



1914 or 1950 in Asia?

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Despite grand visions of a cosmopolitan planet living in peace, the first globalization at the turn of the 20th century descended into World War I as the old empires scrambled to preserve themselves as others sought self-determination. Powers on the losing end of that war reasserted themselves in yet another worldwide calamity within decades.

After World War II, in the early 1950s, with the victorious American-led alliance in the driver's seat, institutions such as the United Nations and the Bretton Woods arrangements created a global stability that enabled peace, prosperity and the "rise of the rest."

In 2014, the world order is shifting again with the rise of China reviving in Asia the very kind of nationalist rivalries that led Europe to war twice in the 20th century.

Will we be able to build new institutions that accommodate the new powershift without resorting to war, or will the second globalization collapse as well? Top strategists from the US, Japan and China respond to this momentous question.

Can China Avoid the Thucydides Trap?

ZBIGNIEW BRZEZINSKI, one of America's pre-eminent strategic thinkers, comments on Chinese President Xi Jinping's worldview. Brzezinski was national security advisor to US President Jimmy Carter. His latest book is *Strategic Vision: America and the Crisis of Global Power*.

NPQ | In a recent conversation with **NPQ**, Chinese President Xi Jinping laid out his vision of international relations:

The argument that strong countries are bound to seek hegemony does not apply to China. This is not in the DNA of this country given our long historical and cultural background. Also China fully understands that we need a peaceful and stable internal and external environment to develop ourselves.

We all need to work together to avoid the Thucydides trap—destructive tensions between an emerging power and established powers, or between established powers themselves.

Our aim is to foster a new model of major country relations in three aspects.

First is a no confrontational or zero-sum mentality. Second is mutual respect for other's path of development and cultural heritage. Third, to seek common ground on issues of common interests in pursuit of win-win progress. As long as the major countries follow these principles, no war will break out in the world.

How do Xi's words square with China's actions, most notably the recent surprise declaration of an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea that overlaps with those already declared by Japan and South Korea?

BRZEZINSKI | I find what President Xi says to be very admirable. I'm impressed particularly by the historical reference to Thucydides, who wrote about the conflict between Sparta and Athens. His point of view is one responsible and knowledgeable Americans would share, as would most Europeans.

Unfortunately, in many parts of the world, I do not think such a reasonable perspective prevails, nor is it likely to prevail. Ominously, I think there is a real danger that, despite such good intentions, even the American-Chinese relationship may deteriorate unless both sides make a greater effort than so far to consolidate more deeply the strategic relationship.

There are those who believe that China is intentionally trying to drive a wedge between the US and Japan in order to establish its dominant role in the region. I don't share this view. Perhaps there are some people in the leadership, particularly in the

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military, who may have felt that way. But I doubt that at this stage it was a deliberate decision at the top level to undertake such a high-risk act with such a short-range objective; high-risk because it could lead to an actual military clash and short-range because China is not ready militarily for a serious showdown with the US.

NPQ | Does this ADIZ declaration and China’s military buildup necessarily conflict with the idea that it is not seeking hegemony? After all, they are not trying to put military bases or conquer territory anywhere beyond their immediate realm. They claim they are only trying to defensively control their own “battle zone” in the event of war.

BRZEZINSKI | This point is well taken. I’m sure that China’s leaders, both political and military are sensitive to the fact—and I emphasize the word “fact”—that the US is vastly more powerful militarily than China.

In the nuclear realm, China has very cautiously maintained a posture of minimum deterrence. The number of its nuclear weapons targeted on the US is infinitely smaller than the number of US nuclear weapons targeted on China. In every other realm of military potential the US is superior. That is especially the case with naval forces.

In any case, I am confident that the top leadership of the two countries understands that a conflict between them would be mutually damaging.

NPQ | China and Japan have never been great powers at the same time. What is worrying about the whole situation is the back and forth escalation. The Japanese declaring their sovereignty over disputed islands, the Chinese response on the ADIZ, then the visit of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to the Yasukuni Shrine, where Class A war criminals are enshrined among the many other fallen soldiers.

Are you worried that the world’s second and third largest economies might tip into an actual clash?

BRZEZINSKI | The situation is extremely worrisome, as was also the case not long ago between China and India.

Some Japanese may not be deliberately trying to bring about a collision in which the US would have to line up with Japan against China, but there may be some whose calculated actions have precisely this aim.

In either case, it is in the interest of both America and Japan for America to make clear privately to the Japanese that, though our commitments formulated in the treaty of alliance are binding, they do not involve support for provocative actions. It would be a good thing for the American-Japanese relationship if the Japanese were more inclined to consult with us on some steps that they take, knowing in advance that they will impact our relationship with the Chinese.

This is not to suggest that Japan is America’s satellite and must follow our

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instructions. It is to say the Japanese should be aware that a collision with China would have extremely destructive consequences not only for the region, but for international stability more generally. Such a collision would confront the US with unpalatable choices.

NPQ | **Despite the US-Japan Alliance, there is not specific security arrangement in place for the South and East China Sea that would preclude China and Japan from getting caught in what Xi calls the “Thucydides trap.” Ought there be?**

BRZEZINSKI | If we take President Xi’s Thucydides comment at face value, and we should, the next step ought to be some regional arrangement—including arbitration and conflict resolution, compromise alternatives—involving China, Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, etc. and, residually, the US not only because of its alliance with Japan but because of its worldwide relationship with China on which so much of the world’s political and economic stability depends.

NPQ | **Who would be the arbitrator? China does not accept the US as an “objective” arbiter, but with interests in the region.**

BRZEZINSKI | The answer to that is that America’s presence in the region is a stabilizing factor. There would be much more conflict in the region involving India, China, North Korea and South Korea, Vietnam, Phillipines, etc. if the US wasn’t there. Such stability is in China’s interest.

We unfortunately clouded the situation somewhat, sending the wrong signals to the Chinese, by some of the wording of President Obama’s speech more than a year ago in Australia in which he used the term “pivot.” He should have not used such a military term and associated it with military decisions. He should have simply pointed to the enduring presence of the US in the Far East since 1905 when Theodore Roosevelt mediated an end to the Russo-Japanese War.

Any objective analysis would conclude that the US has a stabilizing and pacifying role in the region *still* today. It is acting much as Great Britain did vis-à-vis Europe in the 19th Century. We are not organizing coalitions against someone, but trying to mitigate any tensions that could lead to a regional conflict by rival powers.

As President Xi himself makes clear, such a “peaceful and stable” environment is the key to China being able to continue its rapid economic development. And that is also to America’s benefit.



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