

The New New World

In this examination of power, Fareed Zakaria focuses not so much on the decline of America, but on the rise of China and India.

BY JOSEF JOFFE

THE POST-AMERICAN WORLD

By Fareed Zakaria.

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EVERY 20 years or so, the end of America is nigh — ever since the 18th century when, in France, Comte de Buffon fingered the country as a den of degeneracy while Abbé Raynal slammed its cultural poverty: America had not yet produced “one good poet, one able mathematician, one man of genius.” In 1987, in his book “The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers,” the Yale historian Paul Kennedy saw the United States on the road to perdition — this, four years before the suicide of the Soviet Union, which left America all alone in the penthouse of global power. Now, two decades on, it is the much-hyped “great power shift” toward Asia that will turn the United States into a has-been.

At first blush, “The Post-American World,” by Fareed Zakaria, seems to fall into the same genre. But make no mistake. This is a relentlessly intelligent book that eschews simple-minded projections from crisis to collapse. There is certainly plenty to bemoan — from the disappearing dollar to the subprime disaster, from rampant anti-Americanism to wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that will take years to win.

Yet Zakaria's is not another exercise in declinism. His point is not the demise of Gulliver, but the “rise of the rest.” After all, how can this giant follow Rome and Britain onto the dust heap of empire if it can prosecute two wars at once without much notice at home? The granddaughters of those millions of Rosie the Riveters who kept the World War II economy going are off to the mall today; if they don't shop till they drop, it's because of recession, not rationing.

The real problem, Zakaria argues, is the rise of China, trailed by India. China's is indeed the most incredible success story in history — a tale of almost 30 years of growth in the 7-to-10-percent range that seems to defy the laws of economic gravity. The United States, Germany and Japan had similar tales to tell in the late 19th century, but bust was the price of boom, and for Germany as well as Japan (add Russia, too), headlong industrialization ended in the horrors of 20th-century totalitarianism.

But for China it's up, up and away. As Zakaria memorably puts it, “China today

exports in a single day more than it exported in all of 1978.” Authoritarian modernization just hums along. The Party's message reads “Enrich yourselves, but leave the driving to us,” and most of 1.3 billion Chinese seem happy to comply — and to consume. With power safely lodged in the Politburo, China does not conform to the historical pattern of “first rich, then rowdy,” which led to Tokyo's and Berlin's imperialist careers.

So why worry? “The problem is size,” Zakaria writes. “China operates on so large a scale that it can't help changing the nature of the game.” True, but let's play another game, that of compound interest. China's (nominal) G.D.P. is about \$3 trillion, while America's is \$14 trillion. Assume indefinite Chinese growth of 7 percent. That will double G.D.P. to \$6 trillion in 10 years and double it again to \$12 trillion by 2028. Assume now that the United States will grow at its historical rate of 3.5 percent. By 2028, G.D.P. will measure \$28 trillion. This is a silly game, but no more inane than those projections that see China overtaking the United States as early as 2020. American output would still be about one-quarter of the world total, the average for the past 125 years, as Zakaria reminds us.

What about the shifting tides of power? In the affairs of nations, “power” is more complex than in physics. The “hard stuff” — military clout — is certainly central. China's defense budget may be the world's No. 2, but in dollar terms, America spends almost as much as the rest of the world combined. Hence, might — at least American might — doesn't just “grow out of the barrel of a gun,” as Mao Zedong famously had it; “it's the economy, stupid.” Will America stay on top — devaluation, deficits and all?

So, let's look at a related determinant of power: culture. Again, Zakaria proceeds more subtly than the run-of-the-mill declinist by stressing American advantages not captured by growth rates and export surpluses. He rightly takes on the old saw to the effect that China produces 600,000 engineers a year, India 350,000 and the United States only 70,000. This is true if you include “auto mechanics and industrial repairmen” in the Asian totals. Subtract them, and America “actually trains more engineers per capita than either India or China does.”

The larger point is that “higher education

is America's best industry" — never mind the creeping demise of Detroit's Big Three. "With 5 percent of the world's population, the United States absolutely dominates higher education, having either 42 or 68 percent of the world's top 50 universities" (depending on who is counting). In India, he adds, "universities graduate between 35 and 50 Ph.D.'s in computer science each year; in America the figure is 1,000." Now, Beijing is pouring oodles into its universities, but so did Austin, Tex., in the oil-rich '70s, and Stanford et al. are still on top.

In the industrial age, hardware mattered; today it is software, aka "culture." This is a grab bag: skills, openness, innovation, opportunity, competition. "It's brains, stupid," Bill Clinton might exclaim today. And youth. China, Japan and Europe are aging rapidly; the United States will remain a young country way into the 21st century. And why? Immigration is "America's secret weapon." In my Stanford class, the A's regularly go to students called Kim, Zhou, Patel or Vertiz; these are not the "huddled masses," but their children — the gifted and hungry who will slough off the old and drive the new. "First rich, then fat and lazy" will not be America's fate.

What's the problem, then? "America remains the global superpower today, but it is an enfeebled one." It has blown wads of political capital, but it is still better positioned to manage the "rise of the rest" than its rivals. Europe is rich, but placid and graying. Resurgent Russia is too grabby. China is more subtle in its ambitions, but still a classic revisionist that wants more for itself and less for the whole. It craves respect but will choose bloody repression in the crunch, as in Tibet.

THE United States, too, has acted the bully in recent years, and it has paid dearly. Still, why does it retain "considerable ability to set the agenda," to quote Zakaria? How can it muster the

convener power that brings 80 nations to Annapolis? The short answer (mine) is: America remains the "default power"; others may fear it, but who else will take care of global business? Maybe it takes a liberal, seafaring empire, as opposed to the Russian or the Habsburg, to temper power and self-interest with responsibility for the rest.

And maybe it takes a Bombay-born immigrant like Zakaria, who went from Yale to Harvard (where we were colleagues) and to the top of Newsweek International, to remind this faltering giant of its unique and enduring strengths. America will be in trouble only when China becomes home to tomorrow's hungry masses yearning to be free — and to make it. □

Josef Joffe is the publisher-editor of Die Zeit in Hamburg and a senior fellow at Stanford. His latest book is "Überpower: The Imperial Temptation of America."

A skyline rises in Shanghai, 2004.