

Column **Is global chaos the new normal?**



Smoke rises from Tuffah neighborhood after Israeli air strikes in the east of Gaza City. (Mohammed Saber / EPA)



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It's a chaotic world out there. But we'd better get used to it; this may be the new normal.

The Middle East is in flames, not only Gaza but Syria, Iraq and Libya as well. Russia is massing troops on the border of Ukraine. Central Africa is a mess, as are Afghanistan and Pakistan. Parts of Mexico and Central America are ruled by criminal gangs and drug cartels. And those are merely the crises big enough to command front-page attention.

"This is historically unprecedented," former national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski told Foreign Policy magazine recently. "Huge swaths of global territory are dominated by populist unrest, anger and effective loss of state control."

Brzezinski's point wasn't merely that disorder is loose in the world; that's happened in earlier periods of war and revolution (think of Europe in the aftermath of [World War I](#),

for example). His point was that chaos is breaking out simultaneously in many regions, and that governments are less capable of meeting those challenges than before.

Moreover, in an age of instant communication, conflicts can spread more readily. In the Middle East, the democratic uprisings of the [Arab Spring](#) led to anarchy in Libya, a counterrevolution in Egypt and a civil war in Syria. The war in Syria immediately became part of the larger, regionwide conflict between Sunni and Shiite Muslims, and spread across the border into Iraq.

The world is becoming more unstable, because power is fragmenting

And with that, two epic struggles were joined: the political battle over who will govern the fractious nations of the Arab world, and a religious war between two major branches of Islam.

These aren't the kind of conflicts that end quickly or neatly. Richard Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations, says the closest analogy he can come up with is the Thirty Years' War between Catholics and Protestants, a conflict that devastated Europe from 1618 to 1648. That's a daunting thought.

And it's not only the Middle East. Ever since the end of the Cold War 25 years ago, foreign policy pundits have been warning that the world is becoming more unstable because power is fragmenting.



With Ukraine, Putin is courting the home crowd

Big governments and conventional armies could once command obedience around the world; in the 19th century, five British warships compelled the sultan of Zanzibar to sur-

render after only 38 minutes of artillery fire. The great powers don't enjoy that kind of military superiority anymore. The United States spent more than a decade in Iraq and Afghanistan but couldn't fully pacify either country.

The reason isn't that the great powers are no longer powerful; the difference is that their opponents — balky local governments, insurrectionists and jihadists alike — are more potent than they used to be. They're better equipped, better funded and more skilled at guerrilla warfare.

At the same time, outside powers like the United States have lost their appetite for fighting long counterinsurgency wars. It's become harder and more costly to keep a lid on the developing world's disorders, so we're more reluctant to try.

The result is what one scholar, Randall Schweller of Ohio State, has called "an age of entropy" — a leaderless world with no superpowers to enforce order.

Republicans have two words to explain how we got to this leaderless state of affairs: Barack Obama.

But the big changes around the world aren't entirely (or even mainly) his fault. Nor are they, as Democrats insist, mainly the fault of his predecessor, [George W. Bush](#), who took the United States to war in Iraq.

That's not to say that either of their foreign policies was flawless. Bush had a naive faith in America's ability to extend the reach of democracy. Obama began his presidency with a naive hope that an outstretched hand to Iran, Russia and other adversaries would be met with cooperation. And, when the Arab Spring arrived, he underestimated the problems that upheaval would bring, trying to promote democracy on the cheap by cheering uprisings in Libya, Syria and elsewhere, but doing little to help them succeed.

Obama has now retreated to a more minimalist version of his foreign policy. Despite what his most partisan critics assert, he hasn't abandoned international affairs; instead, he has focused on his biggest priorities: counter-terrorism, Iran, China and Russia. But his core foreign policy doctrine is now one of restraint.

That's been infuriating to internationalists who view the United States as the indispensable nation, duty-bound to sort out the world's problems. As Brzezinski put it: "We are ... increasingly devoid of strategic will and a sense of direction."

That's overstated. But if Obama is looking for a big goal for his final years in office, here's one he should embrace (and can hardly avoid): articulating an overarching global strategy for the United States in an increasingly chaotic world, and convincing Americans that it makes sense.

How? That's a question for another column.

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