

Thought Leader: Ian Bremmer

Thought Leaders Forum, Point B

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Transcript

DEVIN STEWART: How would you describe the age we live in today, particularly from a moral perspective?

IAN BREMMER: Today we are living in a world that has much less of a single moral guidepost. Having a single moral guidepost isn't always where you want to be—it can be wrong, it can be incorrect, it can be less than optimal—but absent one, when you have folks who are unable to agree on various applications of ethics internationally, you can end up in a position of lowest common denominator.

If you have folks who think, "We need to get wealthier so we need to industrialize," and you have other folks who say, "We need to pay more attention to the environment because otherwise we're going to lose our country," those are both valid perspectives. But if there's no meeting of the minds, you don't end up with a balance of positions; you end up doing nothing.

As a consequence, we are in the world today losing some of our moral sensibilities. We are living in a world that is less ethical than the one that we have experienced in the aftermath of [World War II](#).

There is something fundamentally unsatisfying with moral relativism. I, like most, dabbled with it for about a week when I was in grad school. It's intellectually very rigorous, but there's no humanity in it.

When we talk about international affairs, you can be as "Realpolitik" as you want, but you're talking about people, you're not talking about assets. You're talking about living, feeling, breathing beings. A world that lacks a moral guidepost, that lacks the ability to compromise on things that matter to those living, breathing things, will be a more [Hobbesian](#) world, it will be a more violent world, it will be a more dangerous world. The G-zero I think does reflect that.

DEVIN STEWART: Are things getting better or worse?

IAN BREMMER: Some things are getting better. Look, we are producing food far cheaper. We are living longer. Race relations in the United States have improved, and we just found out that the the life expectancies of blacks, whites, and Hispanics, the gap is getting closer. Fifty percent of Africa now lives in urban centers; they have better access to health care; their women are getting more educated. Those are huge pluses. You're bringing billions of people out of poverty. That's a great thing.

So you can't look at the world and just say, "Oh my God, we are poised at the precipice."

But I'm a political scientist. I don't spend most of my time focusing on productivity and technology. I spend most of my time looking at how global politics work. Looking at the geopolitical environment, the world is getting worse. The world is getting more dangerous. We have less order. We have less capacity to respond to global crises. We have less willingness to respond to global crises. That is a world that will have more political risk, it will have more down-side, it will be scarier for people than the world that we have lived in, not just since the Soviet Union [collapsed](#), but, frankly, even for most of the time when there was a [Cold War](#).

DEVIN STEWART: What are the emerging trends that you think about in international affairs?

IAN BREMMER: I don't know if I'd call it a trend. I look at China.

The trend that concerns me the most is what I would call "the rise of the different." [Fareed Zakaria](#), a good friend of mine, writes about "the rise of the rest," implying that it's a bunch of other countries, they get

wealthier, and they start looking like us. That may be true eventually. It's not true now.

For now we're talking about a host of countries that are becoming much more important on the global stage, that agree with the United States and with the advanced industrial democracies about very few things. They are poor; we are not. They are politically unstable; we are not. We are free-market economies, we are democracies; many of them are not.

China, in particular, is an authoritarian state. It's a state capitalist state. We are not going to pass the baton to the Chinese, the way that Britain passed the baton to the United States.

This is not about the rise of the rest. The rise of the rest would be a problem. If there's just more countries, it's harder to coordinate with more countries. But the rise of the different, the rise of the other, the rise of those who don't agree with us, that is a problem.

It's not a problem because they're bad. They are not bad—this is not normative—but they are different. We, as Americans in particular, don't like different. We don't like countries that don't agree with us. We have a hard time dealing with it. We believe we're right. U.S. exceptionalism: "Our values are better, aren't they? The things we want, they should make sense for the whole world. If someone disagrees with us, they must be wrong."

That's not always true. And, even if it is true, if they're powerful, we have to deal with them, we have to accommodate them. "Accommodation" is not a word in American diplomatic vocabulary. We do not accommodate people. We communicate with them so they better understand us, so they can better align themselves with our position. This is a challenge for us.

DEVIN STEWART: You mean differences in ethical positions as well?

IAN BREMMER: Sure I do, differences in ethical positions, absolutely. Most differences in the world ultimately come down to differences on ethical questions. What are your values and how do you prioritize them?

Everyone would value a world that did not have rogue states with nuclear weapons. But the relative priority of that compared to, say, being able to get oil from a country, or being able to have stability on your border with a country, those priorities will change.

Everybody puts a value on human rights. The Chinese value human rights, they do, but they value them differently compared to political stability than the United States does.

These are ethical decisions. We're all good people out there. We're not talking about countries that are evil. We're not talking about systems that are evil. We're not talking about Nazi Germany. But we are talking about countries that are at very different stages of development. We are talking about ways of looking at the world that are fundamentally different, to the extent that they are becoming incompatible. Those are ethical distinctions, and ethical distinctions are ones that we will have a particularly hard time compromising on.

DEVIN STEWART: Do you think your values change as economic development proceeds?

IAN BREMMER: Of course they do. Again, more importantly, your willingness to prioritize values changes as your economic wealth increases. You put more of a value on human rights when you're wealthier, though you put more of a value of human rights when you feel secure too. It's not just wealth.

The United States has historically put a very high value on privacy, and yet post-9/11 they started to de-prioritize privacy as they prioritized more national security.

Economic security, human security, and national security—three very different components that help you understand how you will prioritize the ethical values that you have.

Different countries around the world have very different views on this. Most particularly, emerging markets as a group are very different in the way they prioritize these issues than the advanced industrial democracies. Completely understandably so. But that won't make it any easier to come to compromise with these countries.

DEVIN STEWART: What does moral leadership mean to you?

IAN BREMMER: Moral leadership to me means taking the long-term perspective for your own citizens but not in isolation with those that they are living with around the world.

There has been a debate in the United States recently whether the American [president](#) should be maximizing profitability. Of course, immediately, you say, "Maximizing profitability for whom?" What about externalities? How do you define profitability? How long term is that?" Those are questions that no one is really debating right now. It's so politicized—"Bain Capital is evil." "No, it's creative destruction, it's necessary." I have no interest in that. I like the free market. I like a well-regulated free market.

But that's not the point. The president is not the CEO of a multinational corporation, and yet the experience of learning how to run something that's efficient is a value that should be welcomed, and frequently isn't, in government.

All of these things I think play into the question of moral leadership.

DEVIN STEWART: One of our projects is defining a global ethic. Does that concept resonate with you; and, if so, what does it mean?

IAN BREMMER: The idea of "a" global ethic increasingly does not resonate with me precisely because we increasingly can't do global.

Climate change is the most obvious global thing out there. Short of being invaded by aliens, it's hard to come up with a more obvious global challenge. We have had major climate summits now in [Copenhagen](#) and in [Durban](#) and in [Cancún](#), and they have accomplished absolutely nothing. How many more global summits do we need to have before we realize that it's not the geography that we have these damn things, that it's the fact that we just can't agree?

There isn't a global ethic around this. So what we need is a next-best solution. That next-best solution will be a coalition of the willing. It will be a smaller group of like-minded countries. If we do it soon, we can focus on mitigation. If we do it later, we will focus on adaptation. If we do it later than that, we'll focus on geo-engineering. None of those are ideal. We'd rather have a global ethic. We don't have a global ethic.

We owe it to ourselves, when there are challenges like cyber security and nuclear proliferation and climate change that are on our agendas, that are real and urgent and that will cause real hardship for millions and millions of people—we owe it to ourselves not to allow the great to be the enemy of the good. The great is the global and the good is getting anything done. The global is not going to work in this environment. In a G-zero environment there will not be a global ethic. We will need to accept good-enough solutions.

DEVIN STEWART: How about the greatest ethical challenge facing the planet? Is it the ones you previously have mentioned, or do you want to elaborate?

IAN BREMMER: The greatest ethical challenge that the planet has is distribution of scarce resources. That means across countries, that means within countries.

A G-zero world is one where individuals—I talk about pivot states, countries that can adapt and arbitrage between different kinds of modalities internationally, different types of integration. But individuals pivot much more effectively than countries do. In a G-zero environment, you could easily have a plutocracy emerge with super-empowered individuals that are very, very fleet of foot and have the ability to take advantage and arbitrage between different standards and different regulatory environments because there isn't one global

ethic, there isn't one global norm.

If you think that there's a big gap between rich and poor now, that will grow. That is certainly the biggest ethical challenge that we face.

I think one of the places that that will become most interesting is the data revolution. We've had the communications revolution, which has empowered lots and lots of individuals around the world to express their interests and to get information. But the data revolution is not a decentralizing phenomenon; it's a centralizing phenomenon. It empowers small numbers of individuals that have access to extraordinary concentrations of data and can use that for purposes of profit and for national security. That will be an enormous ethical challenge that is just on the horizon.

DEVIN STEWART: We were talking about the difficulty of making priorities earlier. How would you suggest policymakers and politicians make priorities?

IAN BREMMER: They can't do everything, as you see in the world we are in today—24/7 communication cycle, immediately buffered in the media, in the blogosphere, and by other countries and leaders and interests, by everything under the sun.

What's very important is not trying to know everything. What's very important is knowing what to filter out—what are the few things that you can actually work on.

The [United States](#) and [Europe](#) have both experienced extraordinary economic crises over the course of the last four years. It was [Rahm Emanuel](#) who said, "Never waste a crisis." And yet, if I look at the United States and compare it to Europe, I would make a very strong argument that the United States has largely wasted its crisis and the Europeans have not. The Europeans are not through it, but they are trying hard to take advantage of the crisis that has befallen them.

I think part of the problem with Obama, a first-term senator who became president in a very difficult time period—certainly not a bad president, certainly not an incapable president, but he's very, very smart and he wants to engage on all issues. So he gave lots of press conferences after the financial crisis: "Here are all the things I can work on." And every week it was a different message.

As soon as he thought that he was out of the woods on the financial crisis, he moved to health care, spent a year on that. Never mind whether or not the Supreme Court will actually overturn that [health care bill](#), which would be a problem of course for the [Obama administration](#). But the point is that moving to health care meant that you basically said, "I'm not taking advantage of this crisis."

The Europeans have not moved away from their crisis. They have in many ways embraced their crisis. They have actually used the market and the crisis as a stick to force austerity on European peripherals like Greece and Italy and Portugal and Spain. They have used it to bring in non-democratically elected, technocratic governments in Greece, and in Italy especially. They have used it to push fiscal compact and integration, which is desperately needed, and perhaps even a banking union and more integration of fiscal policy than we've seen before. That's the right way to approach the European crisis.

When I heard politicians say that the Europeans should have taken a big bite, they shouldn't have moved incrementally, it's actually precisely the incremental steps that were necessary to ensure that the lessons of the European crisis were not wasted.

DEVIN STEWART: If the world fails to respond to some of the issues that you've outlined so far, what kind of future should we expect?

IAN BREMMER: Geopolitics abhors a vacuum. The longer a vacuum persists, the greater crises will loom, the more they will expand, the more we will be freighted with them.

If we don't end up with any effective international architecture to deal with nuclear proliferation, we'll have a

lot more countries with nukes. At some point, you will see some form of export of that technology to a rogue actor that isn't a state, or a government will fall apart and those nukes will end up in someone's hands, and that will be dangerous and we'll respond.

The same thing is true on climate. The same thing is true on trade. All of these things will create eventually, ultimately, their own responses.

Look, we've had this before: World War II. The United States was, of course, insulated, isolated, by two very large oceans, and we had extraordinary violations of human rights in Asia and in Europe. We had death and destruction. You want to talk about polarizing debate? The U.S. people say Congress is polarizing now. It's hard to get more polarizing than the debate over whether or not the United States should get involved in World War II. And of course America did eventually get involved, but late. If they had gotten involved earlier, it would have saved a lot of lives, a lot of people would exist today that don't, a lot of family lines wouldn't have been prematurely ended, a lot of cities wouldn't have been destroyed. That's important.

I am not saying that I expect World War III—I don't. But I am saying that on the issues that worry us today, like cyber security and like economic growth and the free and efficient exploitation of resources as opposed to resource nationalism, that on those issues life will become more challenging until we have an effective response.

DEVIN STEWART: At the outset you said things are getting worse.

IAN BREMMER: Geopolitically I do believe that, yes.

DEVIN STEWART: From an ethical perspective as well.

Using your imagination, can you think of a brighter future; and, if so, how will we get there?

IAN BREMMER: I think, first of all, we are not going to avoid a G-zero. When you experience a radical imbalance between the balance of power of different actors and the overall leadership structure and institutional architecture of the world, at some point that will crack. When you have countries that are becoming more powerful, that don't agree with the countries that run the world, at some point that will not work. So if it hadn't been the 2008 financial crisis it would have been something else.

We had to experience that geopolitical creative destruction. It's very good that it happened in 2008 and not in 2018 or 2028, because the United States is still, comparatively speaking, the tallest guy in the room. That means that the United States has the ability to have much more of a leadership role in shaping the new architecture that eventually emerges. What the United States needs to do is do that proactively.

The United States is not in the mood to do that right now, of course, with elections, but also not in the mood to do that because of the nature of the unemployment environment and U.S. stock market and the debt situation and all the rest.

But if the United States can get through that, and if we start to see significant growth come back in the United States, and you see a leader emerge—and maybe that's a second-term Obama, maybe it's [Romney](#), maybe it waits for another four years or eight years—but those are the sorts of things that would allow the United States to help its allies reconstruct.

Another thing would be Europe getting through this, and through it in a much more integrated way, with common fiscal policy in addition to currency policy, with European institutions that are stronger, so that Europe does have an address, does have a phone number that you can call, is able to take decisions in a unified way that clearly would support the kind of world that the United States has been leading.

The United States and Europe sharing the baton in the relay back and forth in terms of global leadership is a much easier future to envision than one where the United States tries to pass the baton to a China that is both unwilling and incapable of actually taking hold of that baton. That would be a more optimistic future.

DEVIN STEWART: Thinking about your expertise in political risk—one of the definitions is "it is possible but unlikely"—what issues in the world are being ignored that people should be paying attention to?

IAN BREMMER: People are not paying enough attention to the ways that China can go pear-shaped. We are spending a lot of attention on Europe, a lot of attention on Iran and the Middle East, a lot of attention on the United States. A global economic slowdown has greater impact on China than anyone else, precisely because they are the ones with the regime that cannot tolerate a slowdown.

So what will they do to ensure that doesn't occur? They will double down on state capitalism, they will double down on unsustainable infrastructure investment, they will double down on supporting state-owned enterprises that will have more conflict with Western multinational corporations.

The ways that the China relationship with the United States could deteriorate dramatically is an enormous risk. It's bigger than anything else out there. We are not spending enough time dealing with that issue.

DEVIN STEWART: The problems within the international system, do you see them as systemic and structural? How would you describe them?

IAN BREMMER: I certainly see them as structural. I'm not someone who believes that Obama vs. Romney matters very much in terms of the fundamental need for the United States to create new architecture and the challenges.

Why is it that the G20 doesn't work? There are many reasons:

First, too many countries, can't coordinate. I mean you're going to have a summit that's two days long with 20 countries? That's as long as a summit you had with seven countries. You're tripling the number of countries and you're not expanding the summits. You think they're going to work? There are too many countries.

Second, they're different, they don't agree on most stuff.

Third, the countries that have come into play that we need leadership from, that are more important economically, don't have global experience either in terms of their diplomatic corps or their multinational corporations or their institutions. They're not capable of playing this role. And the United States doesn't want to, doesn't want to be the global policeman, doesn't want to be the lender of last resort, doesn't want to lead globalization the way it has. Many pieces of the American population don't believe it benefits them, and that is growing.

And American allies are usually distracted. Europe is in the middle of this enormous and crippling crisis and Japan has had 17 prime ministers in 22 years. Canada is doing okay, Australia, New Zealand—that is not the future of global leadership, let's be clear.

DEVIN STEWART: As you know, [Andrew Carnegie's](#) vision was one of world peace. You answered this before, I think, on the issue about the end of war. It's basically the same question: Is world peace possible?

IAN BREMMER: Sure, world peace is absolutely possible.

First of all, the European Union came together to stop crippling wars in Europe and has been very successful in doing that because the political and cultural and economic values are so aligned, and have become more so, and that is very successful.

You tend to get wars when you do not trust, when you do not understand. It's not just fighting over scarce resources. It's when you come at it from different perspectives and therefore can't compromise.

Well, we are seeing a world where powerful countries increasingly have those kinds of differences. But the world need not go in that direction ad infinitum.

The longer we look, the more we realize that humanity is changing. What it means to be a human being in 30 years and 50 years will be very different. We might be very much more interconnected with other human beings around the world. If we continue to get wealthier through technological innovation, that will facilitate that again.

I'm not a [singularitarian](#) like [Ray Kurzweil](#). In fact, it's going to be weird when he dies. I feel very ambivalent about Kurzweil's death. On the one hand, he's wrong. On the other hand, it's kind of sad. *[Editor's note: Kurzweil believes that eventually we will be able to extend our lives indefinitely through Artificial Intelligence (AI).]*

But we are going to see increasingly the integration of human beings and computers, we are going to see augmented intelligence, we are going to see augmented communication. As that occurs we'll be different, we'll be different as people.

There's no reason to believe that the nation-state will continue to be the primary unit of organization. Nation-states, as we've seen, have war-making capacity, but not all units do. That will change the way we think about war.

The world is moving very, very quickly. Much as it was a little too early for [Frank Fukuyama](#) to talk about the end of history, it may not be in 50 years' time. That will be interesting.

DEVIN STEWART: Great sound bite.

The final one is: Who is ultimately accountable?

IAN BREMMER: Ultimately the United States is accountable. Andrew Carnegie, if he were alive today, would understand that. The United States is the world's largest economy, it's by far the wealthiest economy of any nations of scale, we have world-beating technology in all of the key areas of cutting-edge innovation, we have the best institutions of higher learning by a large margin, and we have the world's strongest military.

When you are in a position of such exorbitant strength compared to other countries, that comes with responsibility. With leadership comes responsibility. With strength comes responsibility. With responsibility comes accountability.

We have to get this right. Our leaders must be accountable, not just for the state of the United States, but for the state of the world. We are still the indispensable nation. American exceptionalism, while it cannot be forced upon countries that do not agree with it, we cannot lose the strength of our values for ourselves and for the role that we must play in a more fractured world. I think that's critical.

DEVIN STEWART: That's great. That's fantastic.

Do you want to add anything?

IAN BREMMER: No. That was a lot of stuff. That was fun. It was long.

DEVIN STEWART: Was it exhausting? It was half an hour?

IAN BREMMER: Really?

DEVIN STEWART: After I interviewed and picked the topics, now I have a headache, but in a good way.

IAN BREMMER: That's what you should be doing. You should push people on stuff they wouldn't otherwise talk about. The ethical stuff is hard, right?

DEVIN STEWART: It's really hard.

IAN BREMMER: It is really hard. It's something that I don't talk about very much but something that we think

about a lot.

I mean the companies don't care. At some level, I find working with the multinationals very unsatisfying because they don't. Ethics really matter to them if by showing that they're being ethical it will help their bottom line. But this is the problem, right, is that when you are looking at shareholder return, you as a matter of necessity cannot take the interests of even your own employees into—in fact, it's unethical for you as a CEO, given your responsibility to your shareholders, to act in any other way.

Which is precisely why you don't want to be a profit-maximizer if you're in government. There must be a check and balance. [Madison](#) understood that. That's what the *Federalist Papers* are all about. We've lost a lot of sight of that, and the world has lost sight of that too because of the fragmentation, and that's dangerous.

DEVIN STEWART: Your comment about trust, by the way—do you think that technology will help boost trust?

IAN BREMMER: It is not doing so now. It depends. I think that's a really open question. I think if technology continues—in the last few years it has really, as I said, empowered small numbers of folks that have access to huge data. If that trend continues, technology will undermine trust. That's more of a [1984](#)-style development.

I think it's way too early to make that argument. We have no idea how this stuff is going to be used.

Is the United States more empowered or less in terms of national security by the move from conventional weaponry to cyber? I could argue more, because America being a half-a-generation ahead of everyone else will mean it can knock everything out. In 10 years' time, America might be able to knock everything out of the sky. China screws with us, we'll just say, "We're going to bring down your entire system, that's it." This could actually super-empower the United States. That's very dangerous for individual trust because that doesn't have to be used responsibly. It could also super-empower corporations too that are able to master that information and data. We don't know yet.

But it might also be that cyber security completely undermines the United States because small numbers of individuals can just bring down things. We don't know yet. That's an interesting debate. We're not ready to have it.

Point B Podcast

"When we talk about international affairs, you can be as 'Realpolitik' as you want, but you're talking about people, you're not talking about assets. You're talking about living, feeling, breathing beings."

Video Clip

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