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Citation: 91 Foreign Aff. 97 2012

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Mon Nov 19 11:00:12 2012

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Balancing the East, Upgrading the West

U.S. Grand Strategy in an Age of Upheaval

Zbigniew Brzezinski

THE UNITED STATES' central challenge over the next several decades is to revitalize itself, while promoting a larger West and buttressing a complex balance in the East that can accommodate China's rising global status. A successful U.S. effort to enlarge the West, making it the world's most stable and democratic zone, would seek to combine power with principle. A cooperative larger West—extending from North America and Europe through Eurasia (by eventually embracing Russia and Turkey), all the way to Japan and South Korea—would enhance the appeal of the West's core principles for other cultures, thus encouraging the gradual emergence of a universal democratic political culture.

At the same time, the United States should continue to engage cooperatively in the economically dynamic but also potentially conflicted East. If the United States and China can accommodate each other on a broad range of issues, the prospects for stability in Asia will be greatly increased. That is especially likely if the United States can encourage a genuine reconciliation between China and Japan while mitigating the growing rivalry between China and India.

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To respond effectively in both the western and eastern parts of Eurasia, the world's central and most critical continent, the United States must play a dual role. 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, the United States must show the world that it has the will to renovate itself at home. Americans must place greater emphasis on the more subtle dimensions of national power, such as innovation, education, the balance of force and diplomacy, and the quality of political leadership.

A LARGER WEST

FOR THE United States to succeed as the promoter and guarantor of a renewed West, it will need to maintain close ties with Europe, continue its commitment to NATO, and manage, along with Europe, a step-by-step process of welcoming both Turkey and a truly democratizing Russia into the West. To guarantee the West's geopolitical relevance, Washington must remain active in European security. It must also encourage the deeper unification of the European Union: the close cooperation among France, Germany, and the United Kingdom—Europe's central political, economic, and military alignment—should continue and broaden.

To engage Russia while safeguarding Western unity, the French-German-Polish consultative triangle could play a constructive role in advancing the ongoing but still tenuous reconciliation between Poland and Russia. The EU's backing would help make Russian-Polish reconciliation more comprehensive, much as the German-Polish one has already become, with both reconciliations contributing to greater stability in Europe. But in order for Russian-Polish reconciliation to endure, it has to move from the governmental level to the social level, through extensive people-to-people contacts and joint educational initiatives. Expedient accommodations made by governments that are not grounded in basic changes in popular attitudes will not last. The model should be the French-German friendship after World War II, which was initiated at the highest

political levels by Paris and Bonn and successfully promoted on the social and cultural level, as well.

As the United States and Europe seek to enlarge the West, Russia itself will have to evolve in order to become more closely linked with the EU. Its leadership will have to face the fact that Russia's future will be uncertain if it remains a relatively empty and underdeveloped space between the rich West and the dynamic East. This will not change even if Russia entices some Central Asian states to join Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's quaint idea of a Eurasian Union. Also, although a significant portion of the Russian public is ahead of its government in favoring EU membership, most Russians are unaware of how exacting many of the qualifying standards for membership are, especially with regard to democratic reform.

The process of the EU and Russia coming closer is likely to stall occasionally and then lurch forward again, progressing in stages and including transitional arrangements. To the extent possible, it should proceed simultaneously on the social, economic, political, and security levels. One can envisage more and more opportunities for social interactions, increasingly similar legal and constitutional arrangements, joint security exercises between NATO and the Russian military, and new institutions for coordinating policy within a continually expanding West, all resulting in Russia's increasing readiness for eventual membership in the EU.

It is not unrealistic to imagine a larger configuration of the West emerging after 2025. In the course of the next several decades, Russia could embark on a comprehensive law-based democratic transformation compatible with both EU and NATO standards, and Turkey could become a full member of the EU, putting both countries on their way to integration with the transatlantic community. But even before that occurs, a deepening geopolitical community of interest could arise among the United States, Europe (including Turkey), and Russia. Since any westward gravitation by Russia would likely be preceded and encouraged by closer ties between

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Ukraine and the EU, the institutional seat for a collective consultative organ (or perhaps initially for an expanded Council of Europe) could be located in Kiev, the ancient capital of Kievan Rus, whose location would be symbolic of the West's renewed vitality and enlarging scope.

If the United States does not promote the emergence of an enlarged West, dire consequences could follow: historical resentments could come back to life, new conflicts of interest could arise, and shortsighted competitive partnerships could take shape. Russia could exploit its energy assets and, emboldened by Western disunity, seek to quickly absorb Ukraine, reawakening its own imperial ambitions and contributing to greater international disarray. With the EU passive, individual European states, in search of greater commercial opportunities, could then seek their own accommodations with Russia. One can envisage a scenario in which economic self-interest leads Germany or Italy, for example, to develop a special relationship with Russia. France and the United Kingdom could then draw closer while viewing Germany askance, with Poland and the Baltic states desperately pleading for additional U.S. security guarantees. The result would be not a new and more vital West but rather a progressively splintering and increasingly pessimistic West.

THE COMPLEX EAST

SUCH A disunited West would not be able to compete with China for global relevance. So far, China has not articulated an ideological dogma that would make its recent performance appear universally applicable, and the United States has been careful not to make ideology the central focus of its relations with China. Wisely, both Washington and Beijing have embraced the concept of a "constructive partnership" in global affairs, and the United States, although critical of China's violations of human rights, has been careful not to stigmatize the Chinese socioeconomic system as a whole.

But if an anxious United States and an overconfident China were to slide into increasing political hostility, it is more than likely that both countries would face off in a mutually destructive ideological conflict. Washington would argue that Beijing's success is based on

tyranny and is damaging to the United States' economic well-being; Beijing, meanwhile, would interpret that U.S. message as an attempt to undermine and possibly even fragment the Chinese system. At the same time, China would stress its successful rejection of Western supremacy, appealing to those in the developing world who already subscribe to a historical narrative highly hostile to the West in general and to the United States in particular. Such a scenario would be damaging and counterproductive for both countries. Hence, intelligent self-interest should prompt the United States and China to exercise ideological self-restraint, resisting the temptation to universalize the distinctive features of their respective socioeconomic systems and to demonize each other.

The U.S. role in Asia should be that of regional balancer, replicating the role played by the United Kingdom in intra-European politics during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The United States can and should help Asian states avoid a struggle for regional domination by mediating conflicts and offsetting power imbalances among potential rivals. In doing so, it should respect China's special historic and geopolitical role in maintaining stability on the Far Eastern mainland. Engaging with China in a dialogue regarding regional stability would not only help reduce the possibility of U.S.-Chinese conflicts but also diminish the probability of miscalculation between China and Japan, or China and India, and even at some point between China and Russia over the resources and independent status of the Central Asian states. Thus, the United States' balancing engagement in Asia is ultimately in China's interest, as well.

At the same time, the United States must recognize that stability in Asia can no longer be imposed by a non-Asian power, least of all by the direct application of U.S. military power. Indeed, U.S. efforts to buttress Asian stability could prove self-defeating, propelling Washington into a costly repeat of its recent wars, potentially even resulting in a replay of the tragic events of Europe in the twentieth century. If the United States fashioned an anti-Chinese alliance with India (or, less likely, with Vietnam) or promoted an anti-Chinese militarization in Japan, it could generate dangerous mutual resentment. In the twenty-first century, geopolitical equilibrium on the

Asian mainland cannot depend on external military alliances with non-Asian powers.

The guiding principle of the United States' foreign policy in Asia should be to uphold U.S. obligations to Japan and South Korea while not allowing itself to be drawn into a war between Asian powers on the mainland. The United States has been entrenched in Japan and South Korea for more than 50 years, and the independence and the self-confidence of these countries would be shattered—along with the U.S. role in the Pacific—if any doubts were to arise regarding the durability of long-standing U.S. treaty commitments.

The U.S.-Japanese relationship is particularly vital and should be the springboard for a concerted effort to develop a U.S.-Japanese-Chinese cooperative triangle. Such a triangle would provide a structure that could deal with strategic concerns resulting from China's increased regional presence. Just as political stability in Europe after World War II would not have developed without the progressive expansion of French-German reconciliation to German-Polish reconciliation, so, too, the deliberate nurturing of a deepening Chinese-Japanese relationship could serve as the point of departure for greater stability in the Far East.

In the context of this triangular relationship, Chinese-Japanese reconciliation would help enhance and solidify more comprehensive U.S.-Chinese cooperation. China knows that the United States' commitment to Japan is steadfast, that the bond between the two countries is deep and genuine, and that Japan's security is directly dependent on the United States. And knowing that a conflict with China would be mutually destructive, Tokyo understands that U.S. engagement with China is indirectly a contribution to Japan's own security. In that context, China should not view U.S. support for Japan's security as a threat, nor should Japan view the pursuit of a closer and more extensive U.S.-Chinese partnership as a danger to its own interests. A deepening triangular relationship could also diminish Japanese concerns over the yuan's eventually becoming the world's third reserve currency, thereby further consolidating China's stake in the existing international system and mitigating U.S. anxieties over China's future role.

Given such a setting of enhanced regional accommodation and assuming the expansion of the bilateral U.S.-Chinese relationship,

three sensitive U.S.-Chinese issues will have to be peacefully resolved: the first in the near future, the second over the course of the next several years, and the third probably within a decade or so. First, the United States should reassess its reconnaissance operations on the edges of Chinese territorial waters, as well as the periodic U.S. naval patrols within international waters that are also part of the Chinese economic zone. They are as provocative to Beijing as the reverse situation would be to Washington. Moreover, the U.S. military's air reconnaissance missions pose serious risks of unintentional collisions, since the Chinese air force usually responds to such missions by sending up fighter planes for up-close inspection and sometimes harassment of the U.S. planes.

Second, given that the continuing modernization of China's military capabilities could eventually give rise to legitimate U.S. security concerns, including over U.S. commitments to Japan and South Korea, the United States and China should engage in regular consultations regarding their long-term military planning and seek to craft measures of reciprocal reassurance.

Third, the future status of Taiwan could become the most contentious issue between the two countries. Washington no longer recognizes Taiwan as a sovereign state and acknowledges Beijing's view that China and Taiwan are part of a single nation. But at the same time, the United States sells weapons to Taiwan. Thus, any long-term U.S.-Chinese accommodation will have to address the fact that a separate Taiwan, protected indefinitely by U.S. arms sales, will provoke intensifying Chinese hostility. An eventual resolution along the lines of former Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping's well-known formula for Hong Kong of "one country, two systems," but redefined as "one country, several systems," may provide the basis for Taipei's eventual reassociation with China, while still allowing Taiwan and China to maintain distinctive political, social, and military arrangements (in particular, excluding the deployment of People's Liberation Army troops on the island). Regardless of the exact formula, given China's growing power and the greatly expanding social links between Taiwan and the mainland, it is doubtful that Taiwan can indefinitely avoid a more formal connection with China.

TOWARD RECIPROCAL COOPERATION

MORE THAN 1,500 years ago, during the first half of the first millennium, the politics of the relatively civilized parts of Europe were largely dominated by the coexistence of the two distinct western and eastern halves of the Roman Empire. The Western Empire, with its capital most of the time in Rome, was beset by conflicts with marauding barbarians. With its troops permanently stationed abroad in extensive and expensive fortifications, Rome was politically overextended and came close to bankruptcy midway through the fifth century. Meanwhile, divisive conflicts between Christians and pagans sapped Rome's social cohesion, and heavy taxation and corruption crippled its economic vitality. In 476, with the killing of Romulus Augustulus by the barbarians, the by then moribund Western Roman Empire officially collapsed.

During the same period, the Eastern Roman Empire—soon to become known as Byzantium—exhibited more dynamic urban and economic growth and proved more successful in its diplomatic and security policies. After the fall of Rome, Byzantium continued to thrive for centuries. It reconquered parts of the old Western Empire and lived on (although later through much conflict) until the rise of the Ottoman Turks in the fifteenth century.

Rome's dire travails in the middle of the fifth century did not damage Byzantium's more hopeful prospects, because in those days, the world was compartmentalized into distinct segments that were geographically isolated and politically and economically insulated from one another. The fate of one did not directly and immediately affect the prospects of the other. But that is no longer the case. Today, with distance made irrelevant by the immediacy of communications and the near-instant speed of financial transactions, the well-being of the most advanced parts of the world is becoming increasingly interdependent. In our time, unlike 1,500 years ago, the West and the East cannot keep aloof from each other: their relationship can only be either reciprocally cooperative or mutually damaging. 🌐