

## PAPER DETAILS

TITLE: Geography of Strategic Thinking in the US in post-Cold War Era

AUTHORS: Mehmet ÖZKAN

PAGES: 115-122

ORIGINAL PDF URL: <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/2266068>

---

## DEĞERLENDİRME YAZISI

---

### Geography of Strategic Thinking in the US in post-Cold War Era

Mehmet Özkan\*

Francis Fukayama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York: Free Press, 1993, 464pp.

Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*, Simon & Schuster: New York, 1996, 367pp.

Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy And Its Geostrategic Imperatives*, Basic Books: New York, 1998, 240pp.

Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Second Chance, Three Presidents and the Crisis of American Superpower*, Basic Books: New York, 2007, 234pp.

Robert Chase, Emily Hill and Paul Kennedy (eds), *The Pivotal States, A New Framework for US Policy in the Developing World*, New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999, 445pp.

Parag Khanna, *The Second World, Empires and Influence in the New Global Order*, New York: Random House, 2008, 466pp.

Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World*, New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008, 336pp.

Nothing can outline the strategic thinking of a country's inclinations and possible policy positions than the writings of its influential intellectu-

---

\* Ph.D Student, Sevilla University (Spain).

als. Historically strategic projections have always come first, only then followed by its policy repercussions and implementations. This is even truer in understanding of global players' role in the international politics, as middle-sized and small players are only to follow, challenge if possible. Furthermore, strategic perspectives are more influential and needed than ever during the time when there is no clear insight toward future, about issues and problems. Strategic analyses are usually intended to serve as long-term guidance to which it addressed; and while it is tested, it evolves and become re-formulated in the light of real experiences. Whenever a strategic insight is no longer useful, it opens the door for a new one. This does not only replace the former one, but also serves as an advanced level of thinking in theory-practice intersection as an urgent need.

After immediate and unexpectedly collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, the future of international politics/system was as unclear as the direction of the future of the US foreign policy. Strategic perspectives were needed as a guidance not only to explain the existing situation but also to give some hints to policy-makers.

In the post-Cold War era, the American strategic thinking can be divided into three periods roughly. Initial period started with the immediate collapse of the Soviet Union and lasted until mid-1990s. At this time, there had been more discussion and debate on the possibly existing international system, most notably how it would look like, and the ways how one should look at world affairs. Discourses of "the End of History" and "the Clash of Civilizations" were the dominant theme in discussions, not that they provided a substantial and long-term explanation to world affairs given the existing conflict and clash in Balkans and Africa, but they were the only available ones for people who desperately needed a theoretical analytical tool. Departing from this point, this article makes a periodization of American strategic thinking in post-Cold War era through an analysis of the books of some influential strategic thinkers.

### **Ultra-Self Confidence and the 'New World Order'**

In 1989 when Fukayama published his oft-cited article of "The End of History"<sup>1</sup> and later his book<sup>2</sup>, his main argument was that liberal values consisting of democracy and free-market economy as championed by the

1 Francis Fukayama (1989), "The End of History", *The National Interest* Summer.

2 Francis Fukayama (1993), *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York: Free Press.

West are the last thing that human being can reach and it is possible that human being reached the end of its search for an ultimate system. It has certainly provided the much-needed analysis of the time. Given the circumstances that existed that time, it was highly useful and explanatory. Almost half-century racial policy of Apartheid in South Africa was approaching to an end, while talk about the possible solution for a long-standing and deep-seated conflict of the Palestine-Israeli conflict was well under way leading to Oslo Peace Accords in 1993; no need to mention here that the major enemy of the liberal values, communism, and its ardent defender the Soviet Union is no longer existing as a threat. Certainly, the disappearance of the perceivably the most dangerous and then immediate enemy of the West, the Communist threat, was centered the thinking and the discussions on “the End of History”. Such perspective had also shown its repercussions on the policy level. Then president of the US, George Bush, has declared the establishment of the “New World Order” referring to the winning of the liberal ideology and democracy over others and emphasized the importance of spreading out those values all over the world. However, such optimistic perspective on the global politics was shocked first by the events occurred as the time goes. Ethnic-based wars in the Balkans throughout the 1990s, the UN involvement in Somalia in 1993 and unfortunate stories surrounded the American soldiers in there, and most importantly the Rwanda genocide in 1994 had created not only a shock to those who considered the liberal values as the ultimate destination in human history, but also led them to look other ways to understand and explain then increasingly existing conflicts. Again it was in this environment that Samuel Huntington provided the most needed explanations for the world that needed desperately. The famous “Clash of Civilizations” thesis of Huntington has simply argued that the roots of the existing conflicts in the world can be explained only in a reference to civilizations and blamed mainly the Islamic civilization along with others for the conflicts and disorder. He provocatively stated that “Islam has bloody borders”.<sup>3</sup>

Huntington’s argument has shifted the center of focus from the championing and joyful West to the possible conflict creators, the Islamic world, as he claimed. Although the content and perspectives were different and even conflicting, both at Fukayama and Huntington’s arguments underlined one point: the West through its most powerful representative the United States are the most powerful actor in the world that created a system akin to unipolar one. The emphasis on the main dominance, and the only key player, of

---

3 Samuel Huntington (1993), “The Clash of Civilizations”, *Foreign Affairs*, Summer.

the US in global affairs centered the strategic arguments and analysis mostly in the first half of the 1990s. Departing from such insights, the US actually formulated its foreign relations in a way that it acted as solely superpower with a distinctive self-confidence. However as the experiences has shown to those who makes the US foreign policy, it was difficult, if not impossible, to act as the only superpower or even actor in global politics. Yet, the US is the only superpower; it needed to have allies in every part of the world to make involvement easier and successful. Therefore, it was not surprising to see the emerging new theoretical insights that spurred from academics to politicians at the time analyzing the role of other states in the world politics.

### **Need of partners to rule the world**

“The Pivotal States” approach of Chase and others in 1997 and “Emerging Markets” perspectives in global politics were not really intended to locate those within the international system from below, but was an attempt to locate them within the possible US strategy in global affairs, thus being clearly from above. Increasing emphasis on the role and importance of the pivotal states in the US foreign policy was actually an expression of reality that the US, though the only superpower, cannot act alone in global politics as she wishes. From a theoretical understanding, locating such middle-sized states in the US foreign policy planning actually shows that the US has shared its role, and understood that it cannot be the key and only dominator in international affairs. At the same time, it confirms the role of the US as the mover-and-shaker of global politics by choosing whom to locate within its strategic thinking. It is fair to say here that those middle-sized states’ admitted roles in helping the US policies while at the same time benefiting from it was not by their choice. Either they were included due to geographical location or economic strength and stability comparing to other states in the different regions. Whatever the reason was, in the second-half of the 1990s, the US strategically has looked and located middle-sized states in its foreign policy. This was, by and large, an admission that even the only superpower is needed to share its power with some others if it wants to be influential in global affairs.

During first period the emphasis was more on high theoretical claims, while in the second period the practical implications and execution came into forefront. Roughly covering from the mid-1990s until the unfortunate 9/11 events, in the second period intellectual and policy-makers alike more focused on the role of regional allies, transatlantic relations and even re-

construction a newly defined role for international organizations. Therefore, the books of Brzezinski and Chase at all made more sense in the discussions. Strategic perspective by and large were already defined and there needed some tactical and implementation-oriented analysis.

### **Last shot: 'We do whatever we want'**

The 9/11 attacks on the US soil did not only changed the American strategic thinking, but also almost that of all global actors. It has paved the way for a new strategic thinking in the US. The American strategic thinking, put simply, has turned from managing the world as the only superpower to managing a few terrorists whom even no one knows where they live, plan and executes their brutal attacks. The US has narrowed its approach to global politics employing the most national-interest based foreign policy. Without approval of the international community, the United Nations and even key allies in transatlantic relations, the US has chosen to take a path, especially in Iraq, that has many uncertainties and unintended consequences that are still hunting global political relations today.

Perhaps nothing has changed the US perception of world affairs than unfortunate events of the 9/11 in 2001. After this historical tragedy, not only the US took an offensive position toward to the global terrorism and its supporters but also created a world in which it is not only a superpower anymore. The US invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan decreased the role of the US in global affairs, virtually seeming that it actually increased. Fastening globalization has also worked against the US as it stuck in its own battle in Iraq and elsewhere. Taking advantage of the US's misreading of the changing global politics, China, Russia and the EU increased their leverage in international affairs politically and economically globally. At regional level, Iran in the Middle East, India in the East Asia, Brazil and Venezuela in Latin America have all become more influential players than ever. The more the US focused on the self-created world in Iraq and elsewhere, the more the others capitalized the benefits of the virtual absence of the US and the increasing globalization.

### **... and admission of reality**

It took even less than a decade to be understood that American hegemony or the only global power statues is actually illusionary. Underlying this fact,

Cohen argued in his 2002 Annual Political Geography Lecture that a foreign policy was in making and “current political alignments made by the United States in pursuit of the War on Terrorism are short-term expedients”.<sup>4</sup> He powerfully explained that these alignments are actually masking “the more fundamental geopolitical forces and structures that bear upon the process of global equilibrium”.

The argument that “the assumption of American global political and economic hegemony is basically flawed” has actually emerged as early as in 2002;<sup>5</sup> however it was not until the situation deteriorated in Iraq in later years and the presidential election approaches that a new path has meaningfully emerged. That is, a new foreign policy perspective ranging from the withdrawing the troops from Iraq to open a dialogue with so-called rogue states such as Iran and Syria, has been the key debate both in American politics and election campaigns. Championed by 2008 presidential hopeful Barack Obama and backed influential insiders such as Brzezinski, this discussion has shown the clearly that the limits of American power has been understood by recent years’ experience, not by projection.

It was in this environment that the strategic analyses of global affairs are no longer claim the only superpower status of the US in international arena. While Brzezinski claimed that the US has missed the first chance to become a truly only global player in history in only 15 years, Khanna clearly argued that there is no longer one global actor, but three: the US, the EU and China.<sup>6</sup> Highly influential journalist-academic Fareed Zakaria has even titled his latest book as “The Post-American World”.<sup>7</sup>

After analyzing the global policies of the three presidents in the post-Cold War era, Brzezinski convincingly makes the argument that the US has a second chance with the incoming president in November 2008. He warns and outlines the main obstacles and opportunities that the next president will confront. Brzezinski makes a strong case that if this chance is missed, it will be the last chance.<sup>8</sup>

---

4 S.B. Cohen (2003), “The 2002 Annual Political Geography Lecture: Geopolitical Realities and United States Foreign Policy”, *Political Geography* 22, 2.

5 Ibid, 31.

6 Parag Khanna (2008), *The Second World, Empires and Influence in the New Global Order*, New York: Random House, pp. xvi-xix.

7 Fareed Zakaria (2008), *The Post-American World*, New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company.

8 Zbigniew Brzezinski (2007), *Second Chance, Three Presidents and the Crisis of American Superpower*, Basic Books: New York.

Khanna's strategic analysis can be seen as a complementary to that of Brzezinski in many aspects but not with the main argument. He argues that the US is no longer the only superpower, a contrasting argument that runs against the Brzezinski's "Second Chance". As the US is one of the three key players in international affairs, he defines the main clash and influence areas as Second World and argues that whoever increases the influence in these areas will probably be the most influential international actor. Implicitly, Brzezinski also seems of opinion that the US lost its domination or superpower status, however what makes his argument different from that of Khanna is that he still believes there is a second chance to restore it. In that sense, Brzezinski is still optimistic while Khanna argues there is already a more different world out there than people think of in Washington.

In the international politics, it is still the states' actions and behaviors that hold the key to stability and order, not the actions of a few crazy terrorists.<sup>9</sup> Very much in line with this thinking, for example, Khanna explicitly argues that in the current world politics there are three key or determining players (or empires in his terms) and their actions and interactions over the "The Second World" would be inevitably important for the future of the globe we live in: the US, EU and China.<sup>10</sup>

### **And future...**

In line with the global changes, American strategic thinking has been influenced by the events as well contributing to those events. For a powerful country like America, making strategic mistake creates another and forces itself to change the discourse. Is American strategic thinking living in its own box and correcting the earlier mistakes? Today we see another turn in American strategic thinking with the Obama administration; however, whether it will be a correction of Bush administration failure or create another discourse and go beyond the correction is open to debate. A general observation shows that American strategic thinking is a process of domestic issue rather than a global issue although presumably America has to establish a global strategic thinking. At least it was the case until Obama administration. Now after the Cold War, for the first time America is faced to draw a strategy that is valid, supportable and have legitimacy in the eyes of others

---

<sup>9</sup> Zakaria, p.2.

<sup>10</sup> Khanna, pp.xxiii-xxvii.



in international arena. In that sense, if successful, Obama would be the first global president of the US in post-Cold War era in terms of strategic planning and implementing.