THE NEXT AMERICAN CENTURY
How the U.S. can Thrive as Other Powers Rise

by Nina Hachigian and Mona Sutphen

Reviewed by Meaghan Monfort†

Nina Hachigian and Mona Sutphen met while colleagues at the National Security Council under the Clinton Administration. Hachigian is currently a Senior Fellow at the Center for American Progress specializing in U.S. foreign policy, U.S.-China relations, and international institutions. She received her B.S. from Yale University and her J.D. from Stanford University. Sutphen, a former U.S. diplomat, is now serving in the Obama Administration as Deputy Chief of Staff. She earned a B.A. from Mount Holyoke College and her M.Sc. from the London School of Economics. With such diverse experience in and exposure to foreign affairs, these authors are especially qualified to recommend policies for the U.S. to thrive in the 21st century.

Hachigian and Sutphen wrote The Next American Century from 2006-2007 during the final years of the Bush Administration. The 2010 paperback edition includes a preface by Hachigian, in light of the election of President Obama in 2008. Eight chapters guide the reader through the challenges facing the U.S. in an age of rising powers.

Hachigian and Sutphen challenge a growing tendency in U.S. foreign policy discourse to view the rise of other global powers as a threat to American power and interests. Of specific interest are China, Russia, India, Japan, and Europe, which the authors refer to as “the pivotal powers” (10). These pivotal powers “have the resources to support or thwart U.S. aims, to build the world order or disrupt it” (10). South Africa, Brazil, and Iran do not make the list because, the authors argue, they do not meet this definition. South Africa’s military is modest and its influence lies mainly on the African continent, Brazil’s aims are not yet global despite its impressive resources, and Iran’s

† Meaghan Monfort is a Master of Public Policy candidate at the Sanford School of Public Policy, Duke University. She earned her Bachelor’s degree in International Relations and Religion from Syracuse University in 2008. As a Pickering Foreign Affairs Fellow, Monfort has worked at the Department of State in the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs and in the Political Section of U.S. Embassy Moscow, Russia.
economy is too small. These states, however, could make the list in the future.

While all five pivotal powers are attended to in the text, the authors discuss at great length concerns over the growing influence of pivotal power number one—China. Hachigian and Sutphen also distinguish among the five powers in terms of their mentalities. China, Russia, and India “believe in their historical destiny as great powers, yet are simultaneously preoccupied with a raft of daunting internal challenges” (132). On the other hand, Japan and Europe are set apart because they are already major global powers cooperating with the U.S., and “both are also less enamored with the trappings of traditional demonstrations of power, which sets them apart from the other three” (133).

Given the timing of the book and the authors’ political affiliations, one might have expected a more scathing denunciation of the Bush Administration’s foreign policies. Instead, their work is refreshingly prescriptive and future-oriented. The authors outline how the U.S. can grow its innovative economy, maintain its role as a global leader, protect American lives, and advance the liberal world order. They direct our attention away from nebulous and indirect dangers and toward a focus on the threat of international terrorism. In a persuasive table, the authors compare the threats presented by China and radical Islamic terrorists as evidenced by: (1) number of Americans they have killed on U.S. soil; (2) belief in free trade and capitalism; (3) level of ideological expansionism; and (4) announced policy toward liberal world order, among others. They conclude that “China is a much more ambiguous potential foe than are terrorists, the true threat of today” (17). The U.S. should, as a result, focus on improving capabilities to target international terrorism instead of building up weapons systems and capabilities for highly unlikely, large-scale ground wars of the past.

The Next American Century successfully tackles the most common arguments for why the U.S. should feel threatened by the rise of pivotal powers. In its full form, the book is an encyclopedia of talking points on why global power is not a zero-sum game: international trade is good and should be encouraged; China is at least 40 years away from being a real military threat; dependency on foreign oil is not exceedingly dangerous; and it does not matter if foreign firms own American ones. The U.S., they argue, cannot insist on keeping other powers poor and weak in the name of self-preservation. Hachigian and Sutphen now have a likeminded leader in Washington, evidencing a trend toward agreement with the ideas and aims of this book. They aptly quote President Obama’s inaugural address when he proclaimed, “Our power alone cannot protect us” (xiii).

Perhaps the biggest criticism of this work is that it appears a bit unrealistic at times and too quickly dismisses the challenges of ideological differences. Illiberal politics in Russia and China are real roadblocks for the United
States. Market transactions, which will no doubt drive our collaboration with the pivotal powers, are not immune to ideological battles. And cooperation in the market cannot be a cure-all for U.S. foreign policy. Google’s difficulties with Chinese internet censorship laws are a case in point. Additionally, while most agree on the need to keep and create jobs in the U.S. and attract investment from abroad, doing so is all the more challenging when other states cannot or do not regulate wages or adequately enforce tax laws.

Hachigian and Sutphen have created an impressive manual of policy prescriptions for the U.S., both domestically and internationally. Their policy recommendations—manage the national debt; construct collaborative relationships with the pivotal powers; revamp the education system to maintain leadership in innovation; put additional protections in place for workers; foil terrorist plots with smart technology and international cooperation; reduce greenhouse gas emissions; and promote liberal norms and democracy abroad—will not be easy to accomplish. But Hachigian and Sutphen are optimistic, and they have outlined a coherent and sensible strategy for moving forward.