

Book Review

Author: Fareed Zakaria

Title: *Ten Lessons for Post-Pandemic World*

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Reviewer: *Severine M. Rugumamu**

As the COVID-19 pandemic was devastatingly spreading all over the world, Fareed Zakaria, an Indian-American journalist, political commentator and author, attempted to discuss what the new global geopolitical order would be like in its aftermath. The book has ten short chapters of ten lessons employing wide lens, drawing on governance, economics and strategic studies. It provides a rich historical overview of how similar pandemics in the past radically disrupted day-to-day living, while also opening up opportunities for positive change. The author brilliantly chronicles how the COVID-19 pandemic was likely to change the world forever, adding that "... it may well turn out that this viral speck will have caused the greatest economic, political and social damage to mankind since World War 2." The central message of the book comes in the last paragraph: "This ugly pandemic has... opened up a path to a new world...It's ours to take that opportunity or squander it." At this juncture, one may be tempted to ask: was the impact of this pandemic projected to be so profound as to warrant the re-ordering of global geopolitics? It is in my opinion that the impact of this pandemic by itself would probably not warrant such a re-ordering.

At the very minimum, the book attempted to perform a Herculean task of forecasting a post-pandemic future long before the dynamic constants were in full play. It was a Herculean effort of sorts in the sense that there were several key unknowns about the scope and lethality of the COVID-19 pandemic itself, geopolitical contestations, and alliance formations. Some of those evolving unknowns included, among others, the contested origins of the outbreak of the deadly infectious disease, with implications for future policy, biological research and public-health surveillance; the probability of viral mutations and evolution into novel variants had not been fully studied and established; there were no fully tested vaccines with respect to the vaccines' safety and efficacy; a toxic tide of vaccine nationalism, stockpiling and failure to ensure universal vaccination. Research on all these issues is still at nascent stages. Nor had the global health crisis been roundly spanned into competitive geopolitical diplomacy, as well as mapped into the labyrinth of corporate greed by major powers and pharmaceutical companies. As the Italian political theoretician Antonio Gramsci succinctly put it: "... the old is dying and the new cannot be born!" Since there is no single future until it happens, efforts at envisioning geopolitics must include a range of possible futures; not simply fronting one as the most preferred to replace the 'dying global orders'.

Slowly but discernibly, the distribution of global power resources has been shifting away from the US to several other actors in the last few decades. The US National

*Professor, Institute of Development Studies, University of Dar es Salaam

Intelligence Council, for example, projected that in 2025 "... the US will remain the pre-eminent power but that American dominance will be much diminished." The gradual fading of American hegemony has taken many different forms and shapes, each differing in kind, but hugely eroding the foundations on which its global power has been historically anchored. Starting from the Soviet launch of the Sputnik to the current COVID-19 pandemic, the US has experienced monumental seismic shocks one after another. These include its quagmire withdrawal from the Vietnam war in the 1960s; the Oil Shock of 1973; hangover from the Watergate political scandal; the rise of Japan in the late 1980s; the Iraq War; the 9/11 terrorist attack on the US symbols of power; the clumsy withdrawal from Afghanistan; and the protracted post-2020 election saga. In each and every monumental challenge to America's prestige symbols, the political system has proven unable and—at times—unwilling to meet them in a satisfactory manner. In his seminal work, *The Decline of American Power*, Immanuel Wallenstein presciently concluded that "... today, the United States is a superpower that lacks true power, a world leader that nobody follows and few respect, and a nation drifting dangerously amidst a global chaos it cannot control." In the context of contemporary power diffusion, the 'rise of the rest', and emerging counter-alliances, the United States' alliances and networks are not as powerful and legitimate enough to shape and direct the post-COVID-19 global events to serve, first and foremost, its national interests.

As a very firm believer in American global power, Zakaria hugely fails to acknowledge that, in the absence of a war among rival powers where a victor side imposes its preferred orders on the vanquished, who should provide legitimate leadership to construct post-pandemic global orders in the context of power dispersion and diffusion? If there is to be negotiated global order that should promote not only peace but also help to realize universal equality and development, and find solutions to traditional and non-traditional security challenges, what would be the irreducible defining global issues, values and norms for negotiation? Which reforms to existing global institutions would be required and fit for purpose for the digital economy and for global human security threats? What additional global institutions would be required to complement the reformed old ones? How much international disruption and/or hegemonic wars would attend the transition from the old to the new? These and similar questions are not paused, let alone answered, in Zakaria's *Ten Lessons for Post-Pandemic World*. Arguably, there is always a range of possible post-*Pax Americana* futures, not just one future as falsely claimed by the author!