of government. In that respect, it may be argued that his power is more wide-ranging than that of his predecessors, but in fairness it must also be noted that the patterns of corruption that his predecessors faced were not as acute and widespread as they have become in recent years.

At the same time, the increasing emphasis in party journals on the proposition that China's armed forces must be viewed as servants of the Communist Party, and not simply of the nation, seems to suggest concern that the military may be developing its own view of Chinese domestic affairs, in addition to proclaiming with increasing assertiveness its responsibility for national security. The Party elite, quite understandably, does not find this reassuring.



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Can Russian President Vladimir Putin's regime withstand a prolonged period of low energy prices and Western sanctions? What risks do you see emerging should Russia's economy continue to decline, with Putin increasingly unable to reward his political base? There is, of course, a danger that at some point Putin may choose to lash out and create a truly massive international crisis, and perhaps

precipitate some new form of direct East-West warfare. But to say that, one must also assume that to some extent he himself is unbalanced and has shifted from a kind of guerilla warfare against the West, always with some possibility of retreat, to all-out combat. The outcome of that would be inherently unpredictable, but probably in any case very destructive for Russian wellbeing. If Russia's economy continues to decline, and if the West succeeds in deterring Putin from further use of force, it is still conceivable that some acceptable resolution (a form of which I recommended publicly by talking about the Finland model) may be contrived. But that depends in turn on the West's firmness in supporting Ukraine's efforts to stabilize itself.

Following the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan and Iraq, much of the world now perceives the US as being in a period of "retreat," similar to the post-Vietnam War era. Is the US embracing a form of neo-isolationism? Or will America's apparent inward turn be as brief as it was following Vietnam?

I do not believe that the US is in a "period of retreat." The fact of the matter is that the redistribution of global power has produced a situation in which the US is no longer the sole hegemon. The US has to acknowledge the fact that the world is now much more complex. The spread of conflict throughout the Middle East is currently precipitated more by the rise of religious sectarianism than by American interventionism. In these volatile circumstances, greater attention must be given to the national interests of countries such as Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Israel. By the same token, the interests of any one of them must not be allowed to become the total interest of the US.

What may surprise the world most in 2015?

Perhaps the gradual reappearance in Russia of a more politically assertive liberal middle class. That middle class was beginning to play a more significant role in shaping domestic and international Russian policy under Dmitri Medvedev. With Putin's return to power and his recent adventurism, it has been pushed aside by deliberately awakened and intensely stimulated national chauvinism. Waving a chauvinist banner, however, may not be the best solution for dealing with international problems, especially if the West is intelligent and united. The Russian middle class, quite naturally, wishes to live in a society like that of Western Europe. A Russia that gradually begins to gravitate toward the West will also be a Russia that ceases to disrupt the international system.

