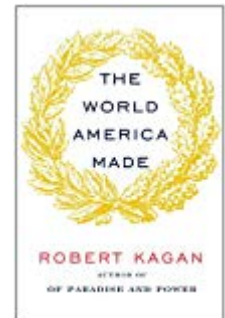
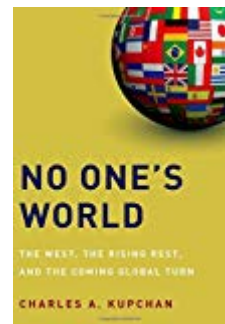


Zbigniew Brzezinski. *Strategic Vision: America and the Crisis of Global Power.* New York: Basic Books, 2012. 208 S. ISBN 978-0-465-02955-6.

Robert Kagan. *The World America Made.* New York: Knopf Publishing, 2012. 160 S. , , ISBN 978-0-307-96131-0.



Charles Kupchan. *No One's World: The West, the Rising Rest, and the Coming Global Turn.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. 256 S. , , ISBN 978-0-19-973939-4.



Reviewed by Jasper M. Trautsch

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In 2012, three of the most prominent and influential American public intellectuals each published a book analyzing the implications of China's rise for the future world order and outlining the foreign policies that the U.S. should pursue to respond to the Chinese "challenge." These political essays are of interest to historians as they show how history is used (or not used) in contemporary political debates and thus reveal the advantages as well as pitfalls of applying (or not applying) the past to manage the present and predict the future. One author employs historical analogies to support his policy recommendations,

another foregoes any profound historical analysis, and one of them explains current and potential international shifts in the world order as a result of a long historical process that cannot be altered by political actors today.

In "The World America Made," Robert Kagan, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, takes issue with predictions about an American decline, warning that the world would change for the worse if America withdrew from its international commitments as a result of the erroneous belief that American global preeminence is irrevocably

over. He makes three interrelated claims. In the first section, he asserts that the U.S. “made” the post-World War II world order, since it was primarily due to American power that democratic forms of government spread, that a liberal free-market global economy emerged, and that most parts of the world saw a relative decrease in violence and wars after 1945. The second section ponders what an American decline would entail for the current system, predicting that the new multipolar world order would discourage the further spread of democracy, tear apart the current liberal economic order, and make great-power rivalry and the outbreak of wars more likely. In the final section, Kagan claims that the U.S. is not declining and is hence capable of maintaining the current world order. He concludes that the U.S. should keep investing in the military in order to continue promoting democracy, free markets, and peace across the globe.

Kagan’s political prescriptions for future U.S. foreign policy are based on three “lessons” that he derives from his reading of history. First, he compares the current international situation to Europe about a hundred years ago – an exercise currently popular among historians of the First World War who equate China’s rise today to the ascension of the German Empire at the turn of the 20th century. Cf. Herfried Münkler, *Der große Krieg: Die Welt 1914–1918*, Reinbek 2013; Margaret MacMillan, *The War that Ended Peace: How Europe Abandoned Peace for the First World War*, London 2013. He concludes that American decline or withdrawal from international commitments – just as Britain’s at the end of the Pax Britannica – could easily usher in an era of renewed great-power competition and global instability and therefore needs to be prevented. Second, interpreting international relations in the 19th century as being marked by an ideological struggle between republicanism and monarchism and the Cold War as being primarily an ideological contest between liberal democracy and socialist totalitarianism, he finds that military power and the ap-

peal of a particular form of government are intrinsically intertwined. In other words: if the U.S. declined, whilst autocracies like China and Russia rise, the worldwide prospects for democracy to advance would become bleaker or – vice versa – if the number of democracies rose, American power would be enhanced. America therefore should continue promoting democratic regime change abroad. Finally, Kagan finds that the geopolitical position of China – surrounded by states who resent Chinese attempts to expand its influence – puts it at a long-term disadvantage as compared to the U.S., just as Germany’s middle position in Europe had confronted it with profound security dilemmas, while Great Britain’s insular position had facilitated its empire building. American decline is therefore, according to Kagan, unlikely.

By reducing political complexity and citing historical precedent, thus giving the air of empirical evidence, the use of historical analogies allows Kagan to make a clear argument and to draw – at first sight – cogent political conclusions. To the historian, aware of the dangers of drawing direct historical parallels, however, Kagan’s comparisons seem too simplistic. There are profound differences between the current world and the late 19th and early 20th century European order. Most great powers today, for example, possess atomic weapons such that – following the logic of mutually assured destruction – they are not likely to risk war to establish regional hegemony. In an historical perspective, Kagan’s claim that democracies will naturally stick together is also problematic. India, for example, refused to ally itself to the U.S. but chose to become the leader of the Non-Aligned Movement during the Cold War. One should also remember that the Russian Czarist regime fought alongside the French republic and the British parliamentary monarchy in World War I and that the anti-Hitler-coalition in World War II was not marked by ideological conformity, either. Furthermore, despite its insular position the British Empire collapsed in the 20th century. In other words: America’s privileged geopolitical position will not

forever shield it from decline – particularly not in case of “imperial overstretch.”

While Kagan denies that America is in decline and therefore makes the case for maintaining U.S. global commitments and continuing democracy promotion, Zbigniew Brzezinski – former U.S. National Security Advisor to President Jimmy Carter – argues in his monograph “Strategic Vision: America & the Crisis of Global Power” that U.S. power is waning and, consequently, that the American government should change its foreign policy. “The West” can only reassert itself if it expands to include Russia and Turkey, Brzezinski claims. An alliance of North America, Europe, Turkey, and Russia would stretch from Vancouver to Vladivostok and would have enough geopolitical clout to dominate world affairs. In East Asia, the U.S. should no longer antagonize China but take its interests in the region into consideration. For this reason, Brzezinski suggests the U.S. should refrain from forming any new anti-Chinese military alliances, for example with India, which would raise the specter of a war with China and hence “reduce Russian fears of China and thus diminish Russian self-interest in becoming more closely tied to the West” (p. 165). Moreover, the U.S. should acquiesce in the unification of mainland China with Taiwan, according to Brzezinski. Whilst in the west America should build an enlarged community, in the east it should ensure a balance of power between China, Japan, and India, instead of pursuing dominance. Furthermore, Brzezinski strongly recommends that the U.S. avoid interfering militarily in the Middle East, since armed interventions would further erode the image of America and would push Middle Eastern nations into an alliance with China.

In contrast to Kagan, Brzezinski largely refrains from historical comparisons. By focusing on current shifts in the distribution of power, he is able to outline a clear grand strategy that responds to an observable decline in America’s relative might. To an adherent of the realist paradigm,

according to which international relations are governed by a number of timeless “laws” such as the assumption that states, as unitary actors, act rationally to pursue more or less objective national interests in an anarchic international system, Brzezinski’s policy recommendations might sound plausible. By expanding “the West” the U.S. could compensate for its decreasing power and by serving as mediator in eastern Eurasia it could play an influential role in the region without having to station – not to speak of employ – a large number of military forces. To an historian, however, his call for the inclusion of Russia in the western security organization may seem problematic. NATO – in the words of its preeminent historian “the enduring alliance” Lawrence S. Kaplan, *NATO and the United States: The Enduring Alliance*, Boston 1988. – was not simply an ad-hoc alliance of convenience during the Cold War but was perceived as the political incarnation of “western civilization.” For this reason, it survived the demise of its nemesis at the end of the Cold War or, in other words, continued to exist despite the disappearance of its original *raison d’être*. Cf. Helene Sjursen, “On the Identity of NATO,” in: *International Affairs*, Vol. 80, No. 4 (2004), pp. 687–703. The effectiveness and longevity of the western alliance can thus be explained by the fact that it drew on a feeling of solidarity among its members that went beyond immediate security imperatives. Such a community, however, is the product of an historical evolution and cannot be simply created or expanded for temporary advantages by a geopolitical strategist.

Charles A. Kupchan – Professor of International Affairs at Georgetown University – agrees with Brzezinski that America is in relative decline. In “No One’s World: The West, the Rising Rest, and the Coming Global Turn,” he predicts that “the West,” which he defines as Europe and the United States, will no longer dominate the world in the 21st century, as they have done before. Instead, as power will be more equally shared around the globe, it will be “no one’s

world.” Consequently, “the West’s” political model – liberal democracy – will also not be adopted unanimously around the globe. Rather, the new world order will be “a politically diverse landscape in which the Western model will offer only one of many competing conceptions of domestic and international order” (p. 5). To prevent international anarchy and armed struggle in the coming multipolar world, Kupchan suggests that “the West” and the “rising rest” should “forge a consensus on the ordering rules that define legitimacy and govern matters of commerce, war, and peace” (p. x). The alternative – i.e. attempting to rapidly spread western democratic ideals and institutions to the world before the dominance of “the West” is irrevocably over and hoping that the liberal international order will then be preserved even without the support of American power – is, by contrast, counterproductive in Kupchan’s eyes, since China will not embrace an order in whose creation it played no part. Instead, “Western” and rising powers should negotiate the basis of a new world order on equal terms – a world order that “preserves stability and a rules-based international system amid the multiple versions of modernity that will populate the world” (p. 10).

Among the books discussed here, Kupchan’s monograph is the most historically informed. Canvassing the larger international developments since around 1500, he demonstrates that modernization and westernization are not synonymous and that non-western countries have followed their own path towards modernity rather than simply copying “the West’s” model. Kupchan doubts that democracy will keep spreading around the globe, as Kagan hopes, but finds that western democracy will ideologically compete with Chinese communal autocracy, Russian paternal autocracy, Middle Eastern theocracy, African strongmen rule, and Latin American left-wing populism in the 21st century.

While, of the three works, Kupchan’s book will be most appealing to historians, since an

analysis of larger world historical developments makes up half of the monograph, it will, however, most likely have the least influence on the public debate on U.S. foreign policy, since its narrative leaves too little room for agency. Kupchan convincingly demonstrates that “the West’s” relative influence is in decline and that in view of long-term trends there is little that can arrest – much less reverse – this development. While Kupchan’s historical trajectory may be correct, his book, however, does not provide as clear-cut a blueprint for political action as Kagan’s and Brzezinski’s essays.

The lesson we can derive from this analysis of the three books might be that the more historically nuanced a monograph is the less conducive it is to unequivocal political messages. Historians explain political actions and their effects in the past and identify long-term developments, but cannot deduce reliable prognoses for the future or develop political action plans for the present from the experience of history. Nonetheless, historical consciousness is indispensable for making sense of an infinitely complex present, for developing a gripping narrative that defines a nation’s role in the world, and for formulating a coherent and convincing foreign policy.

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