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H-Diplo Review Essay on **Zbigniew Brzezinski.** ***Strategic Vision: America and the Crisis of Global Power*****.** New York: Basic Books, 2012. ISBN: 9780465029549 (hardcover, $26.00).

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Reviewed for H-Diplo by **James H. Lebovic**, The George Washington University

In his ambitious and thoughtful book, Zbigniew Brzezinski (the National Security Advisor from 1977 to 1981 in the Jimmy Carter administration) offers his "strategic vision" of the global political landscape – a reaction to the failings of U.S. policy of the last decade as much as a glimpse into the future. By his reasoning, American power is on the decline, in no small part due to wasted post-Cold War opportunities under the profligate leadership of the George W Bush administration. After a near-decade of excess – in Iraq, in Afghanistan, and worldwide in a misconceived war on terror – the United States is spread thin. Its global political support and available military capability are waning, its economic clout has been weakened, and it is hobbled from within by political paralysis and polarization. With the attending power vacuum, states will balance or bandwagon to solve their security problems or use their superior capabilities to settle scores and allay grievances. Japan, India, and countries of the European Union will reevaluate their alignments: Germany might draw closer to Russia, Japan might draw closer to Europe, Russia might extend its border to consume former Soviet republics, and so on and so forth. To arrest these developments, the United States cannot count on its strongest allies for much support. For the European Union to become competitive requires "a more robust political union, with a common foreign policy and a shared defense capability" (22), when it has not appeared up to the task: "too self-satisfied, it acts as if its central political goal is to become the world's most comfortable retirement home" (36).

In places, Brzezinski seemingly puts forth a realist thesis. His book is about power, decline, and realignment. It opens with a chapter that places the decline of the West (relative to the East) in grand historical perspective and contains a chapter ("The World After America") that examines the impact of the U.S. decline upon regional challenges and rivalries. It argues consistently that the key to arresting the downward U.S. trajectory is for America to rediscover and act upon its strengths. There the resemblance ends, for this is no ordinary

realist analysis. Equally striking is just how often it strays from the classic realist emphasis upon material capabilities. In his analysis, "[h]ow the American system performs at home, and how America conducts itself abroad will determine the place and role of the West in the new objective and subjective global context" (p. 35). Of course, economic performance *at home* creates the economic resources and innovations that make the United States the premier player in the global economy and the pivotal global military power; and states can *act* in ways that capitalize upon, or dilute, their military assets. But that is only part of his argument. He maintains that "[t]he continued attraction of the American system – the vital relevance of its founding principles, the dynamism of its economic model, the good will of its people and government – is therefore essential if America is to continue playing a constructive global role. Only by demonstrating the capacity for a superior performance of its societal system can America restore its historical momentum, especially in the face of a China that is increasingly attractive to the third world" (35). Thus, the battle that Brzezinski describes appears to center no less on principles and ideas: if the American system appears "irrelevant" as a model, China might become a "systemic alternative" (36).

To be sure, in discussing the potential return of the United States to prominence, Brzezinksi does a fine job of delineating the various non-ideational obstacles that will impede the U.S: recovery – national debt, Wall Street greed and banking improprieties, income inequality and reduced upward social mobility, a decaying national infrastructure, a public ignorant of the world, and political gridlock. He also convincingly details familiar U.S. advantages that could fuel a comeback: the United States' large national economy, technology and innovativeness, demographic base (in attracting and assimilating immigrants), reactive mobilization potentials; secure natural resources, and national values. But therein lies problems with his analysis. He touches all the right bases, makes compellingly arguments, and seems to offer sensible recommendations. What is lacking is a clear articulation of how the pieces fit together and the mechanisms function for restorative effect. He offers a grand vision of decline and ascendance that provides only a vague sense of exactly what is rising and declining and how it affects political and security outcomes. Without a definitive statement of cause and effect, and the trade-offs that the United States will encounter in choosing one path or another, it is hard to buy even the book's understated optimism that the United States can successfully tackle the seemingly Herculean task, as presented, of reversing course and reestablishing U.S. preeminence in the world. Certainly, the societal, economic, and military can work in tandem, as they did in the past, to help the United States regain lost ground. But is that likely or necessary for the United States to regain influence in the world? Must the United States recover its glory in each and every respect?

These kinds of questions – concerning cause and effect – emerge throughout the book. Brzezinski identifies a problem, proposes a broad or vague solution, and then leaves the reader to wonder whether the solution is in reach. For example, he argues that the United States needs to balance various considerations in engaging China, a potential but somewhat hobbled contender for "global systemic relevance" (188); and he identifies Russia and Turkey as pivotal allies – indeed, important members of a larger democratic community of nations – were the United States to reposition itself in the world. But, if U.S. power is really on the

decline, what does the United States bring to the table that might make it a useful partner to these countries? Moreover, can the United States expect to exert leadership in a world in which it must defer to the demands of states that do not share U.S. priorities? Elsewhere, Brzezinski begs the reader to ask whether his cure is worse than the disease. He argues against a U.S. attack on Iran unless the attack has global support. But, why should the United States care about the opposition of countries that could conceivably have backed a U.S. attack and not care, by implication, that the U.S. attack would obviously lack Iranian support? Isn't Iranian retaliation a key matter for consideration? If Iran does go nuclear, Brzezinski suggests – somewhat indirectly (124) – that the United States could reasonably extend its nuclear deterrence umbrella to the Middle East. But what would it take to reinforce the credibility of the U.S. pledge to retaliate with all necessary means to an Iranian nuclear attack within the region? After all, to extend Cold War-era deterrence to Europe, the United States assumed an active regional presence, stationing thousands of U.S. nuclear weapons there. Although these weapons were deemed necessary in no small part to deter a Soviet conventional attack, Brzezinksi appears to embrace an extensive (NATO-like) role for the United States should Iran go nuclear: "the United States should make a public commitment to consider any Iranian attempt at intimidating or threatening its Middle Eastern neighbors as a threat against the United States" (124). Elsewhere in the Middle East, Brzezinski recognizes the existential dangers for Israel, and major political liabilities for the United States, of failing to solve the Palestinian problem. But how do you solve this problem without creating new dangers and political problems for the parties concerned – indeed, problems that might keep them from reaching a settlement in the first place?

The point is that Brzezinski, in his highly readable and provocative book, has done a great service by placing all the pieces on the table, identifying the fundamental issues, situating U.S. challenges within domestic, regional, and systemic contexts, and outlining a future American role in the world. In his words, "It must be the *promoter* and *guarantor* of greater and broader unity in the West, and it must be the *balancer* and *conciliator* between the major powers in the East. Both roles are essential and each is needed to reinforce the other. But to have the credibility and the capacity to pursue both successfully, America needs to show the world that it has the will to renovate itself at home" (185). What Brzezinski has not done is present anything close to a workable blueprint for fixing priorities and managing choices in an age of disillusionment, austerity, and dissent.

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United States and strategic-nuclear arms control from the Truman to Obama administrations.