

Book Reviews

Superpower: Three Choices for America's Role in the World

By Ian Bremmer
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REVIEWED BY TOM FOX

It is common in any discussion of U.S. foreign policy to hear laments about our current lack of a “strategy.” Whether looking back at Iraq and Afghanistan, assessing options to deal with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and Syria, or projecting the relationship with a rising China, foreign policy hands of all political bents consistently harp on the refrain that we do not have a national strategy. Ian Bremmer, the founder and president of the Eurasia Group, captures this problem neatly in his new book, *Superpower: Three Choices for America's Role in the World*. He positions himself squarely in the critic's camp, but he does not limit his negative assessment to the current administration. Rather, he sees this lack of coherent American foreign policy strategy as stemming from the end of the Cold War. And he is not out only to criticize. His goal is to push the conversation

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forward and begin what he views as an essential debate for determining America's future.

Bremmer leads off with a quiz of sweeping abstract questions that each offer three responses. This exercise sets up his framework for the entire book. He offers three choices: Independent America, Moneyball America, and Indispensable America. The book is set up as an argument for each one in sequence, and wraps up with his final analysis about why choosing one is essential and which choice he recommends. The construct is engaging as he fully commits to making a strong case for all three of the vastly different options. He remains even-handed throughout, and I imagine that many will not know exactly where he will land at the end, as I was myself surprised.

In order to invest the reader in his framework, Bremmer's first two chapters set the stage with his analysis of where the world is now. He states that although America's relative power in foreign policy is shrinking, the capacity and growth potential of the country as a whole are vast and the U.S. remains a superpower. He cites the strength and diversity of the economy, the surge in domestic energy production, and America's favorable demographics as the key factors that give the country a unique competitive advantage in the near and mid-term future. He then assesses recent American foreign policy, reaching back to the end of the Cold War and arguing that we have stumbled significantly with the administrations of Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama in sequence. Bremmer deconstructs their failures and dismantles them all rather expediently on the grounds of “incoherence.” He does not give the American electorate a free pass either, as the American people continue to choose leaders more focused on domestic issues.

But again, his interest is not so much in criticism as it is in reinvigorating the debate about making a critical choice in foreign policy: what should America be now and in the future? The book has no qualms about perfectly positioning itself for a presidential election cycle. It is a fantastic starting point for the robust debate needed about the nation's values and priorities in dealing with the rest of the world. The complexity of international relations does not lend itself to sound bites and 30-second spots, but Bremmer argues that the first step is having this conversation and becoming more informed as a people. Only then will we have the foundational understanding we need to make the hard choices to secure America's future.

This brings Mr. Bremmer to his opening argument, that for Independent America. He leads with a quote from President Dwight D. Eisenhower's "Chance for Peace" speech, which is not as oft-cited as his farewell address that cautions against the "military-industrial" complex, but is similarly powerful in its advocacy for non-military spending. The Independent America chapter focuses its energy on lambasting American overreach, ranging from our nation-building experiments to domestic surveillance and free trade. He argues that the best path to global leadership is instead to set an example for the world at home by focusing our spending on rebuilding crippled infrastructure, investing in education, and maintaining a right-sized military, while also living up to our commitments to our veterans. Bremmer maintains that this is not "isolationism," since that is an oversimplification of the argument. Rather, Independent America is the belief that we can have more influence abroad if we fix our domestic problems and become a proper showcase for American

values. Success at home will set the stage for other nations to follow suit and buy into American peace and prosperity.

Bremmer then turns to Moneyball America, hoping that there are enough baseball fans out there to appreciate his nod to Billy Beane's approach to maximizing value with advanced analytics. The baseline of this argument is that maximizing America's value, not its values, is the critical linchpin for achieving success in today's complex world. He leads on the security front, advocating for the Powell Doctrine's checklist in deciding whether war is worth it. Bremmer compares the two Iraq wars in this light and shows that the second adventure should have been avoided by applying that high standard. In the Moneyball vein, it is essential to not let emotion cloud cold-blooded rational and analytical assessment. To do this, Bremmer makes cost one of the key elements in dictating what America can and should do. He emphasizes the use of drones and sharing responsibilities with allies to further maximize efficiency in foreign policy. Moneyball America allows for and encourages negotiating with enemies, as flexibility is key in taking advantage of opportunities. Finally, Moneyball America relies heavily on the power of trade to secure America's interests abroad. Whether through the use of sanctions, American energy, or aggressive trade deals, America has an unmatched set of economic tools that we can use to advance our interests. This calculated vision of American foreign policy places economics first and steers clear of the idealistic notions of both isolationism and exceptionalism. Pragmatism instead reigns supreme.

Lastly, Bremmer comes to Indispensable America, the argument that most people will be very familiar with, as it has dominated U.S.

Government rhetoric (if not the actual policy decisions) since the end of the Cold War. *Indispensable America* holds American values as supreme and the inevitable march of freedom and democracy as essential to eventual global peace and prosperity. Only the United States can lead that charge because only it has the resources to remain engaged in every region of the world, pursuing American interests and spreading American values. This comprehensive strategy keeps the United States militarily engaged in securing the commons while also aggressively pursuing economic engagement that promotes free-market values. *Indispensable America* relies on democracy and capitalism as the cornerstones for ensuring the arc of history bends toward peace and freedom. The U.S.-China relationship is critical here, but *Indispensable America* maintains that in the long-term, we must empower the Chinese people to eventually realize control of their own government. Bremmer couches *Indispensable America* in the grandest and most ambitious rhetorical American traditions and argues that only in this way can we live up to our own destiny.

Having laid out these three calls for clarity in foreign policy, Bremmer then moves to argue how essential it is to choose. However attractive it might be to pick and choose elements from each or even to continue to muddle through without a foreign policy, he maintains that a cohesive foreign policy sets a course for stability because it shows the rest of the world what America stands for, regardless of what that is. That alone would produce some order in the increasingly more dangerous and disordered world. Here, Bremmer reminds us about the value of decisiveness with a quote often attributed to Theodore Roosevelt: "In any moment of decision, the best thing you

can do is the right thing, the next best thing is the wrong thing, and the worst thing you can do is nothing." In Bremmer's analysis, the time for America to choose is now: we and the rest of the world will be better off with any of the three options presented.

Before he concludes, Bremmer reminds his reader that the book is more about the reader's choice than his own. He also says that the book itself was an exercise for him to figure out where exactly he stood on the question at hand. This construct helps to make the book an enjoyable read because it is inevitable that the reader will feel the tug of each of the arguments. In the end, *Indispensable America* falls short for him because it does not reflect an accurate assessment of American power right now. As he puts it, "America cannot play the same role in 2020 that it played in 1945, 1970, or even 1990." Although one might think that this would put him into the Moneyball camp, he is against that approach mostly because of its lack of vision. Bremmer does not believe that Americans would buy into something that puts "value over values," and he knows how deep exceptionalism runs. For this reason, he believes we should channel that energy into an Independent America policy. Values do matter, but he posits that we can best spread those values through our example. He again renounces isolationism here, as well as adventurism. He emphasizes that we must make this transition slowly in order to afford our allies, particularly Germany and Japan, the time to build up their capacity to defend themselves. He also believes that trade is an essential part of a viable Independent America strategy, in contrast to the anti-free trade view he espoused in his initial argument.

He concludes by once again arguing that choice is essential, and it is the choice of the

reader—and by extension the American electorate—that will set the course for our country. His book succeeds in advancing the conversation and encouraging a comprehensive and strategic approach to foreign policy. Although his framework of only three options is relatively simple, it does a fairly good job of capturing a wide continuum of differing mindsets. One could also criticize the work for offering very little in the way of specifics for any of the three options. Of particular note for a military audience was that all three visions included mention of decreased defense spending, a premise that alone could take an entire book to convince some to even consider.

Nonetheless, the purpose of the book is not to finely detail the policies of each strategy, but instead to outline them and encourage a choice within the framework. In that goal, he succeeds. This work is an excellent starting point for an important debate, particularly in an election season. Although it is probably too optimistic to hope for such a nuanced and serious discussion to happen in the public arena, it is fair to expect our policymakers, their staffs, and our citizens to take a harder look at what matters for America. As we all prepare to go to the polls, we should understand better where our priorities in foreign policy lie. This book provides a strong opening salvo for three different visions and a useful structure for discerning one's own choice for the proper role of America in the world. It is only fitting that Bremmer offers an open-ended conclusion: "May we choose wisely."

PRISM

**Terreur dans l'Hexagone:
Genèse du djihad français
[Terror in the Hexagon: The
Genesis of French Jihad]**

By Gilles Kepel, with Antoine Jardin
Gallimard

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REVIEWED BY I. WILLIAM ZARTMAN

T*error in the Hexagon*¹ is a frightening and authoritative work written for France and, by extension, for the United States. It presents a detailed analysis of the interaction of French society and political Islam over the past decade. This interactional element is of critical importance because, unlike most works on the rise of jihad, this study understands its growth in France as a dynamic between the host population and its leaders and those of the foreign immigrants.

Ten percent of the French population is Muslim. Although France has historically been a melting pot for small groups of minorities, Muslim immigrants have faced—and continue to face—challenges in regard to both French culture and French attitudes toward immigrants, as well as to the very question of what it means to be "French." As important as culture is in France, though, this is not merely a cultural struggle; it is just as deeply an

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