

The Rise of China, And the Fall of the US?

Tectonic Eruptions in Eurasia Erode America's Global Power

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*From the ashes of a world war that killed [80 million people](#) and reduced great cities to smoking rubble, America rose like a Titan of Greek legend, unharmed and armed with extraordinary military and economic power, to govern the globe. During four years of combat against the Axis leaders in Berlin and Tokyo that raged across the planet, America's wartime commanders — George Marshall in Washington, Dwight D. Eisenhower in Europe, and Chester Nimitz in the Pacific — knew that **their main strategic objective was to gain control over the vast Eurasian landmass.***

Whether you're talking about desert warfare in North Africa, the D-Day landing at Normandy, bloody battles on the Burma-India border, or the island-hopping campaign across the Pacific, the Allied strategy in World War II involved constricting the reach of the Axis powers globally and then wresting that very continent from their grasp.

That past, though seemingly distant, is still shaping the world we live in. Those legendary generals and admirals are, of course, long gone, but the geopolitics they practiced at such a cost still has profound implications. For just as Washington encircled Eurasia to win a great war and global hegemony, so Beijing is now involved in a far less militarized reprise of that reach for global power.

And to be blunt, these days, China's gain is America's loss. Every step Beijing takes to consolidate its control over Eurasia simultaneously weakens Washington's presence on that strategic continent and so erodes its once formidable global power.

A Cold War Strategy

After four embattled years imbibing lessons about geopolitics with their morning coffee and bourbon nightcaps, America's wartime generation of generals and admirals understood, intuitively, how to respond to the future alliance of the two great communist powers in

Moscow and Beijing.

In 1948, following his move from the Pentagon to Foggy Bottom, Secretary of State George Marshall launched the [\\$13 billion](#) Marshall Plan to rebuild a war-torn Western Europe, laying the economic foundations for the formation of the NATO alliance just a year later. After a similar move from the wartime Allied headquarters in London to the White House in 1953, President Dwight D. Eisenhower helped complete a chain of military bastions along Eurasia's Pacific littoral by signing a series of mutual-security pacts — with South Korea in 1953, Taiwan in 1954, and Japan in 1960. For the next 70 years, that island chain would serve as the strategic hinge on Washington's global power, critical for both the defense of North America and dominance over Eurasia.

After fighting to conquer much of that vast continent during World War II, America's postwar leaders certainly knew how to defend their gains. For more than 40 years, their unrelenting efforts to dominate Eurasia assured Washington of an upper hand and, in the end, victory over the Soviet Union in the Cold War. To constrain the communist powers inside that continent, the U.S. ringed its 6,000 miles with [800 military bases](#), thousands of jet fighters, and three massive naval armadas — the 6th Fleet in the Atlantic, the 7th Fleet in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific, and, somewhat later, the 5th Fleet in the Persian Gulf.

Thanks to [diplomat George Kennan](#), that strategy gained the name “containment” and, with it, Washington could, in effect, sit back and wait while the Sino-Soviet bloc imploded through diplomatic blunder and military misadventure.

After the Beijing-Moscow split of 1962 and China's subsequent collapse into the chaos of **Mao Zedong's** Cultural Revolution, the Soviet Union tried repeatedly, if unsuccessfully, to break out of its geopolitical isolation — in the Congo, Cuba, Laos, Egypt, Ethiopia, Angola, and Afghanistan. In the last and most disastrous of those interventions, which Soviet leader **Mikhail Gorbachev** [came to term](#) “the bleeding wound,” the Red Army deployed 110,000 soldiers for nine years of brutal Afghan combat, hemorrhaging money and [manpower](#) in ways that would contribute to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

In that heady moment of seeming victory as the sole superpower left on planet Earth, a younger generation of Washington foreign-policy leaders, trained not on battlefields but in think tanks, took little more than a decade to let that unprecedented global power start to slip away. Toward the close of the Cold War era in 1989, Francis Fukuyama, an academic working in the State Department's policy planning unit, won instant fame among Washington insiders with his seductive phrase “[the end of history](#).” He argued that America's liberal world order would soon sweep up all of humanity on an endless tide of capitalist democracy. As he put it in a much-cited essay: “The triumph of the West, of the Western *idea*, is evident... in the total exhaustion of viable systemic alternatives to Western liberalism... seen also in the ineluctable spread of consumerist Western culture.”

The Invisible Power of Geopolitics

Amid such triumphalist rhetoric, **Zbigniew Brzezinski**, another academic sobered by more worldly experience, reflected on what he had learned about geopolitics during the Cold War as an adviser to two presidents, **Jimmy Carter** and **Ronald Reagan**. In his 1997 book *The Grand Chessboard*, Brzezinski [offered](#) the first serious American study of geopolitics in more than half a century. In the process, he warned that the depth of U.S. global hegemony, even at this peak of unipolar power, was inherently “shallow.”

For the United States and, he added, every major power of the past 500 years, Eurasia, home to 75% of the world's population and productivity, was always "the chief geopolitical prize." To perpetuate its "preponderance on the Eurasian continent" and so preserve its global power, Washington would, he warned, have to counter three threats: "the expulsion of America from its offshore bases" along the Pacific littoral; ejection from its "perch on the western periphery" of the continent provided by NATO; and finally, the formation of "an assertive single entity" in the sprawling center of Eurasia.

Arguing for Eurasia's continued post-Cold War centrality, Brzezinski drew heavily on the work of a long-forgotten British academic, Sir Halford Mackinder. In a 1904 essay that sparked the modern study of geopolitics, Mackinder [observed](#) that, for the past 500 years, European imperial powers had dominated Eurasia from the sea, but the construction of trans-continental railroads was shifting the locus of control to its vast interior "heartland." In 1919, in the wake of World War I, he also [argued](#) that Eurasia, along with Africa, formed a massive "world island" and offered this bold geopolitical formula: "Who rules the Heartland commands the World Island; Who rules the World Island commands the World." Clearly, Mackinder was about 100 years premature in his predictions.

But today, by combining Mackinder's geopolitical theory with Brzezinski's gloss on global politics, it's possible to discern, in the confusion of this moment, some potential long-term trends. Imagine Mackinder-style geopolitics as a deep substrate that shapes more ephemeral political events, much the way the slow grinding of the planet's tectonic plates becomes visible when volcanic eruptions break through the earth's surface. Now, let's try to imagine what all this means in terms of international geopolitics today.

China's Geopolitical Gambit

In the decades since the Cold War's close, China's increasing control over Eurasia clearly represents a fundamental change in that continent's geopolitics. Convinced that Beijing would play the global game by U.S. rules, Washington's foreign policy establishment made a major strategic miscalculation in 2001 by admitting it to the World Trade Organization (WTO). "Across the ideological spectrum, we in the U.S. foreign policy community," [confessed](#) two former members of the Obama administration, "shared the underlying belief that U.S. power and hegemony could readily mold China to the United States' liking... All sides of the policy debate erred." In little more than a decade after it joined the WTO, Beijing's annual exports to the U.S. grew nearly five-fold and its foreign currency [reserves soared](#) from just \$200 billion to an unprecedented \$4 trillion by 2013.

In 2013, drawing on those vast cash reserves, China's new president, **Xi Jinping**, [launched](#) a trillion-dollar infrastructure initiative to transform Eurasia into a unified market. As a steel grid of rails and petroleum pipelines began crisscrossing the continent, China ringed the tri-continental world island with a chain of [40 commercial ports](#) — from Sri Lanka in the Indian Ocean, around Africa's coast, to Europe from Piraeus, Greece, to Hamburg, Germany. In launching what soon became history's largest development project, 10 times the size of the Marshall Plan, Xi is consolidating Beijing's geopolitical dominance over Eurasia, while fulfilling Brzezinski's fear of the rise of "an assertive single entity" in Central Asia.

Unlike the U.S., China hasn't spent significant effort establishing military bases. While Washington still maintains some [750 of them](#) in 80 nations, Beijing has just one military base in Djibouti on the east African coast, a [signals intercept post](#) on Myanmar's Coco

Islands in the Bay of Bengal, a [compact installation](#) in eastern Tajikistan, and half a dozen small outposts in the South China Sea.

Moreover, while Beijing was focused on building Eurasian infrastructure, Washington was fighting two disastrous wars in Afghanistan and Iraq in a strategically inept bid to dominate the Middle East and its oil reserves (just as the world was beginning to transition away from petroleum to renewable energy). In contrast, Beijing has concentrated on the slow, stealthy accretion of investments and influence across Eurasia from the South China Sea to the North Sea. By changing the continent's underlying geopolitics through this commercial integration, it's winning a level of control not seen in the last thousand years, while unleashing powerful forces for political change.

Tectonic Shifts Shake U.S. Power

After a decade of Beijing's relentless economic expansion across Eurasia, the tectonic shifts in that continent's geopolitical substrate have begun to manifest themselves in a series of diplomatic eruptions, each erasing another aspect of U.S. influence. Four of the more recent ones might seem, at first glance, unrelated but are all driven by the relentless force of geopolitical change.

Image: Afghans stand in the sewage ditch outside Abbey Gate as they attempt to show documents to Marines processing evacuees on Aug. 25. Credit: Mirzahussain Sadid for Alive in Afghanistan



First came the sudden, unexpected collapse of the U.S. position in Afghanistan, forcing Washington to end its 20-year occupation in August 2021 with a humiliating withdrawal. In a slow, stealthy geopolitical squeeze play, Beijing had signed massive development deals with all the surrounding Central Asian nations, leaving American troops isolated there. To provide critical air support for its infantry, U.S. jet fighters [were often forced to fly](#) 2,000 miles from their nearest base in the Persian Gulf — an unsustainable long-term situation and unsafe for

troops on the ground. As the U.S.-trained Afghan Army collapsed and Taliban guerrillas drove into Kabul atop captured Humvees, the chaotic U.S. retreat in defeat became unavoidable.

Just six months later in February 2022, **President Vladimir Putin** massed an armada of armored vehicles loaded with 200,000 troops on Ukraine's border. If Putin is to be believed, his "special military operation" was to be a [bid to undermine](#) NATO's influence and [weaken](#) the Western alliance — one of Brzezinski's conditions for the U.S. eviction from Eurasia.

But first Putin visited Beijing to court President Xi's support, a seemingly tall order given China's decades of lucrative trade with the United States, [worth](#) a mind-boggling \$500 billion in 2021. Yet Putin scored a [joint declaration](#) that the two nations' relations were "superior to political and military alliances of the Cold War era" and a denunciation of "the further expansion of NATO."

As it happened, Putin did so at a perilous price. Instead of attacking Ukraine in frozen February when his tanks could have maneuvered off-road on their way to the Ukrainian capital Kyiv, he had to wait out Beijing's Winter Olympics. So, Russian troops invaded instead in muddy March, leaving his armored vehicles stuck in a 40-mile traffic jam on [a single highway](#) where the Ukrainians readily [destroyed](#) more than 1,000 tanks. Facing diplomatic isolation and European trade embargos as his defeated invasion degenerated into a set of vengeful [massacres](#), Moscow shifted much of its exports to China. That quickly raised bilateral [trade by 30%](#) to an all-time high, while reducing Russia to but another piece on Beijing's geopolitical chessboard.

Then, just last month, Washington found itself diplomatically marginalized by an utterly unexpected resolution of the sectarian divide that had long defined the politics of the Middle East. After signing a [\\$400-billion](#) infrastructure deal with Iran and making Saudi Arabia its [top oil supplier](#), Beijing was well positioned to broker a major [diplomatic rapprochement](#) between those bitter regional rivals, Shia Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia. Within weeks, the foreign ministers of the two nations sealed the deal with a deeply symbolic [voyage to Beijing](#) — a bittersweet reminder of the days not long ago when Arab diplomats paid court in Washington.

Finally, the Biden administration was [stunned](#) this month when Europe's preeminent leader, **Emmanuel Macron** of France, [visited Beijing](#) for a series of intimate tête-à-tête chats with China's President Xi. At the close of that extraordinary journey, which [won](#) French companies billions in lucrative contracts, Macron announced "a global strategic partnership with China" and promised he would not "take our cue from the U.S. agenda" over Taiwan. A spokesman for the Élysée Palace quickly released a pro forma clarification that "the United States is our ally, with shared values." Even so, Macron's Beijing declaration reflected both his [own long-term vision](#) of the European Union as an independent strategic player and that bloc's ever-closer economic ties to China

The Future of Geopolitical Power

Projecting such political trends a decade into the future, Taiwan's fate would seem, at best, uncertain. Instead of the "shock and awe" of aerial bombardments, Washington's default mode of diplomatic discourse in this century, Beijing prefers stealthy, sedulous geopolitical pressure. In building its island bases in the South China Sea, for example, it inched forward incrementally — first dredging, then building structures, next runways, and finally emplacing

anti-aircraft [missiles](#) — in the process avoiding any confrontation over its functional capture of an entire sea.

Lest we forget, Beijing has built its formidable economic-political-military power in little more than a decade. If its strength continues to increase inside Eurasia's geopolitical substrate at even a fraction of that head-spinning pace for another decade, it may be able to execute a deft geopolitical squeeze-play on Taiwan like the one that drove the U.S. out of Afghanistan. Whether from a [customs embargo](#), incessant naval patrols, or some other form of pressure, Taiwan might just fall quietly into Beijing's grasp.

Should such a geopolitical gambit prevail, the U.S. strategic frontier along the Pacific littoral would be broken, possibly pushing its Navy back to a "[second island chain](#)" from Japan to Guam — the last of Brzezinski's criteria for the true waning of U.S. global power. In that event, Washington's leaders could once again find themselves sitting on the proverbial diplomatic and economic sidelines, wondering how it all happened.

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