

Book Review

The Post-American World

Fareed Zakaria

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The 1990s were one of the most exciting periods in recent history. After decades under the shadow of communism and the Cold War, Eastern Europe opened up to ideas of democracy and free market, and an aura of hope and anticipation for peace spread across the continent. The use of information technology in all aspects of life gave new meaning to international communication and trade. This form of globalization afforded a vast array of opportunities for economic growth for many nations. Although the 1990s began an era with the United States as the world's sole superpower, they also offered avenues for the rise of challengers to the position of the United States as a global force.

In *The Post-American World*, Fareed Zakaria, a noted newspaper columnist and author, analyzes the present position of the United States, the challenges it faces, and its future in a transitioning world. The book draws attention to the gradual rise of China, India, Brazil, and Russia as these countries attempt to claim status in the arena of world affairs. Zakaria specifically discusses the growth of the world's two most populous countries, China and India, and attempts to explain the implications of these nations' growth for the United States's power. Although Zakaria believes that the United States does not face any immediate economic or political challenge from these emerging world actors, he reminds U.S. policymakers to pre-

pare for a change in the dynamics of international relations because of the increasing power and assertiveness of other countries.

Zakaria begins by describing a “new transformation” that is taking place around the world—the “third great tectonic power shift” (2) to occur in the last 500 years. The first power shift occurred during the rise of the West and produced “modernity as we know it: science and technology, commerce and capitalism, the agricultural and industrial revolutions” (1). The second shift occurred at the end of the nineteenth century, when the United States became the world’s largest economy and gradually emerged as the world’s greatest political power. Zakaria argues that the highlight of the third era is not the decline of the United States, but “the rise of the rest,” as China and India are projected to become “the second- and third-largest economies in the world” (21) and as Russia and Europe are “more strongly asserting their interests” (37). It is unclear why Zakaria confines his historical comparison to a relatively short 500-year time frame. This limitation prevents an objective analysis of the causes of the rise and fall of great powers and may make the book slightly over-optimistic regarding the future of the United States as a superpower.

Zakaria describes China’s success at maintaining an average annual economic growth rate of 9 percent for almost three decades. In one day today, China exports the more than it exported in all of 1978 (89). With a population of 1.3 billion people and economic fortunes rising, China will add a new dynamic to the international system. However, Zakaria maintains that it is unrealistic to think that China will economically surpass the United States in the next few decades. At its present growth rate (where gross domestic product doubles every 10 years), China’s GDP will only reach \$12 trillion by 2028—far less than the \$28 trillion projected for the United States that year. However, the trend indicates that “as other countries grow faster, America’s relative economic weight will fall” (41). Similarly, Zakaria does not see China, with the world’s second largest defense spending, posing any urgent military threat to the United States, which outspends the rest of the world’s combined defense budgets.

Zakaria’s explanation of China’s emergence as a world power is simplistic and fails to consider important factors other than economy or defense

spending. Looking beyond the last 500 years, factors such as the internal dynamics of nations, the changing characteristics of populations, and the union of countries to form regional blocs, manifest themselves as important considerations in understanding the destiny of nations. For example, even if the U.S. economy continues to grow at its present rate, Zakaria ignores the fact that the United States lacks control over global capitalism and the unrestrained outflow of finance that, at times, can suddenly leave a state grappling for stability (Panitch 1997).

To argue his main point that the United States does not face any immediate challenge to its position in the world, Zakaria also discusses the edge that the United States maintains in higher education. Universities in the United States graduate the highest number of doctorate students per capita. However, Zakaria fails to recognize that a large number of the doctoral graduates are international students who often return home, especially as their home countries improve economically. I'm a doctoral student and plan to go back to my country even though Pakistan is facing a number of problems, ranging from internal tensions between the constituent nationalities to Islamic extremism along its northern borders. In spite of that, Pakistan has benefited from the economic boom and the impact of globalization in the region, which has resulted in improved living standards in the country—a reasonable incentive to go back and serve there.

Zakaria also echoes journalist and author Thomas Friedman's (see, for one, 2006) contention that immigration is America's "secret weapon" to maintain educational, technical, and economic superiority (195). Zakaria chooses to remain silent, however, on the long-term impact of immigration and how it affects several other challenges, including terrorism. Zakaria asserts that Muslim militancy and organizations like Al-Qaeda are minor irritants and should not merit much attention or resources. As terrorist groups continue on their killing spree, they engender more antagonism from Muslim populations. Zakaria claims that over the last six years support for Osama bin Laden has steadily declined throughout the Muslim world. He seems overly distracted by the fact that terrorists have not inflicted any major act of terrorism in Europe or the United States in the past few years, and does not acknowledge the likelihood that increased security

measures are preventing major attacks from occurring. In his final analysis, Zakaria does, however, recommend that the United States take steps to strengthen civil society in Muslim countries to help contain terrorist activity rather than confining itself to aiding governments or regimes indirectly.

Despite the recent conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, Zakaria argues that the present era is the most peaceful in human history. He suggests that living in the age of information and communication makes it seem like conflict is more prevalent because “every bomb that explodes is breaking news” (9). Here Zakaria seems to conclude that the world is more peaceful today because relatively few lives are lost in wars. His view is problematic because it ignores the threat of large-scale human annihilation due to intentional or accidental nuclear war.

Although Zakaria concedes that the United States has committed blunders at home and abroad, he argues that America’s macroeconomic problems are not the result of “deep inefficiencies” within the economy. He believes the government policies that caused the “dysfunctions,” such as wasteful spending and subsidies, a low savings rate, and rising unemployment, can be quickly and easily reformed to restore economic stability (211). The current recession seems to suggest otherwise. Zakaria believes that although the United States remains a politico-military superpower, in other sectors—such as industry, finance, and education—the distribution of world power is shifting away from U.S. dominance. He contends that the post-American world will be influenced and shaped from many different places and by many different people.

Zakaria suggests that the United States must act with a global perspective, seeking to work with its friends and enemies alike. Attempting to move its agendas unilaterally will not solve emerging international problems. The United States maintains a strategic position in the world because of its democratic disposition and default status as a superpower. The United States can set the international agenda and gain support of many nations in the world. Zakaria suggests that the United States should become a “global broker” by forging close relationships with other major countries through “consultation, cooperation, and even compromise” (233).

Throughout the book, Zakaria maintains a slightly pro–United States

perspective. Although his description of American ideals and fundamentals is refreshing, Zakaria fails to offer a critical perspective on many issues the United States faces, such as the war in Iraq. He doesn't discuss the Americans' propensity to ignore past mistakes, such as those made in Vietnam. Zakaria's analysis would benefit from a more comprehensive comparison with Great Britain's experience as a global power. He himself argues that Britain lost its superpower status "not because of bad politics but because of bad economics"—its burgeoning war debt and other macroeconomic problems (180). In contrast, according to Zakaria, America faces largest challenge on the political front rather than on the economic front. Although the United States has recently been criticized for its brinkmanship worldwide and confronts some political challenges internationally, Zakaria appears to ignore the enormity of the economic challenges America faces. According to a Brookings report, the federal deficit is projected to cross the \$1 trillion mark this year, which will make it larger as a share of the economy than at any time since World War II (Auerbach 2009). While Zakaria offers suggestions to help the United States gain more respect from the rest of the world, he only recommends tinkering to address the country's economic problems.

The Post-American World has particular relevance in the current geopolitical and economic situation. The book successfully advocates for a peaceful world with multiple centers of economic activity under the leadership of the United States. But it fails to address several complexities that the United States currently faces as a global player. The book is a good read for anyone who is looking for a simple but engaging discourse on the dynamics of a globalized world.

References

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