

DIS UNITED NATIONS

*The Scramble for
Power in an
Ungoverned World*

PETER ZEIHAN



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BUSINESS

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**To the mentors who advised me that while
it is important to be bold and brash,
the smartest thing I could ever do is
find the smartest person in the room and just . . .
listen.**

**Candice Young
Robert Pringle
Susan Eisenhower
Matthew Baker**



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INTRODUCTION: MOMENTS OF TRANSITION

At the end of the last millennium I found myself in a moment of transition.

Just after Christmas 1999, I drop-kicked my relationship, my job, and my life in the nation's capital, loaded up everything I owned into a rickety SUV, and took off for a fresh start in Austin, Texas. On January 10, 2000, I was a shiny new staffer at a place called Stratfor.com, at the time a media- and geopolitics-analysis house. My new boss was . . . a piece of work. Matt Baker was a wiry ball of over-caffeinated angst and passion, stuffed into a sharp-edged personality that oozed detailed knowledges (not opinions, *knowledges*) as regards Europe and Russia and China and Turkey and so on.

As my recent work in DC had involved quite a bit of Europe and Russia and China and Turkey, clearly I had things to contribute. Matt and I clashed openly, vitriolically, and often. In doing so we developed a deep mutual respect and became good friends.

One night over too many adult beverages we discussed moments of transition of the less personal, and more global, type.

Matt's core thesis was that the entire fabric of the international system was based on the American alliance network, which in turn depended upon a nearly feudal mix of American security

commitments and deference to American desires. We back you up in your backyard where it matters to you, and in exchange, you back us up where it matters to us. Challenges from the allies had started to pop up after the Berlin Wall fell, triply so as many of the allies sensed the end of history with the 1990s Russian collapse, and disdained the screwiness of American foreign policy in places like Kosovo and Iraq. Matt's contention was that as the fear of nuclear Armageddon faded from memory into history, the Americans would have a harder time holding the allies together. In his mind 2020 would look a lot like 2003 with countries resisting American power, but the Americans would continue to muster suitable motivation to (successfully) pressure everyone into maintaining some version of the status quo.

In other words, everyone would keep working with America, because the most powerful country in history would want to keep it that way. It wasn't going to be quite as chaotic as herding cats, but it would be close.

In contrast, I felt that the alliance network, bereft of the security demands of the Cold War, had slid into a new role. Instead of defending the allies on the plains of Northern Europe or in the seas of East Asia, it instead was spreading security to the global commons. This was becoming an end unto itself that was superseding the old logic of alliance. The root of economic growth is physical security, and if the Cold War ended *and* the alliance could hold, the nearly automatic result would be a transformational boom global in scope that was both economic and technological. In my mind, 2020 would look a lot like 1950, albeit without the whole fear-of-nuclear-war thing. The spreading wealth, by force of information and capital flow, would grind down what less modern, less democratic pockets of resistance remained.

In other words, the world order would keep going, because unraveling it could mean unwinding decades of economic penetration and deny billions access to hamburgers and cell phones.

Who would want that? It wasn't quite going to be *Star Trek*, but it would be close.

I was Stratfor's unofficial economist. Matt was the gun guy. Most of our friction came from arguing over the power of the checkbook versus the power of Smith & Wesson. Yet so did our greatest collaborations.

After a bunch of backing and forthing and what-ifying and puzzling over oddly colored mixers, Matt asked point-blank, "So what happens to my 'suitable motivation' and your 'transformational boom' when the Americans change their minds about their alliance? No alliance system can last without a common threat." As the night's seventh drink soaked in, we both *hmmmed* as we contemplated the dark, horrifying possibility that we might *both* be wrong. I'm pretty sure we cracked the code a few minutes later, but our mutual blackouts robbed us of the pertinent knowledge. Instead, as often was the case with Matt, I was left with more questions than answers.

Ever since, both at Stratfor and beyond, my professional life has been about building up enough understandings to close out that long-ago conversation. *Disunited Nations*, nearly twenty years in the making, is my best shot.

Disunited Nations is about what happens when major powers decide they are better off competing instead of cooperating. It is a book about what happens when the global Order isn't just falling apart but when many leaders feel their country will be better off tearing it down. We're going to look at the rise of Trump and leaders like him. We're going to think through Saudi Arabia and Iran's competition to rule (or misrule) the Middle East. We're going to look at how we match farmers to hungry mouths, minerals to manufacturing, oil to gas tanks.

Through these stories, we're going to keep two big ideas in mind.

The first is that geography might not be destiny, but it is damn

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close. It is the biggest factor in determining how we act and how we live and fundamentally who we are. Live in a desert and *bam!* you're going to fight to protect what little you have. Live on a coast and *bam!* you're going to eat a lot of foreign food. Live in a dense urban area and *bam!* you're probably not going to have an issue with Tongans, Thais, Tunisians, or transvestites. Live in the mountains and *bam!* you're going to be a bit . . . persnickety when folks from other regions roll through. As we were geographers at heart, in this Matt and I were in complete agreement.

Most of us consistently misread economies and conflicts because we don't take geography into account. It's so clear that we are not like the next town over, and city folk are not like country folk, but when we start trying to explain the world, geography often slips our mind. We misinterpret what's happening in the news, and think China is holding on to Hong Kong out of stubbornness or the fights about the American-Mexican border are only about race. Geography shapes everything. Including *us*. What's been different in recent decades is that geography has been suspended somewhat, enabling deep global economic interconnections. We've come to see those connections as a great strength; they are turning into weakness before our very eyes.

The second big idea is that *Disunited Nations* is being published now in 2020, not a few years from now, because the world has run out of time. That moment of transition when the Order will come crashing down is almost upon us.

It may not seem this way to Americans who have been engaged in some degree of warfare continuously since 1999 and had decades of duck-and-cover drills before that, but the world since 1946 is *as calm as the world has ever been*. In creating their anti-Soviet Cold War alliance, the Americans by hook, crook, carrot, and stick brought every significant power of the past five centuries together under a single banner: Norway, Sweden, Spain, Portugal, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, Greece, Turkey, Iran, Japan, China—all of them and more allied in

various degrees of formality against the Soviet Union. If they were to be fighting the Soviets, it wouldn't be particularly productive if they were also fighting one another. The American alliance didn't so much end history as freeze it in place.

Most Americans are broadly familiar with the European side of the equation—after centuries of conflict within the Continent the guns fell nearly silent, courtesy of the American security system—but the impact on Asia was even bigger. China and India did not have a *single* century in the past two millennia when they were not at war within themselves or under assault from a foreign power. Instead, from the American-enforced end of British colonial rule in India in the late 1940s and China's joining of the American-led alliance against the Soviets in the 1970s, the two have had the most security and wealth in their long histories.

As the decades rolled on, the Soviets ran out of gas. The American network expanded deep into the nonaligned countries of the developing world and the former Soviet Empire. But the Americans never adapted their overall strategies to a post-Cold War world, and so never built a case at home or abroad for their alliance in a world without the Soviet Union. It turns out—both to the detriment of Matt's and my own pet theories—the 1990s and 2000s were less a moment of transition and more a world on autopilot, with an old security strategy enabling some gangbusters growth. That gangbusters growth is what most of us think of as normal. It is not. It is nothing more than a moment in time made possible by some strategic inertia.

But now Matt's "suitable motivation" is over. The Americans *have* changed their mind about their alliance and *have* turned sharply more insular. There is no effort to ride herd. The W Bush administration abused the allies, the Obama administration ignored the allies, and the Trump administration insulted the allies. And so America's list of allies has shrunk from nearly everyone to the potentially useful to the obviously useful to the obviously loyal to those with little choice. In a world without America, the

questions become: Who will still benefit from some lingering connection to the Americans? And who can go it alone?

My “transformational boom” is over as well. Without the global security the Americans guaranteed, global trade and global energy flows *cannot* continue. Seven decades’ worth of global industrialization and modernization are not simply at risk, the very pillars of civilization are cracking. In a world without stability, the questions become: Who was most dependent upon the world that was and so will fall? And who was most restrained by the old Order and so will soar?

The world we know is collapsing. Entire countries are watching in horror as what makes them possible—global access, imported energy, foreign markets, American troops—slips through their fingers. For many, there just isn’t enough access or energy or markets or security for them to maintain what they have, much less grow. In a world of want, the questions become: What do countries need to survive in a scrambled world? Who will shoot to get what they need? And who gets shot *at*?

Not all competitions and scarcities are created equal. Nearly all food is dependent upon global trade, whether in the form of imported inputs or the foodstuffs themselves. For decades, the world’s experiences with famine have been crises of distribution, the inability to match foods with mouths. Global breakdown guts food supply itself. The security concerns of the past two decades were largely limited to terrorism, but the tools necessary to counter terror are radically different from those needed to protect agricultural supply chains. Fewer door-to-door manhunts, more beyond-the-horizon naval patrols. In a world of different scarcities and different tools, the questions become: Where will trade patterns hold and where will they collapse? Which ones are worth fighting over? Which tools will be brought to bear? Are we on the verge of a mess of overlapping and interlocking naval competitions for something as basic as the right to *eat*?

Both Matt and I were wrong, and for the same reasons. We

both suffered from a failure of imagination, believing in our respective, simplistic visions that the world of tomorrow would be some variation of the world we knew. The break is sharper. We stand at the end of the era that began with the Cold War. It'll be less like the messiness of the early 2000s or the raw potential of the 1950s, and more a disastrous combination of the battle royales and displacements of the 1870s against the economic backdrop of the 1930s. It. Will. Suck. A mad scramble for the scraps of the era just ending. Compared with the safety and wealth of the past several decades, it may seem like the literal end of the world. But the end of an era isn't the same as the end of history. Something new is coming. Something that, historically speaking, is far more "normal" than anything the Americans created. Just keep in mind that "normal" is far from synonymous with "comfortable," much less "favorable."

Disunited Nations is my effort to sketch out that "normal" future. To answer these questions and more. To identify the countries that will rise to dominate the human condition, and perhaps provide a glimpse as to what that condition will be, both in the time during and after this moment of transition. In the pages that follow, I'm going to argue that thinking the future will look more like the year 2000 than the year 1900 has negative effects in almost every sphere of our lives. On a grand scale, many of us are betting on the wrong horses. France will lead the new Europe, not Germany. We should be worried about Saudi Arabia, not Iran. We should be thinking about how to remedy mass starvation in China, not counter its economic and military clout. As we look at how each country has benefited from the Order, and what each brings to the table in a new world, these conclusions will seem obvious, rather than controversial.

In Chapters 1 through 4, we'll take a whirlwind tour of the past and present: the various epochs of history, combined with a quick and dirty review of how to run a global empire and what makes countries tick. Chapters 5 through 13 are dedicated to the

major powers—both those we all *know* are the countries of the future (but in reality won't be able to hack it), as well as those we barely think about that will rise to rule their respective roosts.

Capping off each country-themed chapter is a bit of a report card. A cheat sheet, if you will. A few distilled lines of information on each country's guts and outlook to help readers filter the news and paranoia and fluff of the day to generate a more accurate appreciation for the country's potential and limitations. For those of you who like to share books with people who don't like to read, I've taken the liberty of refining the chapter's thoughts into a single, solitary word.

Finally, we'll end with a pair of chapters on the United States. The Americans might not be running things any longer, but it isn't like they're disappearing into a black hole. The United States will retain—by far—more power than any player, past or present. So it's important to understand both domestic limitations on Americans' capacity as well as the sorts of issues and allies they will still care about. In all cases, you can grab full, sharable versions of each and every graphic in this book at my website, www.Zeihan.com.

I knew Matt for only three years. In 2003 he was suddenly, horribly taken from us. I miss his passion. His brutal honesty. He would have *hated* the first draft of this book. He would have ripped it apart. I would have been so pissed at him. Then, we would have rebuilt it. Together. It would have been awesome!

This version is still pretty good.