



The Accidental Superpower: The Next Generation of American Preeminence and the Coming Global Disorder

Peter Zeihan

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In the bestselling tradition of *The World Is Flat* and *The Next 100 Years*, THE ACCIDENTAL SUPERPOWER will be a much discussed, contrarian, and eye-opening assessment of American power.

Near the end of the Second World War, the United States made a bold strategic gambit that rewired the international system. Empires were abolished and replaced by a global arrangement enforced by the U.S. Navy. With all the world's oceans safe for the first time in history, markets and resources were made available for everyone. Enemies became partners.

We think of this system as normal—it is not. We live in an artificial world on borrowed time.

In THE ACCIDENTAL SUPERPOWER, international strategist Peter Zeihan examines how the hard rules of geography are eroding the American commitment to free trade; how much of the planet is aging into a mass retirement that will enervate markets and capital supplies; and how, against all odds, it is the ever-ravenous American economy that—alone among the developed nations—is rapidly approaching energy independence. Combined, these factors are doing nothing less than overturning the global system and ushering in a new (dis)order.

For most, that is a disaster-in-waiting, but not for the Americans. The shale revolution allows Americans to sidestep an increasingly dangerous energy market. Only the United States boasts a youth population large enough to escape the sucking maw of global aging. Most important, geography will matter more than ever in a de-globalizing world, and America's geography is simply sublime.

The Accidental Superpower: The Next Generation of American Preeminence and the Coming Global Disorder Details

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Ciera Harris says

All my homies need to read this! It is super informative and frankly speaks straight truth. What Zeihan does is put together all the puzzle pieces of political events taking place around the world into a cohesive puzzle—displaying a picture of how the strifes of nation states will ultimately not hurt America. America will be just fine. I say that with confidence, now. As Zeihan said in the end, “we don’t have to do a damn thing,” the U.S. will be A-OK. Zeihan also said that we will have a lot of time for “navel-gazing.” Good!

Eric says

Engaging read ascribing global events to inexorable forces of geography and climate, aka geopolitics. Books gives enough statistical support for surface plausibility without overwhelming the narrative with numbers. The underlying economic and demographic data is referenced sufficiently that the basic claims of the book can be checked by those compulsive enough to do so. The book does have an air of inevitability, though not as obvious as Jared Diamond in *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*. Even though the forces identified by Peter Zeihan function beyond the direct control of politicians, militaries and societies, they are not so overwhelming as to predetermine all history. But, the forces identified are in play now and any business or government planner would do well to peruse the book and the issues raised.

I gave the book 5 stars despite one apparent short-coming. Radical Islam is given only a couple of pages, late in the book, and only in other contexts. Islam arose in the 7th century and motivated a few Arab horsemen to conquer, in the name of Allah, the Middle East, Persia, Central Asia and Spain. Those conquests did not follow the reasons given in the book for any nation to conquer that particular area of the world. Also, when the West temporarily came back to reconquer [sorry, PC crowd, but the Islamists started this one] Palestine (aka the Crusades) back from the then Jihadists, there was no geopolitical reason to do so, but only religious reasons (and perhaps the desire to get out a bit and see the world).

The book is a quick and easy read and is a pleasant alternative to internet news websites, and the current political debates.

Clayton Hauck says

Peter Zeihan succeeds at providing us with a hugely enjoyable read on what he thinks will shape the world in the coming decades. While he very well might be accurate, one must consider this is a complicated world and not one ruled entirely by geopolitics. My main takeaway was to rethink the forces which made this world what it is today. Having only been alive for 32 years, it's easy for me to forget or cast aside the seemingly-infinite human energy that shaped the planet we currently live on — cultivation, civilization, discovery, innovation, war, nature, etc. We live not in a static world but one of fluidity. The recent period of humanity has proven to be a more stable one, arguably thanks in part to post-WWII United States military supremacy

and global trade. The US, however, seems to be slowly turning away from engagement with the rest of the world, perhaps resulting in a world with no overarching force of stability. While it's too soon to know how this will play out, Zeihan argues it will have massive consequences.

While a few other books I've read recently (Ian Bremmer's Superpower and Henry Kissinger's World Order) expand on this topic, Accidental Superpower does more to point out the likely consequences of changing demography. Countries such as Japan, Russia and China, he thinks, will fare poorly as populations age and production declines. As an example: with far too few ethnic Russians, the state itself will face possible implosion, which Zeihan argues is a reason for recent Russian aggression into regions previously included in the Soviet Union. While it's again impossible to know the extent of how aging and declining populations will fare in the coming decades, I fear we may be in for a reckoning much like the current global financial crisis only on a potentially much larger scale. It's easy to be pessimistic and borderline paranoid while considering these possibilities, however, a citizen of the US may take some comfort in Zeihan's assessment that the United States will fare immensely better than most of the rest of the planet as geographic forces once again take control of global populations; geography being the reason he thinks of the US as an "accidental" superpower to begin with. In short, the US is blessed with far more navigable rivers than anywhere else on earth along with oceans on both sides creating a vast buffer and easy navigation, this in addition to better demographic trends, natural defenses and huge amounts of arable land.

The argument against this book might be that this planet has moved beyond one controlled largely by geography and that cutting-age weapons, advanced communication and easy transportation render the globe one controlled by anyone with best access to these things. Perhaps, as humans tend to do, this thinking is over-confident and we don't have as much control of our destinies as we'd like to think. Either way, it's shaping up to be an interesting time to be alive — if you're into geopolitics at least.

Chad Manske says

Well researched and argued, Peter Zeihan delivers an intriguing argument of US preeminence and bounty resting on the premise of its geography, geology, form of government and other factors that by accident allow it to survive as a superpower for many decades to come. Even if you don't buy the premise, the facts underpinning the logical assumptions allow even pessimistic doubters to question their doubt. The Bretton Woods Agreement of 1944 that establishes the modern economic order that has led to the interrelationship of international finance and economies forms the basis and glue that reinforce the other factors above. A fantastic read and review of the world powers!

Oleg Zhoglo says

I think Zeihan hits the nail on the head in some cases, but very often misses the mark.

Zeihan's key theory- that geography plays a huge influence on a country's development, is a great framework through which to view and analyze history. Especially interesting were his views on capital flows in an economy and the key differences between capital rich and capital poor nations. In a country with poor geography capital is required to develop the land, this means less economic opportunities and upward mobility for the working classes- you can't simply take a piece of fertile land and try to start your own farm business, you need capital to make land suitable for farming. But I think he truly shines in the discussion of

demographics, the impact that various age groups have on the economy and how the demographic situation in different countries will affect their economic and political future.

Zeihan's theory that the equity market will see declines when baby boomers are done growing their capital and begin pulling money out of risky investments (equities) to preserve their nest eggs in bonds is an easy one to act on. The prudent thing to do would be to buy bonds now while the equity market is on fire and bonds are seen as too conservative and are trading at low values. Another prudent move would be to reduce exposure to international equities- as all risky assets will be impacted by the boomer flight to safety. A third option could be an interesting one- cryptocurrencies. If the next 10-15 years sees international and financial upheaval, alternative currencies that are easily moved across borders and potentially hidden from overzealous governments can become an attractive proposition.

The biggest problem with the book occurs when the author claims that the current economic order will collapse because the USA will exit the world free trade system and stop guaranteeing energy supplies for our allies. He gives the following scenario of how this will occur:

1. The free trade system created under the Bretton Woods agreement allowed all American allies to engage in free trade and have access to markets and energy under the American protection umbrella
2. America's economic system isn't designed around exports, shale makes the US energy independent, so even access to the Middle East oil supplies is irrelevant to the USA- yet the USA bears the brunt of the cost.
3. Aging baby boomers pull capital out of the markets, causing a worldwide credit crunch and economic slowdown, this will mean the USA will have to cut spending and will no longer be able to secure the existing economic order that gives it no benefits
4. Collapse of free trade and free access to markets along with aging societies will rekindle economic and military competition for resources among nations

The biggest problem with this theory is the idea that the USA gets nothing from the current economic system because we're not an export economy, thus we will cut funding for the maintenance of this system once the full impact of the boomer retirement hits. Yes, we are not an export economy, however we benefit from the current world order in several key ways:

1. Corporate profits
2. Access to debt markets
3. Access to cheap goods
4. We can still get pulled into global affairs

Foreign markets make up a large portion of American corporate revenues- according to S&P, 44% of S&P 500 member company sales come from outside the US. Some sectors like technology and heavy equipment makers have over half their sales come from abroad (Caterpillar is at 60% for example). Since 1993 exports of cars and parts to Mexico has gone from \$10 billion to \$70 billion. Trade with China has grown by 200%. American companies have over \$1 trillion in foreign revenues stashed abroad. These corporate interests would likely lobby hard against any American exit from the existing global system.

America's reputation for stability gives our government privileged access to the global debt markets, that is, we can usually borrow at lower rates than the rest of the world ("usually" means in normal political circumstances, our current political upheaval has made the interest rate higher for 10 year US bonds than

their German equivalents). Foreigners own about 33% of US government debt (according to the US Treasury). This cheap access to debt financing will become more important as baby boomer retirement puts a strain on our public pension obligations.

Access to cheap goods and labor has benefited the American consumer and certain types of workers. According to The Economist, clothing costs today as much as it did in 1985, home furnishings the same as they did 35 years ago- on average Americans save \$250 a year on trade with China alone. High skilled and college educated workers earn as much as a 50% premium thanks to more specialization and higher productivity at home (this premium was 30% in the 1970s). Of course, this increase in wage premium means that the wage gap has grown between the winners in this system and the low skilled and uneducated, but this trend doesn't invalidate the main point that there is a clear benefit to Americans from participation in the global order (as long as the group that's benefiting is larger and more powerful than the group being hurt, then the system will remain in place- it is in the interest of the "winners" to make sure that the "losers" also see the same benefits).

The choice to exit or remain in the global system may not be up to the USA. Geographic isolation doesn't mean that by removing itself from the world order, the US would automatically avoid the chaos that Zeihan predicts will be left behind. In a world of ICBMs and cyber warfare, an ocean will not protect you against threats. If the loss of previously mentioned economic benefits won't be enough to keep the USA from maintaining the current system, there could be several things that other world actors can do to keep the USA in:

Pat Rolston says

This is a MUST read to enhance anyone's perspective regarding the profound effects that demographics and geography have on geopolitics. One can argue the conclusions, but that is the fun in having an author provide suppositions as to how the world will look in the next 50 years. The data and analysis is compelling and entertaining in such a way as to leave the reader wanting more of this authors insights. He is a good writer with a profoundly interesting perspective that will enrich anyone's worldview.

Douglas Hackney says

Full disclosure: Like the author, I grew up in Iowa and live in Austin. Although those close to me will recognize many recurring themes between what they have heard (endlessly) from me for the last couple of decades and the content of this book, this is not my pseudonym and I did not write this book.

TLDR: This is a good read and is recommended.

Who will profit from reading this book:

Parents, business people, policy makers, teachers, young adults.

Downsides:

Like many bright, observant people who are not personally involved in technology or who have never spent

a lot of time on the ground in various regions of the world, the author plays fast and loose with some assertions. In this case, he attributes too much near- to mid-term impact to additive manufacturing (3D printing) and makes armchair-quarterback level assumptions about other cultures.

Secondly, he suffers the same fundamental conceit as economists: the assumption of rational actors. Here, the author assumes that nation states and the people who control them will act in a rational manner most, if not all, of the time.

Unfortunately, history does not support this contention. The variables at play here, including the ability to use nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction, are completely absent from his analysis and projected outcomes.

The latter shortcoming undermines many of his projections for the general shape and outcome of the next few decades. While I am in violent, vociferous agreement with his foundational arguments related to demographics and logistics, his lack of acknowledgment of historically-proven, irrational human behavior undermines many of his primary projections.

In particular, he assumes that most of the rest of the world will spiral into decline and disarray and yet be perfectly fine with the U.S. reigning untouched as a shining tower of favorable demographics, logistics and ocean-spanning power projection.

Again, history does not support this contention. History shows us that nation states and stateless actors that are under existential threat, much less on the slippery slope of dissolution, will lash out with every tool at their disposal.

In this modern age those tools include weapons that make short order of carrier battle groups, cities and, in the case of nuclear weapons, wide areas of agricultural production.

Lastly, it requires some real perseverance to get past the "U.S.A.! U.S.A.!" level of boosterism, self-promotion and fundamentalist exceptionalism in the early chapters and into the more meaty and rewarding sections. As such, this work functions perfectly as Holy Writ for those so inclined. Unfortunately, that cohort is probably the least likely to fully comprehend and understand the implications of what follows in later chapters.

Upsides:

The author presents an accessible, cogent and well formed argument for the society-, culture- and history-shaping power of demographics, logistics and energy.

The book includes well designed maps, graphics and illustrations to drive home the lessons in the text. In fact, it is worth buying the book simply to skim the illustrations.

The author writes clearly and in terms that non-wonks and non-policy analysts can understand.

The reader will come away with a well founded understanding of how the world, and the societies and nations that make up the world, are determined, formed, rise and fall primarily due to demographic, logistic and energy factors.

In addition, the reader will be equipped with a set of projected outcomes for the next decade or two that have

at least a reasonable chance of being realized, absent the factors noted above.

For many readers this will be a revealing, perhaps transcendental, book, especially if it is their first exposure to these building-block components of societies, nations and regions.

For all readers this work should help to inform their tactical and strategic choices for the near- and mid-term future.

Conclusion:

If you want to understand how the world got to where it is and where it is likely to go in the next few decades, you could do a lot worse than investing a few hours in this book. You will gain more from that investment than any 400 hours of watching screaming heads shout past each other on television, listening to rants on the radio or in perusing echo chambers of online "we are the intelligent ones" partisan news sources.

Many people make a lifetime out of seeking to prove hidden, secret conspiracies to explain the state of the world, what it is and how it got to be this way. The author does an excellent job of teaching the elementary components that actually drive human history, including what will cause most of the events that will shape the history of the next few decades.

Alex says

10% and already the blatant platitudes and omissions of convenience are too much. This book would make Thomas Friedman's mustache blush. Bail.

Clif Hostetler says

This book provides a thorough discussion of how geography and demographics have effected nations in history and the present, and where they will lead in the future. The main premise of this book is that during the cold war the United States was motivated by fear of Communism to support free global trade leading to financial prosperity among western nations, but conditions have now changed and in the future the USA will withdraw from the world stage, global trade will decrease, and nations of the world will need to seek their own best interests without the American defense umbrella. The USA is free to pursue this changed policy because it is energy independent (thanks to fracking technology) and no longer fears international Communism.

In other words this book says the world is going to hell in a hand basket, but the USA is sitting pretty and can thrive on its own. The book's discussion goes from country to country and elaborates on all the problems they will be facing in the future. It admits that the USA will have some of the same problems, but compared to other countries it is in much better shape than any of the other countries of the world.

It's interesting to note that this book was published in 2014 which predates Trump's election and that some of the book's predictions are already coming to pass through Trump's disinterest in international agreements and responsibilities.

The following is a link to an excerpt from *Accidental Superpower* in which the author describes the Bretton Woods system:

<https://t.co/redirect?url=https%3A%2F...>

In the above excerpt and in the book the author gives the impression that the Bretton Woods system has been the guiding principle of world trade since World War II. In fact it ended in 1971 when the dollar was taken off the gold standard as described in the this Wikipedia article. (See Message 6 under Comments below for clarification on multiple meanings attributed to "Bretton Woods System.")

The following graph is from that article.

As the book describes its predicted future global disorder, it describes many cases where border adjustments will be made. One of the book's more astounding predictions is that Russia's aggression in eastern Ukraine is an indication of more to come. The illustration below shows the preferred borders for Russia, and the book makes the case that they will need to pursue these borders in order to survive the coming future disorder.

Wesley Roth says

After surging to a bestseller on Amazon this spring, I picked up Peter Zeihan's book, to learn why he thinks the next generation will feature "American preeminence and global disorder." This book is a geopolitical junkie's dream. As a former STRATFOR analyst, Zeihan brings his talent to book form covering a wide range of topics: from the demographic roller coaster to shale to Alberta (!) and Mexico to China to many other countries and conflicts and geopolitical trends. I found myself reading the book with a highlighter, taking notes as if in a class with a professor. Some of the history and ideas are well known, but many areas the author covers are contrarian to current political and geopolitical "norms".

For instance, Zeihan believes that without addresses the southern border crisis and the Mexican drug war, our country will eventually face the "most horrible conflict they have ever fought" and the "single greatest geopolitical threat" to the American way of life. If a person is feeling down about our country, the author's case that because of Bretton Woods, along with geographic location, balance of transport, deepwater navigation and industrialization, along with the shale boom, America's future is bright, not dark, hence the title of the book. Every chapter the reader is taken through step by step through many geopolitical trends or countries in crisis, with a brief history, current day developments and what the future may or likely hold. Zeihan's book is full of detail, maps and demographic charts to help the reader understand the analysis. This is a great book to read if you are concerned about the future of our country and our world.

Michael Douglas says

3.5 stars - This made for a thought provoking, very entertaining and often alarming read. I tend to have the feeling with books about geopolitics that the author suffers from "man with a hammer" syndrome and this

was no exception. Bretton Woods, population pyramids and whether a country has a dense network of navigable rivers will seemingly seal its fate over the coming decades. To sum it up, if you're outside of North America you're in for a bumpy ride. I would have liked for it to take more into account technological advances and global warming (an afterthought, in the appendix). If any of the wide-ranging and detailed predictions about the future leading to 2030 come true, then I will revert and increase my rating (if I've survived the predicted chaos).

Janet Lavine says

A better title for this would be The Destined Superpower as Zeihan claims that there is really nothing accidental about the United States' preeminence in the world -- it seems to come down to geographic advantages (navigable rivers), shale (who needs oil anymore?) and its navy. And the rest of the world is doomed already or soon will be. Zeihan asserts that the US policy of protecting free trade everywhere has been the underlining of post WWII economies to this day but that the US is giving up that role and letting the rest of the world duke it out over trade policies, artificial indefensible borders and governments that soon will all turn on each other. And that's the good news. Russia is a doomed state as is Germany, England, Saudi Arabia, China and about a dozen more and that we're in for several decades of instability and militarism. And.....because the US will retrench from everywhere around the world, and we've got shale, we'll be fine. His thesis on the role of geography and demography raise some fascinating points, but I just can't deal with the doomsday scenario that he portrays. And with no mention of nuclear threats, I feel he left unanswered the big question of whether rivers or oceans or mountains are enough to ensure peace and prosperity.

Tim says

Phenomenal book that should be read by anyone interested in International Relations. Zeihan does an incredible job of putting the geo back in geopolitics in explaining how the world developed and how he thinks it will continue to change. I recommend reading the first eight chapters and skimming the last seven as the predictions can go a little astray.

- Bretton Woods - A new type of empire building. The United States sacrificed a chance to make itself into the only colonial power and instead instituted a global trade system which it would secure. Unfortunately, the system has ran its course and is down detrimental to US interests.
- Geography - A superpower needs a certain size, ease of internal movement and difficulty of external movement, energy resources, and food.
- Demographics - US one of the few countries without a negative demographic outlook. The aging populations will enervate national and international markets Countries like South Korea and Japan are doomed.
- Energy - The fracking boom will allow the US to be a global power for the next century. It will also provide the option to be isolationist.
- Food - The US is a food power house. This too will provide an isolationist option.

James says

I like books that promise a sunny future without the need for a lot of hard work. Zeihan's book delivers in spades. While I'm not sure I buy into the basic premises or his outlook, I'll unashamedly admit I feel better for having read (listened to) it.

Sammer Abdin says

A thought provoking and interesting geopolitical analysis on the world's history. Covers how the powers that be got to where they are today and takes a look at what the future may hold. You may not agree with everything he states, but his predictions are fascinating. The book overall is a great read.
