

Toward a Global Realignment by [Zbigniew Brzezinski](#)

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As its era of global dominance ends, the United States needs to take the lead in realigning the global power architecture.

Five basic verities regarding the emerging redistribution of global political power and the violent political awakening in the Middle East are signaling the coming of a new global realignment.

The first of these verities is that the United States is still the world's politically, economically, and militarily most powerful entity but, given complex geopolitical shifts in regional balances, it is no longer the globally imperial power. But neither is any other major power.

The second verity is that Russia is experiencing the latest convulsive phase of its imperial devolution. A painful process, Russia is not fatally precluded – if it acts wisely – from becoming eventually a leading European nation-state. However, currently it is pointlessly alienating some of its former subjects in the Islamic southwest of its once extensive empire, as well as Ukraine, Belarus, and Georgia, not to mention the Baltic States.

The third verity is that China is rising steadily, if more slowly as of late, as America's eventual coequal and likely rival; but for the time being it is careful not to pose an outright challenge to America. Militarily, it seems to be seeking a breakthrough in a new generation of weapons while patiently enhancing its still very limited naval power.

The fourth verity is that Europe is not now and is not likely to become a global power. But it can play a constructive role in taking the lead in regard to transnational threats to global wellbeing and even human survival. Additionally, Europe is politically and culturally aligned with and supportive of core U.S. interests in the Middle East, and European steadfastness within NATO is essential to an eventually constructive resolution of the Russia-Ukraine crisis.

The fifth verity is that the currently violent political awakening among post-colonial Muslims is, in part, a belated reaction to their occasionally brutal suppression mostly by European powers. It fuses a delayed but deeply felt sense of injustice with a religious motivation that is unifying large numbers of Muslims against the outside world; but at the same time, because of historic sectarian schisms within Islam that have nothing to do with the West, the recent welling up of historical grievances is also divisive within Islam.

Taken together as a unified framework, these five verities tell us that the United States must take the lead in realigning the global power architecture in such a way that the violence erupting within and occasionally projected beyond the Muslim world—and in the future possibly from other parts of what used to be called the Third World—can be contained without destroying the global order. We can sketch this new architecture by elaborating briefly each of the five foregoing verities.

First, America can only be effective in dealing with the current Middle Eastern violence if it forges a coalition that involves, in varying degrees, also Russia and China. To enable such a coalition to take shape, Russia must first be discouraged from its reliance on the unilateral use of force against its own neighbors—notably Ukraine, Georgia, the Baltic States—and China should be disabused of the idea that selfish passivity in the face of the rising regional crisis in the Middle East will prove to be politically and economically rewarding to its ambitions in the global arena. These shortsighted policy impulses need to be channeled into a more farsighted vision.

Second, Russia is becoming for the first time in its history a truly *national* state, a development that is as momentous as it is generally overlooked. The Czarist Empire, with its multinational but largely politically passive population, came to an end with World War I and the Bolshevik creation of an allegedly voluntary union of national republics (the USSR), with power resting effectively in Russian hands, took its place. The collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991 led to the sudden emergence of a predominantly Russian state as its successor, and to the transformation of the former Soviet Union’s non-Russian “republics” into formally independent states. These states are now consolidating their independence, and both the West and China—in different areas and different ways—are exploiting that new reality to Russia’s disadvantage. In the meantime, Russia’s own future depends on its ability to become a major and influential nation-state that is part of a unifying Europe. Not to do so could have dramatically negative consequences for Russia’s ability to withstand growing territorial-demographic pressure from China, which is increasingly inclined as its power grows to recall the “unequal” treaties Moscow imposed on Beijing in times past.

Third, China’s dramatic economic success requires enduring patience and the country’s awareness that political haste will make for social waste. The best political prospect for China in the near future is to become America’s principal partner in containing global chaos of the sort that is spreading outward (including to the northeast) from the Middle East. If it is not contained, it will contaminate Russia’s southern and eastern territories as well as the western portions of China. Closer relations between China and the new republics in Central Asia, the post-British Muslim states in Southwest Asia (notably Pakistan) and especially with Iran (given its strategic assets and economic significance), are the natural targets of Chinese regional geopolitical outreach. But they should also be targets of global Sino-American accommodation.

Fourth, tolerable stability will not return to the Middle East as long as local armed military formations can calculate that they can be simultaneously the beneficiaries of a territorial realignment while selectively abetting extreme violence. Their ability to act in a savage manner can only be contained by increasingly effective—but also selective—pressure derived from a base of U.S.-Russian-Chinese cooperation that, in turn, enhances the prospects for the responsible use of force by the region’s more established states (namely, Iran, Turkey, Israel, and Egypt). The latter should also be the recipients of more selective European support. Under normal circumstances, Saudi Arabia would be a significant player on that list, but the current inclination of the Saudi government still to foster Wahhabi fanaticism, even while engaged in ambitious domestic modernization efforts, raises grave doubts regarding Saudi Arabia’s ability to play a regionally significant constructive role.

Fifth, special attention should be focused on the non-Western world's newly politically aroused masses. Long-repressed political memories are fueling in large part the sudden and very explosive awakening energized by Islamic extremists in the Middle East, but what is happening in the Middle East today may be just the beginning of a wider phenomenon to come out of Africa, Asia, and even among the pre-colonial peoples of the Western Hemisphere in the years ahead.

Periodic massacres of their not-so-distant ancestors by colonists and associated wealth-seekers largely from western Europe (countries that today are, still tentatively at least, most open to multiethnic cohabitation) resulted within the past two or so centuries in the slaughter of colonized peoples on a scale comparable to Nazi World War II crimes: literally involving hundreds of thousands and even millions of victims. Political self-assertion enhanced by delayed outrage and grief is a powerful force that is now surfacing, thirsting for revenge, not just in the Muslim Middle East but also very likely beyond.

Much of the data cannot be precisely established, but taken collectively, they are shocking. Let just a few examples suffice. In the 16th century, due largely to disease brought by Spanish explorers, the population of the native Aztec Empire in present-day Mexico declined from 25 million to approximately one million. Similarly, in North America, an estimated 90 percent of the native population died within the first five years of contact with European settlers, due primarily to diseases. In the 19th century, various wars and forced resettlements killed an additional 100,000. In India from 1857-1867, the British are suspected of killing up to one million civilians in reprisals stemming from the Indian Rebellion of 1857. The British East India Company's use of Indian agriculture to grow opium then essentially forced on China resulted in the premature deaths of millions, not including the directly inflicted Chinese casualties of the First and Second Opium Wars. In the Congo, which was the personal holding of Belgian King Leopold II, 10-15 *million* people were killed between 1890 and 1910. In Vietnam, recent estimates suggest that between one and three million civilians were killed from 1955 to 1975.

As to the Muslim world in Russia's Caucasus, from 1864 and 1867, 90 percent of the local Circassian population was forcibly relocated and between 300,000 and 1.5 million either starved to death or were killed. Between 1916 and 1918, tens of thousands of Muslims were killed when 300,000 Turkic Muslims were forced by Russian authorities through the mountains of Central Asia and into China. In Indonesia, between 1835 and 1840, the Dutch occupiers killed an estimated 300,000 civilians. In Algeria, following a 15-year civil war from 1830-1845, French brutality, famine, and disease killed 1.5 million Algerians, nearly half the population. In neighboring Libya, the Italians forced Cyrenaicans into concentration camps, where an estimated 80,000 to 500,000 died between 1927 and 1934.

More recently, in Afghanistan between 1979 and 1989 the Soviet Union is estimated to have killed around one million civilians; two decades later, the United States has killed 26,000 civilians during its 15-year war in Afghanistan. In Iraq, 165,000 civilians have been killed by the United States and its allies in the past 13 years. (The disparity between the reported number of deaths inflicted by European colonizers compared with the United States and its allies in Iraq and Afghanistan may be due in part to the technological advances that have resulted in the more productive use of force and in part as well to a shift in the world's normative climate.) Just as shocking as the scale of these atrocities is how quickly the West forgot about them.

In today's postcolonial world, a new historical narrative is emerging. A profound resentment against the West and its colonial legacy in Muslim countries and beyond is being used to justify their sense of deprivation and denial of self-dignity. A stark example of the experience and attitudes of colonial peoples is well summarized by the Senegalese poet David Diop in "Vultures":

*In those days,
When civilization kicked us in the face
The vultures built in the shadow of their talons
The blood stained monument of tutelage...*

Given all this, a long and painful road toward an initially limited regional accommodation is the only viable option for the United States, Russia, China, and the pertinent Middle Eastern entities. For the United States, that will require patient persistence in forging cooperative relationships with some new partners (particularly Russia and China) as well as joint efforts with more established and historically rooted Muslim states (Turkey, Iran, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia if it can detach its foreign policy from Wahhabi extremism) in shaping a wider framework of regional stability. Our European allies, previously dominant in the region, can still be helpful in that regard.

A comprehensive U.S. pullout from the Muslim world favored by domestic isolationists, could give rise to new wars (for example, Israel vs. Iran, Saudi Arabia vs. Iran, a major Egyptian intervention in Libya) and would generate an even deeper crisis of confidence in America's globally stabilizing role. In different but dramatically unpredictable ways, Russia and China could be the geopolitical beneficiaries of such a development even as global order itself becomes the more immediate geopolitical casualty. Last but not least, in such circumstances a divided and fearful Europe would see its current member states searching for patrons and competing with one another in alternative but separate arrangements among the more powerful trio.

A constructive U.S. policy must be patiently guided by a long-range vision. It must seek outcomes that promote the gradual realization in Russia (probably post-Putin) that its only place as an influential world power is ultimately within Europe. China's increasing role in the Middle East should reflect the reciprocal American and Chinese realization that a growing U.S.-PRC partnership in coping with the Middle Eastern crisis is an historically significant test of their ability to shape and enhance together wider global stability.

The alternative to a constructive vision, and especially the quest for a one-sided militarily and ideologically imposed outcome, can only result in prolonged and self-destructive futility. For America, that could entail enduring conflict, fatigue, and conceivably even a demoralizing withdrawal to its pre-20th century isolationism. For Russia, it could mean major defeat, increasing the likelihood of subordination in some fashion to Chinese predominance. For China, it could portend war not only with the United States but also, perhaps separately, with either Japan or India or with both. And, in any case, a prolonged phase of sustained ethnic, quasi-religious wars pursued through the Middle East with self-righteous fanaticism would generate escalating bloodshed within and outside the region, and growing cruelty everywhere.

The fact is that there has never been a truly "dominant" global power until the emergence of America on the world scene. Imperial Great Britain came close to becoming one, but World War I and later World War II not

only bankrupted it but also prompted the emergence of rival regional powers. The decisive new global reality was the appearance on the world scene of America as simultaneously the richest and militarily the most powerful player. During the latter part of the 20th century no other power even came close.

That era is now ending. While no state is likely in the near future to match America's economic-financial superiority, new weapons systems could suddenly endow some countries with the means to commit suicide in a joint tit-for-tat embrace with the United States, or even to prevail. Without going into speculative detail, the sudden acquisition by some state of the capacity to render America militarily inferior would spell the end of America's global role. The result would most probably be global chaos. And that is why it behooves the United States to fashion a policy in which at least one of the two potentially threatening states becomes a partner in the quest for regional and then wider global stability, and thus in containing the least predictable but potentially the most likely rival to overreach. Currently, the more likely to overreach is Russia, but in the longer run it could be China.

Since the next twenty years may well be the last phase of the more traditional and familiar political alignments with which we have grown comfortable, the response needs to be shaped now. During the rest of this century, humanity will also have to be increasingly preoccupied with survival as such on account of a confluence of environmental challenges. Those challenges can only be addressed responsibly and effectively in a setting of increased international accommodation. And that accommodation has to be based on a strategic vision that recognizes the urgent need for a new geopolitical framework.

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