

Book Review

Zero-Sum Future: American Power in an Age of Anxiety

By Gideon Rachman
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REVIEWED BY MICHAEL J. MAZARR

Gideon Rachman has an intriguing notion. The broad assumptions of most analyses of world politics since 1989—that the major and middle powers of the world are agreed on a set of shared interests, that globalization has created a positive-sum context in which all can benefit at the same time, that a sort of modern alliance of like-minded states opposed to major conflict and other annoyances such as terrorism and environmental degradation will work to preserve stability—may be breaking down. The “international political system has . . . entered a period of dangerous instability and profound change,” he writes, which will fracture the foundations of the positive-sum, like-minded-powers world.

There is growing evidence for such a proposition, and a persuasive case for it ought to be laid out. Unfortunately, this book is not that case. It is, instead, a series of frustratingly brief nuggets that try to encapsulate everything about the post-Cold War world, from neoconservative philosophy to the Thatcherite revolution in Britain to the Gulf War to Islamic terrorism.

These chapters, generally 7 to 10 pages each, represent a sort of “pop history” and read as if Rachman read the relevant chapters from a few popular historical treatments, sat down at his keyboard, and summarized the fundamental themes for a high school-level audience. He disposes of the rise of China in seven and a half pages. There is no depth of analysis, no new insight, and no particular argumentation that connects these brief summaries to his overall argument—that the positive-sum, “end of history” moment is ending.

The result can also be misleadingly simplistic. He refers in some places to the “democratic peace” thesis as the idea that “capitalism, democracy, and technology would advance simultaneously—and global peace would be the end product” (p. 5). This sounds like an interesting and persuasive notion, but it is *not* the democratic peace thesis. This limits its explanatory variable to political democracy, and says nothing about capitalism or technology. He later writes that “The theory of the ‘democratic peace’ looked less persuasive as Russia flexed its military muscles” (p. 168), when in fact a more authoritarian Russia would, by this theory, have been expected to become more aggressive.

The pop-history approach—apparently an effort to appeal to a broad audience—results in many loose, vague claims and statements. Rachman refers to problems in global governance on key issues (a very real problem), and then immediately conflates it with “world government,” a totally different notion, weighted with political significance. He claims that “American conservatives fell prey to their own form of technological euphoria” (p. 120), arguing that “they became firm believers that the technology-driven ‘revolution in military affairs’

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had created a new era of unanswerable American dominance.” I know at least a number of “conservatives” who believed no such thing; this is a broad and generic claim that cannot be true—it is just lazy writing. He equates globalization with the rise of “an enticing vision of a ‘new world order’” that emerged after 1989, when in fact students of globalization would make no such parallel—globalization as a phenomenon has been emerging for centuries.

The real problem with the book, however, is that, after laying out a provocative and potentially important thesis—that world politics may be making a U-turn, or at least a left hook—Rachman then himself veers off into an unsatisfying tour of the last couple of decades, ground that has been amply covered in hundreds of books and thousands of articles. He had a compelling thesis to support; he ought to have spent 150 of his pages supporting it. Instead he throws many of his eight-page summaries at the reader, which tell us nothing we do not already know, leaving him precious little space to make his true argument: that a combination of nationalism, zero-sum rivalry, and most of all the legacy of the 2008 financial crisis is creating an “Age of Anxiety” in which rivalry between states will become much more pronounced than it has been. In theory, this section begins on page 167 of a 280-page book, but even then some of the chapters that follow remain devoted to back-ground throat-clearing.

There are suggestive nuggets that point to analysis that could have been broadened considerably. Rachman quotes an American professor at a Chinese university who is astonished at how many of his students “have been taught that war with America is inevitable” (p. 179). There is the description of Russian President Vladimir Putin’s spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, apparently ultramodern and Westernized—yet a man who carries a “tough and nationalistic” message—who believes that “the West had taken advantage of a period of Russian weakness in the 1990s,” who insisted that Russia was “not going to be pushed around anymore.” There is Rachman’s argument that Russian and Chinese governments are turning to nationalism as a chief source of legitimacy.

These and other glimpses of an emerging world of proud, nationalistic, mutually suspicious states with self-interest at the top of their list of priorities, followed by . . . self-interest, and then self-interest, and several notches below that, some vague notion of the sort of collective responsibilities celebrated during what Rachman terms the “Age of Optimism” that began in 1989—these point to the sort of book that could have been written: deeply researched, strong on reporting from the ground in these countries, less about the past and more about the future, giving the reader an intimate sense of the mindsets of emerging leadership generations, not only in China and Russia, but also in places (which, to be fair, Rachman certainly mentions, and emphasizes) such as India, Brazil, Turkey, and Pakistan. But again, that is not this book. **PRISM**