Five years ago, CSIS launched a Commission on Smart Power to propose an optimistic vision for revitalizing U.S. global leadership. The perception at the time was that the United States had turned an angry face to the world, lost its moral authority, and relied too heavily on hard military power.

This perception began to change in the closing years of the Bush administration and with the changeover to the Obama team, but the ensuing economic crisis exposed two great structural challenges facing the United States. First, in a globalized world, vectors of prosperity quickly become vectors of insecurity. And, second, the center of gravity in world affairs is shifting to Asia.

During the past two years we have heard a steady chorus predicting, and in some places celebrating, America’s decline. I never believed this for a simple reason. Every serious problem in the world still requires American involvement. But the chorus keeps singing, and it has started to shape people’s perceptions at home and abroad.

At the time of this writing, the United States has weathered the near-term dangers of the economic crisis, but the long-term prognosis for America’s fiscal health and subsequently our forward presence around the world remains in some question. The feeling is that if we cannot get our own house in order we have no business leading on the world stage.

How the rest of the world sees the continuing capacity and relevance of U.S. leadership is at the heart of this excellent volume. The specific question under investigation is how certain pivotal countries view U.S. power at this moment in time. Debates about U.S. primacy and decline tend to be inward looking and academic in nature. And yet the decisions our allies and adversaries make depend in part on their assessments of the trajectory of American power. Foreign assessments have real-world implications for U.S. policy.

My view of how the international system has changed in the past in response to global trends and challenges shapes what I see happening now. In order to place the country assessments that follow in context and to try to understand their significance, I would like to outline some thoughts along these lines and suggest what it may mean for the stability and durability of the current international system over the next decade.

We have had only three truly global international systems in human history. The first was the international system that developed between the years 1648 and 1945. Before that time, there were only regional powers and regional systems. This era saw the emergence of the first truly global international system. It was centered in Europe and based on empires. The modality of operation of this international system was a shifting balance of power among competing nation-states.
This first international system was unstable. Peaceful equilibrium broke down frequently into conflict. But it proved to be a highly durable international system, lasting nearly 300 years. This epoch was brought to an end by World War II, which effectively broke the back of the great European empires. The collapse of the empires started after World War I, but World War II brought it to a crashing conclusion.

The second epoch—which for lack of a better term we will label the Cold War era—began in the years 1946–1948 and lasted until 1989–1990, when the Berlin Wall collapsed, the Warsaw Pact collapsed, and the Soviet Union finally dissolved. This epoch was characterized by a static competition between two great blocks divided fundamentally on the ideas of how man, society, and the state should be organized. It was more of an ideological competition than it was a resource competition.

The Cold War period was relatively stable. There were numerous conflicts as former colonies struggled into independence, and there were proxy conflicts where the two superpowers invested interest and resources in opposing paladins. But the two great superpowers—the Soviet Union and the United States—avoided direct conflict with each other, largely because of fear that conflict would lead to an uncontrollable escalation that would ultimately result in nuclear warfare. So this international system was largely stable. But it was not durable, largely because the Soviet Union could not sustain its domestic power base and hold together an alliance.

We are now entering the third decade of a new international system—let me call it the post–Cold War era. This international system is unique in that it comprises a single global superpower—the United States—but with a number of regional powers, several of which operate beyond the boundaries of their regions.

Brazil is South America’s indisputable power. India dominates South Asia. In Europe we see for the first time the emergence of the supranational state of the European Union—an economic superpower to be sure, but not yet a diplomatic or military superpower. But this will emerge. Europe also has the phenomenon of Russia—a remaining military superpower (largely because of nuclear weapons), but not an economic superpower.

In West Asia there is an uneasy balance among Iran, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and a rising Turkey. In East Asia we have two superpowers—China and Japan. Both are now economic superpowers, and China is certainly a military superpower. Japan’s military alliance with the United States rounds out its economic power base although it is still recovering from the terrible recent events following the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear spillage.

For this third international epoch, I pose the same questions we asked of the earlier epochs. Is this a stable international system—that is, will it be prone to resolve differences among the power centers through peaceful means or violent means—and is it a durable system?

First, on the question of stability, I believe that a careful analysis will reveal it is an inherently stable system. The global superpower has no incentive to enter conflict with a regional superpower because, although it might win that military exchange, it would sap all its energies doing so and permit other regional superpowers to fill the vacuum. No regional superpower would conceivably find it advantageous to go to war with the global superpower.

And except for a few significant instances—East Asia is certainly one—there is little basis for regional superpowers to come into conflict with each other. It is not conceivable that the South
American superpower would come into conflict with the East Asian superpowers, for example, in ways that would lead to military conflict.

We should spend a minute, though, examining the geostrategic situation of both East Asia and the Middle East, as these regions present a higher chance for significant conflict.

In East Asia there certainly is opportunity for conflict. North Korea’s sinking of the South Korean patrol craft Cheonan in March 2010 reminds us that the political situation on the Korean Peninsula is unresolved. North Korea’s actions have, in a sense, strengthened the political divisions of East Asia along traditional Cold War lines. This will likely be the situation for several years to come.

In recent years cross-strait tensions have abated. While miscalculation could indeed lead to violence, I personally think this is not likely to happen. The primary trajectory set more than 30 years ago—with Taipei and Beijing finding a peaceful way to resolve their political differences together—seems to again be on track and in everyone’s interests.

In recent years, there has been increasing tension between American and Chinese naval forces in the South China Sea. China considers this area to be analogous to the Caribbean Sea. America has always had a special interest in political developments in the Caribbean region even though it comprises independent sovereign states in international waters. China thinks of the South China Sea in a similar way.

America sees the South China Sea as purely international waters for which America provides a useful stabilizing military presence. This difference is significant and could be problematic in years to come. One cannot rule out accidents or miscalculations, and we know that in geopolitics small incidents can cause consequential ripples. But a rational calculus would suggest to me that there is little reason why China or the United States would choose to go to war with each other to resolve this or other political differences.

There was a time a few years back when tensions were rising (worryingly) between Japan and China over Prime Minister Koizumi’s visit to the Yasukuni Shrine. It reminds us that Asia’s painful history remains fresh in people’s memories. But it does not seem likely that a government led by either the Democratic Party of Japan or the Liberal Democratic Party will repeat this activity any time soon.

In the Middle East, we have seen a growing “populism contagion” that is reshaping the region. The political landscape has been frozen for more than three decades, so when the earth suddenly moved, the political changes were massive and profound. It is too early to know at the time of this writing how durable these uprisings will be, but on one level it is a familiar picture. Popular revolts in one country trigger a broader upwelling of unhappiness with the legitimacy of government in other countries. While the phenomenon is familiar, its spread to other countries is accelerated by modern communication tools under the general umbrella term “social networking.” This is a uniquely modern occurrence.

The United States again finds itself walking a fine line. Publicly, we support the calls of citizens for more representative government wherever they occur. Our “national DNA” causes us to turn a sympathetic eye to citizens who call for more accountable and effective government. But, as during the Cold War, we temper our historic bias toward democracy with an overarching need for stability during times of crisis.
What does this mean for the geostrategic picture of the region? It is difficult to say at this early stage. Turkey and Iran remain natural powers on account of their size, geography, and historic role, while Israel commands a unique military capability in the region. Turkey remains an important ally, but it sees the world through a different prism than during the Cold War when it anchored NATO’s southeastern flank. We continue to see Iran behaving in dangerous ways, even as talk of a U.S.-led military strike wanes.

Neither Iran nor Turkey seems the clear beneficiary of the current unrest. To date, the protests in Egypt or Tunisia have not exhibited a strong religious quality although commentaries left and right worry about “Islamic fundamentalism” gaining control of new countries. This does not look like the Islamic revolution we saw in Iran in 1979. In fact, what might emerge in a country like Egypt may look more like Turkey where the military, Islamist, and progressive forces all reach accommodation, even if at times this is unsteady.

What is particularly interesting is that Turkey’s new policy of “zero problems toward its neighbors” has actually brought it closer with Iran in recent years. This raises the possibility of a new regional alignment given the two countries’ common economic interests and strained relations with the West. I gauge this to be unlikely, as such a development would have to overcome major hurdles, but it could prove difficult to U.S. interests in Iraq and Afghanistan, with regard to Israel, and on energy.

What we see, even at a time of such turbulence, is a continuing role for the United States in the region. These uprisings have not been about us—for the first time in decades, Arab populations feel genuine pride in their own accomplishments. But neither are they aimed at driving out American influence. The most important decisions are surely still in front of us, but there is nothing to indicate to me that the U.S.-led order in the Middle East is likely to fundamentally erode any time soon, even if countries go through the painful process of opening political space.

So, on balance, I conclude that this international system, in the abstract, is stable. And although there are certainly hot spots in East Asia and Southwest Asia that could devolve into significant violence, I personally judge these possibilities to be remote.

So we turn to the second question. Is this a durable international system? Here our judgment is understandably affected by the current bitter experience of the global recession. America has been diminished during this recession, as has Europe. China, India, and Brazil have weathered it well and seem on a trajectory of growth again. The United States is also still entangled in debilitating wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, which has caused considerable strain on its military establishment.

Acknowledging all this, I think it is still quite likely that America will remain a global superpower for decades to come. First, its demographic base is still growing (albeit slowly). In the next two decades, Europe’s and Russia’s demographic foundations will decline and China’s will plateau. India’s population base will continue to rise, but ironically that is also perpetuating its poverty.

Second, the United States retains an astounding foundation of intellectual talent and idea generation that is actually improving during this recession. America’s universities remain strong, and research and development spending (the highest in the world) is still increasing as a percentage of GNP. It is widely felt in America that during this time of recession, we should spend more on research and development, not less.

Third, while America’s military is badly strained after almost ten years of warfare, it is still a formidable force. America puts more military ships to sea every day than the rest of the world’s
navies combined. It now has an officer corps that has fought a clever enemy for nearly a decade’s time. We have never had such a fine officer corps in our history. We have pioneered remarkable new collaborative mechanisms between the intelligence community and the military establishment. And although we are entering a period when the public will demand reduced federal spending, defense expenditures total only 3.5 percent of GDP, and there is a robust consensus to sustain roughly this level of force indefinitely.

I relay all this to say that America is likely to retain its fundamental foundation for hard power for at least the next two to three decades. Certainly America’s “soft power” was eroded because of the way we responded in anger and fear after 9/11. But President Obama has substantially corrected this perception.

America’s leading role as the global superpower is likely to remain, but the regional superpowers in the world are gaining strength. So America’s relative dominance will decline. This is inevitable. And because I think this is largely a stable international system, a more prosperous world in general is a good thing for America’s specific national interests.

Several key questions, however, remain unsolved and merit discussion. First, how should we institutionalize this international system? The current international structures reflect the power balance that emerged after World War II. The UN Security Council has five permanent members—three of which are European (counting Russia as a European state). Three regional superpowers—India, Brazil, and Japan—are not permanent members and in my mind should be. Yet it seems impossible to structure a reform effort.

The Group of Eight appears to be waning, with the Group of 20 rising to replace it. While the G-20 has the advantage of being more representative of economic and demographic power, it is an unwieldy size and currently has plausibility only on economic matters. It is hard to see how the G-20 would have anything meaningful to say or do on security questions.

Second, we have an uneven basis of interest or commitment to maintain the current international system. I think it is the dominant perception in America that China is prepared to operate within the current international system but not take ownership of it or responsibility for sustaining it. Rising India clearly feels that the current international system is skewed toward the Euro-Atlantic community. Regional superpowers to varying degrees feel the current international system largely rewards America’s dominance.

Yet I do not see a great ideological challenge to the current international order. President Chavez in Venezuela, for example, has quite vocally challenged the international system that he believes is skewed by American values and interests. But I don’t see a wide or influential following to his philosophy. So there is no great philosophical divide in the world over how to organize the international system and around what values. Yet America is increasingly fatigued by its role as lead manager of the current international system and is increasingly ambivalent about the current international institutions. How will a commitment to sustain or amend this international system arise? And what alternatives are there to it?

My perspective on our current international system has grown out of years of travel overseas and ongoing conversations I continue to have with a wide variety of stakeholders. My perspective has benefited greatly from the in-depth and insightful country studies found in this volume. We are living in a remarkable period where the entire international system is potentially at an inflection point. The way other countries perceive American power today will shape the order that emerges in the years ahead.