

Turbulence in the Global Balkans

Zbigniew Brzezinski

On 1 February 2008, Zbigniew Brzezinski was interviewed by James Naughtie on Radio 4's Today programme. A longer version of the interview was posted on the programme's website. This is what the former National Security Advisor to President Carter said.

BBC: Let me ask you a very straightforward question. What is the biggest problem in international affairs, from an American perspective, facing the next president of the United States?

ZB: I think the overall response pertains to global turbulence because we are now in a phase in which all of mankind is politically activated and restless. But the specific focus of that restlessness is in an area that ranges from the Sinai Peninsula, between Egypt and Israel, to Shenyang, China's western most province; from South Russia to the Indian Ocean. I call that area the Global Balkans – the modern equivalent of the European Balkans – and that is the area of the greatest turmoil and the area which poses the greatest threat to global stability.

BBC: And the comparison with the Balkans, in the role that that area has played in European history, is rather a melancholy one, isn't it?

ZB: Yes, because the Balkans have had a suction effect on external powers, drawing them into the conflict. I don't expect a conflict between the major powers arising in the Global Balkans but I think there is a real risk that the United States could be drawn into a conflict which expands in scale, in geographical reach and then undermines America's ability to play a constructive world role, with very damaging consequences for the West in general, specifically for the EU, and very destabilising consequences for all of the other major players in the world.

BBC: So what are the mistakes, in your view, that need to be avoided and what needs to be done?

ZB: In a nutshell I think we need to be more active, more constructive, more engaged in seeking an Israeli/Palestinian accommodation because that conflict radicalises the Middle

East. We have to be willing to recognise the fact that enduring American occupation of Iraq is no solution because we are no longer in a colonial or imperial age. We have to be prepared to negotiate seriously with Iran. And we have to avoid over-militarising our engagement in Afghanistan, and potentially Pakistan, because that could then backfire against us.

BBC: Let me begin to go through that. You talk about the Israel/Palestine problem having radicalised, or having the capacity to radicalise, the Middle East. The problem is that has already happened.

ZB: You can't use the past tense on it because that implies a kind of terminal conclusion. It is happening. The Middle East is being radicalised and destabilised, but it's a process and it's a process that should be reversed.

BBC: Can it be reversed?

ZB: I think so. I think if there was a breakthrough in the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, if there was a settlement that was equitable, that paves the way for eventual reconciliation that in turn permits Israel to become the Singapore of the Middle East, working together with the Palestinians and the Arabs, I think it can be reversed.

BBC: But you know, better than anyone, that the essential deal, the outlines of a deal have been on the table for, let us say, 10 or 15 years. So, everyone knows what they are, we can argue about the edges, about the status of Jerusalem, or about the West Bank, or the Right of Return, but the essence of the package is there. What could a new President do to make that work in a way that, for example, President Clinton and then President Bush have failed to do?

ZB: What you could do is become directly engaged in facilitating a reconciliation, a settlement, in which the first needed step is a compromise formula for both sides. As long as the United States stays on the sidelines neither of the two parties is inclined to step forward and begin the negotiating process by making a significant concession because it fears, quite naturally, that the other side will quite simply pocket it. So we have a stalemate. President Bush has said repeatedly that he expects a settlement this year. If he is serious about it, he will have to be engaged directly. If he is not, it will be up to his successor to do so.

BBC: What is your reading of the consequences of the foreign policy pursued by the two Bush terms as we come to their end?

ZB: I have written a book which has dealt with this, the book is entitled *Second Chance*, and there is a chapter in it entitled 'Catastrophic Leadership'. I think President Bush's leadership internationally has been catastrophic for the United

States, in the sense that it de-legitimated America's world role, it undermined the credibility of the American President. It has stirred up an enormous amount of animosity toward the United States and that has to be undone.

BBC: Do you think it should be undone, because it's a different kind of world now? China is emerging; India is emerging in a different way. Do you think that America could, or should, regain the kind of role that it once thought it had?

ZB: I think it could regain a constructive pre-eminent role but I think we all have to be aware of the fact that preponderance is not omnipotence, that preponderance does not justify a recall to arms, preponderance does not create the grounds for a policy based on the proposition 'if you're not with us, you're against us'.

BBC: But isn't the problem this: that many American people have come to believe that that is not true and the opposite is true? And they need to be argued with in the way that you suggest?

ZB: That's right. That's what the presidential elections are going to be all about. I think we are going to have a very clear choice this time between a Democrat, we don't yet know who it will be but a Democrat will more or less say what I have been saying, although one of the two competing Democrats is more inclined to talk in those terms, and a Republican who in all probability will be talking a great deal about the war on terror, about Jihad, or as the President said the other day in the State of the Union message, that the defining ideological challenge of the 21st century is the war on terror. Now I ask you, could anyone in the year 1908 predict what the defining ideological challenge would be in the 20th century? Or in 1808 of the 19th century? That's what this debate will be about.

BBC: This gets us to the meat of it. Because Senator McCain, who's now head of the pack and may well be the nominee, we don't know that, but he may well be the nominee for the Republican Party, says that the greatest challenge to the United States of the 21st century, the first challenge, he does go as far as you've just gone ...

ZB: It's not me; it was President Bush who said it.

BBC: ... no, I know, I understand, but he doesn't go as far as that, he says the first challenge of the 21st century is Jihadist Islamic terrorism. Now, how do you advise a presidential candidate on the other side, and you are a supporter of Barack Obama, to counter that argument? What should he say in response?

ZB: Largely by saying what I said at the very opening of the discussion. Namely, that the world is very turbulent, in general there is a great deal of restlessness with global inequalities, and there is a particular region of the world which is rammed by conflicts and we have to be very careful in how we deal with them, so that we

don't over-militarise them and become bogged down in them. That is precisely the issue and to elevate the Jihad into the major confrontation of our time reminds me of the people who used to talk about the Crusades. We didn't call the war against Hitler a crusade. We didn't call the Cold War a crusade. We have to have a sense of balance in our analysis and I'm agreeing with you that the debate of the presidential campaign is going to be precisely over that excessive, in my judgement, and misleading terminology.

BBC: Let me ask you two questions, one about Iraq and one about Senator Obama. What makes you believe that Senator Obama, with no experience in foreign affairs, with relatively a short time in Washington, with a mind which is sharp, as everyone knows, but with little experience, could lead the United States in these turbulent times as you describe.

ZB: You know this business about lack of experience in foreign affairs is a red herring. What experience did Lincoln have? In recent times, what experience did President Truman have when he became President after a few months as Vice President and having served previously as a Senator from Missouri, from a political machine incidentally? What experience did Clinton have? What is essential to a President is an understanding of the historical moment; of understanding what are the decisive forces at work in the world and understanding how America has to relate itself to these circumstances.

BBC: And you think he has got that?

ZB: I have talked to him a lot. I have a deep conviction that he has that and this is why I think he is the man of the moment.

BBC: In this campaign he is going to have to deal very directly with very specific questions about Iraq, especially if Senator McCain, who's got deep knowledge of these matters, is the candidate on the Republican side. Now precisely what do you think Senator Obama should say about Iraq and, if he were the nominee, what would he say?

ZB: I'm not going to go into that in great detail because our time is running out right now, but let me say that in general what he says on the subject is responsive to the prevailing, dominant view in America that the war in the first place was a fundamental mistake, justified by premisses which were false and that it is in the American interest to bring it intelligently to an end. Which means a series of steps to disengage militarily, complemented by a series of political initiatives designed to create a political balance within Iraq and a more constructive interest, on the part of Iraq's neighbours, in Iraq remaining stable, and that can only be galvanised by a political process that is pointed towards the end of an occupation which has all the earmarks of a colonial presence in the post-colonial age.