

# Will the New Global Order indeed be Post-American?

Michal Brumar

**Review of:** Zakaria, Fareed: *The Post-American World*. New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company 2008, pp. 308. ISBN 978-0-393-06235-9.

*In recent years, there were many new publications on the changing world order, that have sometimes been called 'the grand thesis', e.g., Ian Buruma's *After America: Is the West being overtaken by the rest?*, Parag Khanna's *The Second World: Empires and Influence in the New Global Order*, or Robert Kagan's *The Return of History and the End of Dreams* (Buruma 2008). All of these books discuss the possibilities of the future development in global politics on the highest level. It is possible to sum up their considerations around questions like: 'Will USA keep its dominant position in global politics?' or 'Is there any power that could contest the position of America?' or 'Is the global political system going to be unipolar, bipolar, multipolar or will it be shaped in any unknown, unprecedented form?' but also for example 'How to understand globalisation?'*

*The Post-American World* of Fareed Zakaria is another interesting meditation on the coming world order that argues about this topic from the more optimistic side of the discourse. According to Zakaria, the concept of a post-American world stems from various roots. The book convincingly does not work with the concept of the fall of the USA as it rather operates with the rise of the rest. Many superlatives that USA could have been described with yet a few years ago are now attributes appropri-

ated to China, India, Brazil or South Africa and even by some countries of Middle East. Some of the qualities from a handful of supremacies that Washington, D. C. is going to keep in future are based on the ability of fast technological innovation and hard-power hegemony, because militarily, the USA is still far beyond the reach of other powers. That is the reason for describing the new international order of the first years of the 21st century, Zakaria recognizes Huntington's curious term of 'unimultipolarism', that reflects the system of one superpower overseeing the multipolar system of assertive powers using mainly non-military means of politics. For the USA, this means challenge, whether it will be able to adapt itself, or will face consequences in further undermining of its own dominance.

First of all, from the position of a historian, Zakaria analyses why the western part of the world was able to develop far quicker than other civilizations. In this part, the reader can at some moments become unsure, whether he accidentally isn't reading one of older Zakaria's texts, *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad*, where he uses a very similar basis for his argument. For example, in both books, Zakaria refuses to accept the predominance of culture as a condition for continuous development. Instead of this, the main factors for him are politics and the nature of the state, which are both based on geography. According to this, the special geographic setting of the European continent is the very important aspect of evolution of limited state power that used to exist next to the power of the church, emperor, aristocracy and other actors. Because of this, in the year 1500, there were more than 500 kingdoms, dukedoms and city-states. This high number of actors means a very competitive environment, innovation and circulation of ideas. Actors have to balance each other in the sense of power both on and under the level of the state, and also be mutually responsible in legal sense. Next to this similarity with his older book, reader will not find anything overlapping. While the arguments in both books are based on the precondition of predominance of geography over politics and culture, they soon develop in interesting efforts proving the conclusions in two different areas of political science, actually depending on the book you are reading at the moment.

## Is the modernization of 'the rest' going to be peaceful?

According to Zakaria, the trends of modernization and subsequent rise of new powers onto the political stage were typical for the end of 19th century and also two decades after World War Two. But this time, the wealth spreads out of the political club of the west. Although the present era is arguably the most restful age in human history, 'the rise of the rest' brings a set of new challenges for the whole world. Zakaria sees them in various levels.

First, it is the rapid development itself that brings today's status quo into risk. High demand pushes the prices of raw materials to unprecedented high levels. Thanks to this, the states economically dependent on the export of one or two commodities that do not fully adhere to rules of the market can become rich and stabilize their positions. Regimes in Russia, Iran or Venezuela deepened their financial resources and so for some time preserved their power despite global competition. There are also states that were able to invest these temporary fortunes into new infrastructure or to liberate themselves from the dependence on exports of raw materials as for example Dubai decreased its dependence to only 5 % of its economic output. Here Zakaria's text collides with limitations of predictions in Social Science. As the media have documented since the publication of the book, although the governments of these states provisionally enriched themselves, the financial crisis had also impacted upon them. Russia suffers from the recession more than the western countries, Venezuela is more pauperised than before, and Iran has to cope with revolts against the fundamentalist regime. Next to them, Dubai finds itself on the edge of bankruptcy.

The second level of risk is based on burdens on stability of the environment that are not different from the prognoses of Thomas Malthus. Agglomerations consume vast amounts of food, water and energy and in return produce pollution and waste. While the population has grown three times, the consumption of fresh water has risen six times. Also high production of electricity for consumption in China and India will probably create five times more emissions than is set by Kyoto Protocol.

The third level of the challenge lies in the rise of new ideas based on modernization and urbanization, which can mean much more radical nationalism but also self-confidence and more expressive assertiveness of the new actors. In comparison with this, the institutions of global governance are near to obsolete, because they are based on the situation at the end of World War Two, or because the institutions were designed by the western governments as a means of their own interests. There is therefore some likelihood to expect tensions between the new powers and old institutional setting. Nationalism is a threat also on the local level inside the new actors, because their new wealth diminishes the influence of distant capital cities and governments.

## The dusk of the American hegemony?

Zakaria later analyses the rise of China and India. He examines the role of political systems and societies in the economic development of these new potential powers, so he can later look at today's position and prospects of the USA. The first of them is based on analysis of a preceding superpower, the British Empire. This comparison might be quite misleading and problematic as both of the actors have very different

backgrounds. The first of the distinctions can be found in structure of both entities. The USA as a federal state has much closer ties between its subjects and is not a still-collapsing community based on the antiquated concept of colonialism. The second distinction of the USA rests in the absence of a dominant group as that of the Britons and the position they had in the British Empire. Considering these two problems combined, the movements that have built their legitimacy on the resistance against the Empire could easily integrate the concept of liberation into their ideology. The third deficit — and that is one that Zakaria admits — is the difference in the failed attempt to preserve global economic dominance on the side of the British Empire. That is the attribute that the USA for a long time has had and probably will keep it. The result of this is then the stability of political dominance and ability to invest into political commitments, which the Britons have been slowly losing while the USA still has a strong background to stay on the top.

Zakaria builds his argumentation here on a presentation of advantages the USA has, compared to the historical position of the British Empire. The first similarity rests in the fact, that both powers were able to create truly global markets and communication networks. These two allowed them to export their own cultural specifics and therefore attain great influence over the globe. Second, we can also find tendencies to lose global popularity and legitimacy of own policies in the world. The British Empire had, at the end of 19th century, engaged in the Boer war, where the Britons used very cruel methods of warfare such as burning villages, and herding civilians into concentration camps (the world's first), something that had other great powers and public opinion openly opposed. Zakaria compares this to American operations in Iraq, which have had a similar impact on the international community and public opinion in both allied states and opposing regimes, like that of Iran and Venezuela, contributing to their populist rhetoric.

According to Zakaria's last chapter, the USA alone has a set of attributes that will determine whether it is to keep its dominant position. The first of them is economic power that can be endangered by low competitiveness in industrial production on the world stage but has good position in attracting foreign students to its own universities. This stems into the yet unchallenged ability to raise and hold experts and entrepreneurs who can quickly implement technological innovations into business.

The second attribute is based on the same line of critique as in *Future of Freedom: 'Political system that has degenerated in the last 30 years into captivity of money, special interests, sensationalist media and ideological attack groups. The result is ceaseless, virulent debate about trivia — politics as theatre — and very little substance, compromise, and action'* (p. 212) Because of this, short-term interests prevail over long-term strategies that might be very useful in today's changing global political environment.

## Legitimise the US global leadership!

Zakaria concludes his text with six recommendations for US foreign policy. These in some points seem to be a bit idealistic, but which are partially followed by today's Obama administration. First, it is to set clear priorities, because some efforts in US foreign policy, for example towards Iran seem to be neutralizing each other, like the demand of denuclearisation and against it the demand to liberalize the regime, which can force fundamentalists who might feel threatened to keep developing nuclear technology. Second, Zakaria recommends that the US set and observe the network of international rules including international law, which today results into an inconsonant foreign policy, when the USA on one hand demands the observation of human rights in some countries, while tolerating its own authoritarian allies who do not care about rights and freedoms. And third is the advice to 'be Bismarck, not Britain' (p. 241), which means to attain a stable international environment by keeping as friendly relations as possible with other great powers in order to become a respected partner. British strategy would seem to be a neutral balancer, which might prove counterproductive. The fourth is a multilateralist recommendation to use a contemporary international institutional basis for advocating US interests, not unilateral steps. The fifth bit of advice directs a look for proportional solutions for today's global problems, which Zakaria explains as '...think asymmetrically' (p. 244). His sixth recommendation deals with the continuous search for a legitimate leading position based on proactive diplomacy.

The same as in Zakaria's earlier book, *Future of Freedom*, a wide range of consideration and convincing argumentation allows the book to be recommended to those who find their interest in international relations in a deeper manner. It can also be recommended to the general public, because of his bright form of both writing and argumentation in which the text does not lay out many obstacles to the reader.

## References

- Buruma, Ian (2008) 'After America: Is the West being overtaken by the rest?' [Internet]. *The New Yorker*, 21 April 2008, [Accessed on 13 February 2010]. Available from: [http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/atlarge/2008/04/21/080421cra\\_tlarge\\_buruma?currentPage=1](http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/atlarge/2008/04/21/080421cra_tlarge_buruma?currentPage=1)