

Persian Gulf, or a cabin cruiser in the Caribbean, every ship in the world moves under the eyes of American satellites in space and its movement is guaranteed—or denied—at will by the U.S. Navy. The combined naval force of the rest of the world doesn't come close to equaling that of the U.S. Navy.

This has never happened before in human history, even with Britain. There have been regionally dominant navies, but never one that was globally and overwhelmingly dominant. This has meant that the United States could invade other countries—but never be invaded. It has meant that in the final analysis the United States controls international trade. It has become the foundation of American security and American wealth. Control of the seas emerged after World War II, solidified during the final phase of the European Age, and is now the flip side of American economic power, the basis of its military power.

Whatever passing problems exist for the United States, the most important factor in world affairs is the tremendous imbalance of economic, military, and political power. Any attempt to forecast the twenty-first century that does not begin with the recognition of the extraordinary nature of American power is out of touch with reality. But I am making a broader, more unexpected claim, too: the United States is only at the beginning of its power. The twenty-first century will be the American century.

That assertion rests on a deeper point. For the past five hundred years, the global system has rested on the power of Atlantic Europe, the European countries that bordered on the Atlantic Ocean: Portugal, Spain, France, England, and to a lesser extent the Netherlands. These countries transformed the world, creating the first global political and economic system in human history. As we know, European power collapsed during the twentieth century along with the European empires. This created a vacuum that was filled by the United States, the dominant power in North America, and the only great power bordering both the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. North America has assumed the place that Europe occupied for five hundred years, between Columbus's voyage in 1492 and the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. It has become the center of gravity of the international system.

Why? In order to understand the twenty-first century, it is important to understand the fundamental structural shifts that took place late in the

twentieth century, setting the stage for a new century that will be radically different in form and substance, just as the United States is so different from Europe. My argument is not only that something extraordinary has happened but that the United States has had very little choice in it. This isn't about policy. It is about the way in which impersonal geopolitical forces work.

EUROPE

Until the fifteenth century, humans lived in self-enclosed, sequestered worlds. Humanity did not know itself as consisting of a single fabric. The Chinese didn't know of the Aztecs, and the Mayas didn't know of the Zulus. The Europeans may have heard of the Japanese, but they didn't really know them—and they certainly didn't interact with them. The Tower of Babel had done more than make it impossible for people to speak to each other. It made civilizations oblivious to each other.

Europeans living on the eastern rim of the Atlantic Ocean shattered the barriers between these sequestered regions and turned the world into a single entity in which all of the parts interacted with each other. What happened to Australian aborigines was intimately connected to the British relationship with Ireland and the need to find penal colonies for British prisoners overseas. What happened to Inca kings was tied to the relationship between Spain and Portugal. The imperialism of Atlantic Europe created a single world.

Atlantic Europe became the center of gravity of the global system (see map, page 20). What happened in Europe defined much of what happened elsewhere in the world. Other nations and regions did everything with one eye on Europe. From the sixteenth to the twentieth century hardly any part of the world escaped European influence and power. Everything, for good or evil, revolved around it. And the pivot of Europe was the North Atlantic. Whoever controlled that stretch of water controlled the highway to the world.

Europe was neither the most civilized nor the most advanced region in the world. So what made it the center? Europe really was a technical and