

# Ian Bremmer on the Future of American Superpower

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*by Alex Taylor, MALD '15*

The world is entering an “unstable and increasingly dangerous” period, spelling uncertainty for an American-led global order, according to Ian Bremmer, founder of the risk advisory firm Eurasia Group.

“Globalization surely is not slowing down. The movement of capital, people, and goods is only speeding up around the world, but Americanization is not,” Bremmer told an audience at Tufts University’s Fletcher School of Law & Diplomacy on March 25, hosted by SovereignNET and the Tufts Financial Network.

Bremmer believes the world is beginning “a period of geopolitical, creative destruction,” or what he terms “G-Zero.” This fragmentation is driven by four geopolitical factors: growing unilateralism in American foreign policy, incoherence in Europe, decline in Russia, and, most importantly, growing economic competition between the U.S. and China.

Discussing the first of these factors, Bremmer believes that America’s shift towards a more unilateral foreign policy has left many allies and other countries wondering what the United States stands for in the world.

“If you look at the tools of 21<sup>st</sup> century power that America is increasingly employing, they look very interventionist but they don’t look so multilateral,” Bremmer said, citing surveillance, drones, cyber, and the weaponization of finance as examples of opaque tools of statecraft that have left many U.S. allies and other countries asking questions about America’s role in the world.

While the U.S remains the world’s only superpower, Bremmer believes that America has lacked a truly strategic foreign policy since the end of the Cold War and will need to formulate a coherent, international vision if it wants to maintain a U.S.-led global order as China grows and Russia increasingly acts like a “revisionist power.”

"[Russian President Vladimir Putin] absolutely wants to bloody America's nose," Bremmer said, warning that Putin will continue on a revisionist path in Europe as long as he feels targeted by the West.

"The problem is that Putin is the most powerful individual on the planet. Do you believe that if he starts actually feeling like he is in a corner that he is not going to respond in a way that is detrimental to American interests directly?" Bremmer asked, cautioning that "red lines" do not exist for Putin in Eastern Europe.

"We're going to see lots of gray lines and of course they are going to be transgressed, and this going to cause a problem for the Americans," he added.

Despite Putin's ability to act as a spoiler, Bremmer argued that today's headline-grabbing crises, whether Crimea or ISIL, are a distraction from the most important long-term driver of geopolitical, creative destruction: "the challenge that China will pose to U.S.-led global standards when it becomes the world's largest economy."

At present, Bremmer does not believe that the Chinese are willing to "upset the apple cart for the foreseeable future on security issues," such as the East or South China Seas, Taiwan, and Hong Kong.

"Chinese President Xi Jinping understands that in the long-term the United States is doing a reasonable job in areas the Chinese have neither the capabilities nor the intention of playing big ball," such as providing "public goods on security in the Middle East."

Unlike near-term security issues, Bremmer sees economic competition between the two nations as ultimately "zero-sum," because the Chinese want to change "standards in their region to be more beneficial to China on the Internet, on telecoms, on accounting and things like that."

Within the next ten years, he continued, China will have sufficient economic influence that it could displace the current American-led order with "architecture that will have radically different conditionality." The first signs of this are coming into view with institutions such as the new Asian Investment Infrastructure Bank, which has already seen America's closest ally, Britain, join.

A Chinese-led global order on standards will not only hurt American interests but also paint a very different picture globally, according to Bremmer.

"If you think the Europeans are distracted now, the Chinese are going to be so much more distracted by all of the changes that are required in China over the next ten years than the Europeans have been. It doesn't mean that they won't have foreign policy,

but their foreign policy is going to be so focused on serving the needs of that domestic potential for instability and the need for security.”

While Bremmer believes that the U.S. has managed its relationship with China well so far, continuing to manage China’s rise will require strategic vision and compromise. The United States and China are not necessarily on the road towards confrontation.

“China is an increasingly complex country and there probably are some 50 million Chinese today who themselves would really like to see not just economic reform but real rule of law, real transparent accounting, a real independent judiciary, because they fear that otherwise their own companies’ interests and wealth will be stripped away by competing Chinese interests.”

While these business interests won’t force the Chinese government down a path of high-risk reforms, the United States, through initiatives like the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), could establish a more cooperative model for economic relationships in Asia, increasing business and culture interaction between China and the United States.

“Suddenly you could imagine a cadre of Chinese who are quite influential and actually want to a much more cooperative model and want to meet the Americans in the middle in terms of building architecture as opposed to competing architecture.”

However, Bremmer’s caveat to this vision for a global order that accommodates both nations would require the United States to accept compromises, which is difficult when America’s “willingness to see the world from the lens of other countries is virtually zero.”

Bremmer closed his remarks on this theme, calling upon the audience to think critically about the narrative of exceptionalism in American politics and what it may cost the United States in the long run.

“I think [exceptionalism] is a serious problem—not because American values are wrong, not because we’re not hypocritical frequently—purely from a power perspective. When the Russians or the Chinese have the ability to tell you no, then it behooves you to try to understand where they’re coming from and if you need to compromise and how.”

“Our politicians, both left and right, as we enter the 2016 cycle, every last one of them is saying things to make us feel better. As long as that continues we are going to see more geopolitical creative destruction on our watch.”