

Disunited Nations: The Scramble for Power in an Ungoverned World

Peter Zeihan

Zeihan's overarching thesis is that we have come to the end of an epoch. What's Next?

The Global Order maintained by American force of arms since the end of the Second World War is coming to an end. The United States is giving up its role as the world's policeman. It will no longer put the quietus on regional squabbles such as between Russia and Georgia or Turkey and Syria. It will no longer feel obliged to enforce freedom of navigation in support of world trade.

Zeihan attempts to address the question of what happens next, assessing each country's position in the world as Zbigniew Brezhnev did long ago in "The Grand Chessboard."

Here's a joke that an Argentine told me, slightly amended to suit the needs of this review.

Saint Peter was looking over his shoulder as God was creating the world, one country at a time. When he got to Argentina Saint Peter was concerned.

"God, don't you think you've gone overboard? You have given the Argentines a huge country with defensible natural borders on all sides. You have given them rich pampa lands that will grow almost anything, and immense fisheries along the Atlantic coast. You have given them a small and sustainable population. On top of that, you have given them lots of gas and oil. Don't you think it's unfair?"

God replied, "Peter, don't worry. I've given them a vast handicap. I populated it with Argentines."

That, in a nutshell, is my critique of this book. Zeihan does a pretty good job of cataloguing all of the physical attributes that contribute to a country success. His reasoning is similar to that of Jared Diamond in "Guns, Germs and Steel." He doesn't take the people into account.

Singapore sits on what was a disease-ridden swamp a couple of hundred years ago. Israel was an arid backwater under the Ottomans and British. What changed? They imported Chinese and Jews. The people make the difference.

Nature has not exactly blessed Japan, China and Korea. Nonetheless they dominate manufacturing and world trade.

Zeihan is trying to solve an immense equation excluding the most important variable – the human variable. The book is still worth reading because he gives a pretty good treatment of the other variables.

A country should be defensible. His metaphor is "crunchy on the outside, gooey on the inside." Protected by mountains and oceans, with fertile plains and navigable rivers holding it together on the inside. With no particularly threatening neighbors.

By this measure the United States is close to ideal. Oceans East and West. Though there are no significant geographical obstacles between it and its neighbors, those neighbors are not particularly fierce. The nation is tied together by huge river systems: Mississippi/Missouri/Ohio in the center, Hudson in the East and Columbia in the West.

He finds that France is the most favored nation in Europe, generally ringed by mountains and oceans, with fertile land and navigable rivers. Germany does well on rivers, though they are on the periphery rather than in the center.

Mountains break things up. Though China has a few great rivers, the Yangtze, Pearl and Yellow, the mountains along the coast tend to isolate coastal cities. Make the same observation about Brazil.

And so it goes throughout the book – a country by country analysis of the assets and liabilities that have governed countries' destinies throughout their histories and will continue to do so.

Changing technology changes these factors. As deepwater navigation improved, Spain, Portugal and England moved from the periphery of Europe to being highly relevant. The ability to import energy in the form of oil radically transformed Japan.

Zeihan discusses how these factors affected the history of the major nations of the earth and how they will play out.

He argues that the most favorably situated nations going forward are The United States, France, Argentina and Japan. On the other side, he imputes to Russia, China and Turkey almost insuperable problems.

Handicapping the world in this fashion is a very presumptuous exercise in the first place. Nonetheless, you will gain a lot of insights from reading the book. But don't put any serious money on it. People made the same arguments in favor of Argentina when I worked there 40 years ago. They have had the opportunity to go broke many times over. As the IMF, World Bank, and many private banks have done as well. My bet is that they will have the same opportunity going forward.

Zeihan's assessment of the demographic problem in France is that the native French are not enthusiastic about extending Libert ,  galit  and Fraternit  to their recent immigrants, who remain on the outside of society and are therefore resentful. He thinks that the United States will be successful because it enjoys a high birth rate, without taking into account the demographics of those births. Others would see the issues differently.

A lot of material worth thinking about. But don't take it too seriously.