

Cogitatio Bestia:
Zbigniew Brzezinski's Argument for American Empire in
The Grand Chessboard

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Short of a deliberate or unintentional American abdication, the only real alternative to American global leadership in the foreseeable future is international anarchy. In that respect, it is correct to assert that America has become, as President Clinton put it, the world's indispensable nation.¹

This quotation is central to Brzezinski's work, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives* (1997). While the book is dated, it still contains the essential ideas of postmodern western imperialism. Its central idea is that the American *imperium* is not an empire in the 19th century sense. Instead, it is a hegemony that can create and enforce basic rules of international legitimacy. It is an “empire,” but one that is compassionate rather than violent. Since the implosion of the Soviet Bloc, the US and its “values” became universal norms. This is a mystification. It is nothing other than liberalism pretending to be objective “human rights.”

Brzezinski argues that “values” are crucial in differentiating the American *imperium* from older empires. The older idea of “empire” was inherently exploitative. The colonizer “owned” the colonized. Brzezinski is making the claim that this older imperial concept of power has no relation to the World Order forged under American power.

The values that Brzezinski claims are quintessentially American are obscure and indefinite. They center around the guarantee of rational and fair procedures such as fair trials and freedom of assembly. Human rights, however, have little to do with procedures but concern results as states of affairs.

Holding to a set of values that stress procedural action rather than a result such as justice is never honest. No one has ever died for a procedure. “Elections” are merely abstract. Who wins them, how and why, and what they do with this newly found power, is not. Using procedural terminology is intellectually fraudulent.

Intellectuals specializing in imperial ideas such as Marco Gandásegui, emphasize that “universalist” or “human rights” rhetoric, while seemingly basing itself only on procedures actually defines a “democratic procedure” as that which leads to liberal victories. Gandasegui argues in his 2007 article on western imperialism that “democracy” rhetoric actually means that western values and institutions should remold the world. “Human rights,” according to this piece, revolve around privileged access of American capital to foreign markets. The U.S. denounced the Serbian Radical Party's victories in the elections of the 1990s, even though the election itself was free and fair. The U.S. banned the Ba'ath party in Iraq after the ouster of President Hussein. The violent ouster of president Yanukovych of Ukraine was seen as acceptable. The 2010 election of A. Lukashenko of Belarus was condemned *prior* to the actual election. Vladimir Putin's party and movement, popular in Russia, have also been denounced, whether the elections have been considered fair or not.

¹ Brzezinski, 1997, 195

The point is that “democracy” does not refer to the procedures of voting and free speech, but deal exclusively with liberal outcomes.²

Brzezinski contends that the U.S. has a right to control the very vocabulary used to determine a government's legitimacy. This right exists largely because liberalism serves the interests of capital. Capital cannot reach its full oligarchic potential in any other system.³ The following points are taken as obvious truisms through the book:

1. Liberalism alone grants legitimacy.
2. Liberal values are comprehensive and self-evidently true. They require no supporting argumentation.
3. The “global community,” is a real entity, but the “nation” is the product of “myth.” It has the right to intervene wherever “democracy” is threatened.
4. Implicitly, the American taxpayer should be coerced to pay for these actions.
5. Capitalism is the sole rational mode of production.
6. Liberal democratic capitalism should be (and is) the only ideology that has the right to be imposed and enforced with American arms.
7. The only objects that exist in the universe are individuals. Collectives are only conventions.
8. Nationalism (which is undefined here) is inherently monstrous and ruinous. This includes all forms of economic nationalism such as import substitution.
9. Only the leader of global liberalism has the right to intervene in the politics of other states. Anyone else, especially if they are against the liberal consensus, does not have this right and should be obstructed by force.
10. American influence and power, if it is controlled by liberal values, is inherently just.⁴

None of the above receive any extended argument. The author believes, or would like to inculcate the belief, that all reasonable people believe as he does. Any further argumentation to be found in the book assumes the above 10 points as true, and extrapolates with this assumption.

What is noteworthy is Brzezinski's belief that Eurasia is essential for global control.⁵ This is true, and has an important place in the structure of this book. Eurasia in general, and Central Asia in particular, is considered crucial for several interlocking reasons. First, American domination of this region is essential for checking Russia. Significant Russian minorities exist throughout Eurasia, and this worries our author greatly. He argues that these minorities might give Russia an “excuse” to intervene. Russia has no such right. Intervention is a prerogative of the US alone.⁶

The worst possible outcome for this ideological view is the formation of a China-Russia-Iran coalition. For Brzezinski this is legitimate cause for war. The containment of China, as an ally of Russia, by herself, also requires American control. The list of “rogue” states common in all liberal and neoconservative sources have several things in common: they have a strong state sector, they reject liberalism as an ideology and have erected traditional forms of governance, they remain hostile to Israel, and almost always support Russia in international politics.

For writers such as C.E. Martins, this is a cover for the eventual US control of the fuel

2 Gandasegui, 2007, 159

3 Brzezinski, 1997, 8

4 See Brzezinski, pps 37-40, though these points are argued throughout.

5 Brzezinski, 1997, pps 50-55

6 See pps 55ff, while this sounds like a caricature of his position, it is not, but is seriously argued on these pages.

resources in places such as Central Asia. The actual “nightmare scenario” is foreign, that is, Russian or Chinese, authority over the Central Asian oil and gas transport systems. The “human rights” rhetoric, so argues Martins, should not be taken seriously because it covers for crass western economic interests. Simply put, tight American (or pro-American) domination of energy transport is essential for American economic recovery.⁷

For Brzezinski, two essential concepts guide (or should guide) American foreign policy. The first is redundant, since it is the “preservation of US hegemony.” This is important because, secondly, the final end of this *imperium* is the creation of a totally democratic, liberal and borderless world.⁸ The creation of this “cooperative world” requires American enforcement of liberalism as an official ideology. On what basis anyone would cooperate in such a world is left unstated.

The arguments Brzezinski crafts suggest that democracy will automatically create pro-American governments. This is a restatement of the idea that “democracy” refers not to procedures, but results. For example, Brzezinski worries much over China. To limit and control China's free movement in Asia is of crucial importance. He holds that China's rapid development is a positive thing.⁹ It only becomes a problem when it allies with non-liberal (and hence, ipso facto, illegitimate) governments such as Burma. The Chinese are given an ultimatum: without “democratization,” the US will use its (slowly evaporating) bases in Central Asia to use other forms of persuasion. It is not an exaggeration that control over Eurasian energy and the need to check Chinese expansion is the thesis of this book, and the purpose of Brzezinski's work in general.¹⁰

Concerning Russia, Brzezinski states:

The post-Soviet Russian elite had apparently also expected that the West would not aid in, or at least not impede, the restoration of a central Russian role in the post-Soviet space. They thus resented the West's willingness to help the newly independent states consolidate their separate political existence.¹¹

Russia is a problem due to her geographic location. A strong Russia is troublesome because Russia alone, or in an alliance, can exert influence over Central Asia. With the US broke, cynical and overstretched, a Russo-Chinese gamble here is quite rational. The fact that Russia has minorities in Kazakhstan—about 30 percent of the Kazakh population—automatically involves Russia in Central Asia. Because of the Eurasian views of Kazakh president N. Nazarbayev, Brzezinski then shifts to Uzbekistan as the future of Eurasia, since fewer Russian speakers live there. So in this section of the book, yet a new concept of “legitimacy” emerges: a legitimate state is one within which Russia has few investments or citizens.¹²

Brzezinski contends for a strong US presents in EU policy. Russia again is the reason. Germany, for example, must be forced to apologize endlessly for its part in World War II. States to him are instruments for broader ends. Germany, for example, has no interests of her own, but retains “legitimacy” only to the extent that she stabilize Central Europe and check Russia. Brzezinski also argues that a German-Polish alliance would increase international trust for Germany and, more importantly, serve as a check on Russia.¹³ By the end of this

7 Martins, 2007, 17-20

8 Brzezinski, 1997, 38-41

9 This merely means that the US can do little against such a large power.

10 cf. 130ff

11 Pg 103

12 Ibid; the book oscillates between a universal policy concept that is free of any specific issues and the fact that Russia alone seems to stand in its way.

13 68-71; the creation of a Germano-Polish alliance seems as feasible as a Russo-Polish one. The strange idea

book, all other states drop out of contention and Russia alone is revealed as the sole concern of US foreign policy. Therefore, Brzezinski is making the case that global control and the ability to check a Russo-Chinese alliance are the same thing. The alternative is “international anarchy.”

The vehemently anti-imperialist Ludwig von Mises Institute says this in a sarcastic 1998 review of the book:

The good professor's “argument” is no more than a crude verbal trick. By “international anarchy” he means nothing more than a system of states not controlled by a hegemonic power or otherwise unified. Since no other country has sufficient power to assume global control, then if we set aside the imperial purple, by definition, a state of anarchy remains.

But why is “global anarchy,” that is, the existence of numerous national and regional alliance structures, so bad? Brzezinski does not feel the need to explain. He does refer to various problems that hint at a reason, especially “overpopulation” and refugees, but it is never made clear why only US power can deal with it. By the end of the book, any sensitive reader begins to realize that the underlying argument is that US power is its own justification.

The US should take the following stance concerning European issues according to Brzezinski:

1. The EU should be seen as an partner to the US. This is partly based on Germany's ability to check Russia without becoming too powerful.
2. The French too, have their own role in the American imperium. Since Germany can never be trusted, she too must be checked. France has this role and must fight any possible “separate peace” between Russia and Germany.
3. Europe has no real identity. For the author, this is a very good thing. National cultures need to be obliterated lest they become sources for national rebellions. American hegemony over the EU, at least in part, is to ensure that all nationalist parties and movements are quickly squashed.
4. The American “partnership” with the EU is conditional. In fact, it is soon contradicted. Whenever American interests are threatened, the US has the right to intervene in any way it deems proper.
5. Finally, the sole real purpose of the EU is to create a unified liberal order against Russia.¹⁴

Writers such as Professor O.C. Leiva stress that such an approach—the one advocated by Brzezinski—is about American economic interests or, more specifically, the status of the American oligarchs. Since democracy encourages a “weaker” form of state, riddled by factions based upon access to financial power, the subject state is ripe for capital penetration.¹⁵

The emphasis on American power is not really based on liberalism. That is merely a weapon to deprive would-be rebels of a strong cultural foundation to rebel. Without national ethnic cultures, there can be no imperialism. Imperialism, by definition, is the imposition one

that Germany must endlessly win the “trust” of western elites suggests that the author here is advocating using World War II as leverage in dealing with Germany and its allies from 60 years ago.

14 cf. pps 70-72

15 Leiva, 2007, pps 8-12. The simply argument is that democracy does not allow coordinated state action. This is questionable, but the basic point remains. Democratic states are factionalized. Therefore, when a corporation or bank wants to set up shop, they need to discover and then patronize those factions that stand to gain from it.

one social elite upon a functioning culture. If there is no functioning culture, then there is no imperialism. Instead, American power exists to prevent the emergence of any rival trading bloc. China and Russia fill that role. Now, the US can rearm itself against a new set of enemies, and nationalism replaces communism (though some of us hold that it was nationalism all along). These mythical enemies also contain a powerful economic alternative to Washington.

Leiva writes in the context of discussing the official statements found within the US National Security Policy book which is yearly released and updated by the White House:

The objective existence of the global capitalist economy is evident in the development of a global productive structure and the global circulation of merchandise and capital superimposed on the national economies and greater than their mere sum. Its origin goes back to the first phases of the development of capitalism. Protectionism and free exchange were always thought of as global economic policies adopted in accordance with the level of development and needs of national capitalisms participating in the world economy. . . .¹⁶

The new U.S. national security policy transmitted from the executive branch to Congress establishes three key principles: (1) peerless American global military dominance; (2) the assumed right to use force anywhere US interests are vulnerable ; and (3) the immunity of US nationals from any court not specifically American. This is merely a succinct and formal statement of imperial rule.

OC Leiva is an essential author in this field because he shows how the argument Brzezinski promotes is to be put into practice. He is not advocating for a policy but is just defending what is presently in force. Liberal democracy leaves politicians in a everlasting scramble for money, support and positive media treatment. All of these show the dominance of private capital over public outcomes. All candidates must receive their funding from powerful sources of wealth. The unending failure of liberal democracy is the distinct and inescapable privatization of the entire process. The dirty secret of democracy is that politicians have no power, but serve the interests of others that do.

Brzezinski's rhetoric can be summarized in three points:

1. Liberalism and democracy are the same. Democracy is not a set of procedures, but an ideological formulation.¹⁷ The US has the obligation to enforce this view throughout the world. The end of the "Cold War" suggests that capitalism and liberalism have eliminated its resistance and therefore have earned their role as the default intellectual perspective that, as a result, requires no argument.
2. Liberal democracy within capitalism require constant infusions of cash for its authorized candidates. Politicos require money and constructive media exposure in the same way that states require access to credit. This means that those who control wealth must, ipso facto, control the electoral process.¹⁸
3. If access to credit is largely under the control of a few omnipotent banks, then liberal

16 Quoted from the Leiva paper, pps 9-11

17 This is A. Dugin's argument in his recently translated Fourth Political Theory

18 This is not to suggest that politicians have power. They do not write nor read the bills they vote on, especially given the length of the typical Congressional bill. They have no control over what will be added to it, how it will be manifest in bureaucratic practice, or how the judicial branch will modify it. A politician is just a marquee to place on a law that is written and interpreted by others far less notable. Furthermore, corporations that help draft bills also have the power to challenge aspects of it that are considered irritating. Microsoft's well known victory against charges of monopoly and restraint of trade from both the US and EU attests to this.

democracy is a means to create a universe of dependent economic entities in debt to western finance.

Brzezinski is advocating a cooperative and integrated global regime with the US elite at the helm. Globalization, however, is primarily economic. It is about the minimization of production and transport costs and, of course, the continual decline of labor power and wages. Modern liberalism is based on this general approach. Liberalism cannot be discussed as an abstract ideal, but only in reference to its actual functioning. In the economic world, liberalism has promoted, whether willingly or not, oligarchy and consolidation. In liberalism's assumed nominalism and ideological rush to strip man of any cultural moorings, it has done nothing but clear the field for the rule of conglomerates. In practice, globalization is really that access to credit (which is the same as control over global investments) is in the hands of a few well connected elites with no connection to "America" or any other country.

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