

A Commentary on Business and Knowledge Opportunities for Africa's Rise

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Fareed Zakaria. *The Post-American World*. London: Allen Lane, 2008. 292 pp. \$25.95.

The Post-American World and the Rest

Fareed Zakaria's insightful and fascinating book, *The Post-American World* (2008) deals with the gradual demise of America's power and global dominance and the consequent rise of marginal or regional powers, which include Africa. Zakaria's hypothesis about the "post-American world" resides principally in America's weakening domestic and international prowess associated with her fighting prolonged wars in recent time, dwindling manufacturing scale, weakening domestic economy and the rise of Asian Tigers as well as China. This postulation also deals with the gradual manifestation of periphery countries' potential or ability to lead the global economy with their natural endowments, rapid wave of industrialisation in regional economies and the impact of globalization, which has significantly shifted global power loci, by taking jobs away from the United States through foreign direct investment (FDI). More than all of this, Zakaria's "post-American world" thesis has brought to the fore an unprecedented way of re-thinking development of Africa's resources (human capital) given the pressures of this phenomenon in determining growth in the contemporary global power equation.

The Post-American world (2008) is Zakaria's fourth book; it takes a different approach to his earlier debates on America as a global power exemplified in his first book, *The American Encounter: The United States and the Making of the Modern World* (1997), as well as *From Wealth to Freedom* (1998) and *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad* (2003). It is a book of seven chapters. These chapters are further arranged in three parts. The first part deals with America's global power and influence; the second part is concerned with the rise of "the rest" that resonates with the Zakarian "non-Western" thesis; the last part of the triad deals with "American purpose", that is, how America could re-invent itself. Zakaria's perspective in this context is akin to the Hegelian dialectics: thesis (America's strength), antithesis (what is wrong with America) and synthesis (how to cure America). Thus, although America is in the rubbles of diminished global dominance and domestic strength, she could re-invent herself if she so desires!

On the book's inside cover is a gripping testament by former America's Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, which echoes the contributions of *The Post-American World* to the still emerging discourses on the global power as the empire retreats. On the book's jacket, Zakaria flashes torchlight on the urgency of globalization, which is diversifying as well as decentralising global power bases from America (the West) to regional economies:

Global power is shifting, and wealth and innovation are bubbling up in unexpected places: the tallest buildings, biggest dams, top-selling movies and most advanced mobile phones are all being built or made outside the United States (p. i).

The book appeals to America, rather than continuing its role as global hegemon, to see the need to transmute her global strategies – particularly in the area of military might. In doing this, America needs to share power, build legitimacy, create global coalition and above all, forge global agenda in a distributed manner:

A related aspect of this new era is the diffusion of power from states to other actors. The 'rest' that is rising includes many non-state actors. Groups and individuals have been empowered, and hierarchy, decentralisation and control are being undermined. functions that were once controlled by governments are now shared with international bodies like the World Trade Organisation ... corporations and capital are moving away from place to place, finding the best location in which to do business ... (p. 4).

With clarity, insight and forthright imagination, Fareed Zakaria draws on lessons from two great shifts of the past five hundred years – the emergence of Western power and the rise of the United States of America. Deductively, Zakaria identifies the demise of America's power in the new era on the heels of globalization as "... the three tectonic power shifts over the last five hundred years, fundamental changes in the distribution of powers that have reshaped international life – its politics, economics and culture" (p. 1).

The Post-American World and the Rise of Periphery Nations ("the Rest"): Locating Africa's Business Voice in the "Knowledge Worker" Age

As Zakaria indicates, "the post-American world", has many opportunities for the Saidian "Others" or nations considered on the socioeconomic periphery. As Benito & Nerula (2007) contend in their book, *Multinationals on the Periphery*,

the concept of a periphery has been with us a long time, and by its very definition, implies that it is relative to the existence of a 'core'. Researchers in the area of 'world systems theory' have argued that the core-periphery dichotomy (in its current sense) among nations has been with us since a least the 16th century when the foundations of the modern capitalist system and international trade led to the beginning of globalisation and the interdependence of nations through trade ... building on the core-periphery argument, addresses the challenges for development and catch-up for the countries in the periphery – who are, by definition, economically or otherwise poorer or less technologically advanced than countries of the core (2007, p. 2).

Thus, as Zakaria stated, *The Post-American World* is about "the rise of everyone else. It is about the great transformation that ... though often discussed, remains poorly understood ... We are now living through the third great power shift of the modern era. It could be called 'the rise of the rest' (p.1-2).'

The thematic strand that percolates in the global consciousness amongst less developed nations to be individualistic and to be identified in the comity of nations:

When thinking about what the world will look like as the rest rise and the West wanes, I am always reminded of ... [T]oday, people around the world are becoming more comfortable putting their own indigenous imprint on modernity... Local and modern are growing side by side with global and Western (p. 81-2).

As modernity becomes less the possession of America as well as the West, periphery nations, which include Africa, are stridently marching on to be recognised in international community. These nations are re-engineering their capital base and reconceptualizing the need to be a part of the global wealth distribution by re-assessing their potential strength in developing human capital for knowledge creation and empowerment (Itika, 2011).

The growth of China, Brazil, India, Kenya and other regional economies is redefining the global wealth cartography. However, nation-states in the present era need to shake off stifling the voice of the people (human capital) for the periphery nations to be relevant in the global marketplace. In his *The End of the Nation-State: The Rise of the Regional Economies*, Kenichi Ohmae maintains that

the uncomfortable truth is that, in terms of the global economy, nation-states have become little more than bit actors. They may originally have been, in their mercantilist phase, independent, powerfully efficient engines of wealth creation. More recently, however, as the downward-ratcheting logic of electoral politics has placed a death grip on their economies, they have become – first and foremost – remarkably inefficient engines of wealth distribution. Elected political leaders gain and keep power by giving voters what they want, and what they want rarely entails a substantial decrease in the benefits, services, or subsidies handed out by the state (p. 12).

From the start, there is a big challenge for nation-states to facilitate development and emancipation in regional economies. To do this, an African brand of leadership has to be reconfigured to take cognizance of valuing people and knowledge creation and management. In Africa, despite the fanfare and celebration that greeted her march from military rule to democracy in the last few decades, there is less to show in the economic empowerment of nations and their people as well as business opportunities this has created. What has been described as cheap nationalism pandering to the emotion-grabbing symbols of nationhood has produced no concrete evidence of improvement in the quality of lives of the people, nor the knowledge of the economy that should drive the continent's business opportunities. This is crucially important for Africa's entrepreneurial development and knowledge economy empowerment (Handelman, 2006). For Africa to rise from its economic and business ashes so as to be relevant in the global marketplace as America's power wanes, she has to find her voice in the age of Druckerian "knowledge worker", which is prerequisite to survive in the current global marketplace. In the contemporary business era following the urgency of globalisation and information age, Africa needs to adjust its business antenna to negotiate more as well as to be competitive and relevant. This is what Bill Clinton sees in our world today: "we are living in a world, where what we *earn* is a function of what we *learn*".

The Post-American World breaks from the view of America as an unending oasis of power and resources. It brings a lot of revelations to light regarding the how regional powers could appropriate the current global economic heartbeat for their emancipation and business prosperity. This is especially important for Africa, which seriously lags behind in the comity of nations given its leadership malaise as well as underdevelopment, poverty and low level of industrialisation. Within this frame, in her "Knowledge Management: What Makes Complex Implementations Successful?", Marina Plessis (2007, p. 97-8) underlined what African businesses should do if they want to find their own identity in the global power shift.

While most studies that deal with the subject matter of America's decline in contemporary world politics, economy, military strength and culture take this debate to a theoretical and analytical level couched in statistical and pragmatic data, Zakaria's perspective on this as articulated in the book is rather sketchy but smart and perspicacious. Zakaria is short on detail, but long on superficial, name-dropping vignettes of world history that adumbrates his "tectonic power shifts" schema. Also, rather than cite statistics or possibly draw on recent events around the world in detail that buttress his position, Zakaria dwells on a prognosis of the future without sound empirical basis. Zakaria even admitted in his "Acknowledgements" page that he hopes his son, Omar, would not be embarrassed in the future if his hypothesis fails (p. 272). Nevertheless, *The Post-American World* is a rich tapestry of vision for the rise of the Saidian other ("the rest") – the regional blocs – as the might of America burns out like wax before the candle of recent global realities.

References

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