



Rise of new centres of power in Eurasia: Implications for Turkish foreign policy



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ABSTRACT

The emergence of new centres of power in Eurasia has entailed a re-reading of Zbigniew Brzezinski's book which drew an analogy between the Eurasian supercontinent and a grand chessboard. Following the global financial crisis of the last few years, countries like China, Russia and India have started to project greater global political and economic influence. Eventually, Eurasia has become a geopolitical symbol signifying a multipolar world order unlike fifteen years ago when Brzezinski wrote his book in a world dominated by the US superpower. The changes in the geopolitical meaning of Eurasia have also been very important for Turkey for a number of reasons. First, it is a country that is strategically located at the meeting point of Europe and Asia. Second, its economy has grown at an impressive rate throughout the 2000s turning it into a rising Eurasian power. Third, its multi-dimensional foreign policy approach in the last decade has enabled it to develop closer relations with the Eurasian states.

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1. Introduction

In 1997, Zbigniew Brzezinski who once served as President Jimmy Carter's National Security Advisor published his seminal book *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostategic Imperatives* with the goal of formulating a long-term strategy for US foreign policy in the post-Cold War period. The central argument of the book was that the

US primacy in the world depended foremost on its success in maintaining political, economic and military dominance over the Eurasian supercontinent, which Brzezinski presumptuously depicted as "the chief geopolitical prize for America". Such a bold assertion, however, was actually based on the self-confidence of the US policymakers of the period who boasted a strong political standing and powerful economy at home and an unequalled political, economic, military and cultural influence abroad in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War.

Both the US power and prestige suffered a significant decline in the fifteen years that followed the publication of *The Grand Chessboard*. The September 11 attacks, two highly controversial and protracted wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and finally the breaking out of a sweeping financial crisis have raised ever-increasing questions about the future of US influence in world politics. The EU and Japan – the two other leading power centres of the Western financial

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system – were also negatively affected by the tectonic changes that took place in the global dynamics throughout the 2000s. Around the same time, new actors have started to become increasingly visible on the global scene. Four of the “emerging economies” of the 1990s – Brazil, Russia, India and China – in particular were included in a special group called “the BRICs” due to their advanced economic development. Not only are they expected to lead the world economy by 2050, they also enjoy increasing influence in world politics as they currently account for more than forty percent of the world population.

Since the three members of the BRIC grouping are geographically located in the supercontinent of Eurasia, the policymakers and scholars have been compelled to reconsider the geostrategic significance of Brzezinski’s “grand chessboard” in the new millennium. This article seeks to explore the changing meaning of Eurasia in world politics by critically reviewing Brzezinski’s theory in light of the new global changes. As the centre of gravity in the world economy continues to shift from the West to the East and as the international system is becoming increasingly multipolar due to the rise of new powers, Eurasia seems to have become identified with the idea of a geopolitical balance or alternative against the West. Turkey is one of the countries that is affected the most by this new geopolitical reality not only because it is geographically located at the centre of the Eurasian supercontinent, but also due to its decision particularly in the last decade to develop its strategic relations with the rising Eurasian powers. In this regard, the article will also try to reveal the dynamics that have shaped the Turkish governments’ geopolitical outlook towards Eurasia in light of the current changes taking place in the global political and economic balances.

2. Revisiting the grand chessboard: From unipolarity to multipolarity

Eurasia is the landmass that shelters more than seventy percent of the world’s population and covers almost one tenth of the Earth’s surface. As a geographical term, it was first coined in late nineteenth century to define the supercontinent comprising Europe and Asia, which until that period have been generally treated as two separate continents. In geopolitics, it has been associated with an even more profound meaning as it is frequently referred to as the symbol of land power against sea power. British geographer Sir Halford J. Mackinder is probably the single most important figure who conceptualized Eurasia in traditional geopolitical thinking through his theory of the “Heartland” – the northern-central part of Eurasia which he had initially called the “geopolitical pivot of history” (Mackinder, 1904). According to Mackinder, a state could only achieve world hegemony by acquiring geopolitical control over the heart of the Eurasian supercontinent (Mackinder, 1944: 113).

It is believed that Mackinder’s geopolitical vision greatly influenced the world politics of the twentieth century, since “the continuing struggle for Eurasian mastery was the geopolitical essence of the First World War, the Second World War, and the Cold War ... [and] the Great Power struggles of the twenty-first century will likely repeat this pattern” (Sempa, 2002: 20–21). This has also been the main

theme of Brzezinski’s book which likened the Eurasian supercontinent to a “grand chessboard” – an immense geopolitical stage over which the great powers continuously fought for political and economic control (Brzezinski, 1997: xiv). Drawing heavy inspiration from the Heartland theory, *The Grand Chessboard* has become a major influence on the Western policymakers’ and scholars’ geopolitical imagination of Eurasia in the following decade.

The novelty of Brzezinski’s book did not only lie in its representation of Eurasia as a geopolitical battlefield for the world’s leading states, but also its powerful emphasis on the emergence of the US as the most influential actor over the political and economic balances of the supercontinent. Brzezinski believed that the appearance of a number of unprecedented conditions in the post-Cold War period required a thorough reassessment of the geopolitical state of world affairs. The most significant condition he thought was the rise of the US as the only comprehensive global superpower that enjoyed clear supremacy in all four domains of power (military, economic, technological and cultural). For Brzezinski, this meant that for the first time in history a non-Eurasian power became the globally preeminent state and controlled the globe’s central arena (Brzezinski, 1997: xiii). Viewing Eurasia as the “chief geopolitical prize”, he seemed to be convinced that the end of the Cold War granted the US a huge advantage over other powers to achieve political and economic domination over the supercontinent (Brzezinski, 1997: 30).

It may be claimed that Brzezinski’s depiction of Eurasia was at the same time greatly influenced by the theories of “unipolarity” which were popular among the international relations scholars of the immediate post-Cold War period. Unipolarity, which refers to an international system where a single state possesses capabilities that far exceed those of any other state, was an academic response to the collapse of the Soviet Union which left the US as the only superpower in the world. Its principal exponent was political analyst Charles Krauthammer who drew attention to the unipolar character of the post-Cold War world politics and claimed that the centre of global power became the unchallenged superpower of the US (Krauthammer, 1990/91).

Although Krauthammer’s views were later criticized by prominent international relations scholars including Christopher Layne (1993), Kenneth Waltz (1993) and Charles Kupchan (1998) who all thought unipolarity was only temporary and would be sooner or later replaced either by a bipolar or multipolar international system, the US continued its unrivalled supremacy in world politics throughout the 1990s, despite the presence of other notable actors like China, Japan, and the EU. It is interesting to view in this regard that even when political scientists like Samuel Huntington took notice of these actors and revised Krauthammer’s theory into something called “unimultipolarity” at the turn of the millennium, they still found it necessary to underline the superior position of the US within the international system (Huntington, 1999: 36).

It was not until the second half of the 2000s that some cardinal questions were raised about the sustainability of the unipolar structure of world politics. Particularly after 2008, there has been an intensified debate about the decline of the US primacy vis-à-vis the growing political,

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