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Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World*. New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008.

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Few would disagree that the previous U.S. administration of George W. Bush Jr. plunged America's international reputation to an all-time low. Even as the country staggers to recover international goodwill under President Barack Obama, a home-grown credit crisis, captured most strikingly in the collapse of several iconic institutions of American industry like Citigroup and General Motors, has brought the U.S. economy to a standstill. Few would doubt that America will eventually recover from both crises. Be that as it may, the unipolar moment, centered on the preeminence of American power, purse, and presence may well and truly be over, or so we are often told. What powers will take the place of the U.S., and how will these new players and forces be configured? This is the question that Fareed Zakaria attempts to answer in his latest tome, *The Post-American World*.

The continued viability of American global dominance has been the subject of great intellectual debate over the past decade or so. Fareed however, is not interested – at least not explicitly – in contributing to the debate on whether America is still the sole superpower, nor is he keen on using that debate as a point of entry. Indeed, as he makes poignantly clear in the first sentence of the book, his interest is in “the rise of the rest,” and it is only in the final third of the book (circa p.182 onwards) that Fareed ponders “how America will fare in the new world.” *The Post-American World* begins with the observation that over the last five hundred years, the world has seen three tectonic power shifts: (1) the rise of the Western world that resulted in modernity as we know it (brought on by science and technology, commerce and capitalism, and the agricultural and industrial revolutions); (2) the rise and dominance of the United States towards the end of the nineteenth century in the areas of global economics, politics, science, and culture; and (3) the rise of “the rest,” by virtue of global growth that has dispersed power and influence and contributed to the creation of a truly global order – one defined by and directed from many places and by many people.

This new global order, Fareed is quick to remind, has in fact proven remarkably peaceful. While a conclusion that would perhaps be initially met with raised eyebrows, Fareed proceeds to explain this in a manner that makes eminent sense. For instance, he argues that Islamic threat is overrated and that the struggle between governments and terrorists will persist, but with the former holding the upper hand. For instance, he explains, Al Qaeda may have been a movement out to rally the entire Muslim world to jihad against the West, but the many variations within Islam undermine its ability to merge into a single monolithic force. He goes on to suggest that ideological watchdogs have focused so much on jihad rhetoric that they have ceased to take into account the actual Muslim societies - which are frustrated with the fundamentalists, wish for modernity (that allows for dignity and cultural pride), and pursue practical solutions not martyrdom. Equally telling is his explanation for this artificial and unnecessary state of paranoia we live in. The problem, to him, lies in the mismatch between people's perception and fear of the danger (i.e. war, terrorism, organized violence) that allegedly surrounds them, and the actual reality. This, he argues, can be partly attributed to the revolution in and enhanced reach of information technology, which has amplified news content, particularly news of a more negative nature.

Of particular interest is the book's discussion of the key players in two chapters, provocatively titled “The Challenger” and “The Ally,” which betrays Fareed's abiding interest in the theme of great power politics. As the challenger, Fareed recognizes – as do many others – that China's participation on the global stage is reshaping the economic and political realities.

Beijing is basically juggling the same two forces that more or less define the post-American world, namely, globalization and nationalism, and its path of advancement is via an asymmetrical strategy through which it “gradually expands its economic ties, acts calmly and moderately, and slowly enlarges its sphere of influence, seeking only greater weight, friendship, and influence in the world...[and] quietly positions itself as the alternative to a hectoring and arrogant America.” Acknowledging China as a new challenge that the United States is largely unprepared to tackle, Fareed notes that in order to address this challenge, the American political elite have turned their gaze to India, which is described as an alternative rising power, close to, and hot on Chinese heels. The attention paid to the role of China, and to a lesser extent India, in this reconfiguration of world power, however, touches on the issue of nationalism, and in particular, the question of a resurgent nationalism. Indeed, as Fareed observes himself in his reflections on his anecdotes, emergent Chinese national identity is a potent concoction of cultural and entrepreneurial sophistication on the one hand, and potentially bellicose nationalism on the other. How China’s new generation manages these two dynamics will undoubtedly be crucial to the stability of this new global order that Fareed has carefully outlined.

As an attempt to capture complex trends in one overarching idea, *The Post-American World* provides thoughtful and meticulous analysis and interpretation. It leaves readers with little doubt that “the rest” are certainly on the rise, and this rise, for better or worse, is something that America will have to live with and perhaps even harness to advance its own position in this new global order. To be sure, Fareed hints at this when he suggests in the chapter titled “American Purpose” that the current power shift may be beneficial to the United States as the trends of democratization and the economic liberalization that follows it afford opportunities for America to remain the pivotal player in a world of robust growth and stability, even if he has by and large skirted the more complex (and potentially convoluted) question of what form of engagement this would entail on Washington’s part. So persuasive is his case for the resolute rise of “the rest,” that even though Fareed explicitly denies that it was the intention of the book, readers are invariably led to consider the reality of a possible decline of the United States.

Yet the pivotal role that America continues to command in global affairs has only recently been re-emphasized in at least two recent events. First, in what was viewed tellingly as inevitable, the credit crunch in the United States has sparked recessions in economies across the world. Second, when President Obama launched into his widely-anticipated speech at the American University in Cairo, the world watched with bated breath, dissecting each and every word as if the fate of relations between the West and the Muslim world hinged on them. These recent developments cannot but compel us to revisit some of the core assumptions, implicit or explicit, in the thesis behind *The Post-American World*. It is fast becoming trendy to argue, as Fareed does, that “the rest” are rising, and rising fast. Even then, could it not be, upon closer scrutiny, that America’s comparative and competitive advantage over “the rest,” in terms of military and economic power, natural resources, the creative energy of its population, technological know-how, and strength of institutions, built up over the last hundred years or so, is now so vast in absolute terms that even if the gap is closing, it will still be several generations before we are truly looking at a *bona fide* post-American world?

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