

# Fareed, the global polymath

**UPCLOSE & PERSONAL**  
with Dr Fareed Zakaria



**I**F Dr Fareed Zakaria was any smoother, he would metamorphose into a hearty cappuccino. Whether addressing a crowd of around 800 participants comprising financial professionals, policymakers and politicians at the World Capital Markets Symposium in Kuala Lumpur earlier this week or facing off with movers and shakers, like his tête-à-tête with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak, the CNN broadcaster, author and columnist evolves into a category of his own — the global polymath able to filter the world's mess and convey a sense of meaning that everyone can understand.

There were journalists, ambassadors, troubleshooters like him before — in contemporary times, the French intellectual and author Bernard-Henri Lévy comes to mind — but Fareed exudes far more range in his two books on politics and globalisation, columns for *TIME* or the *Washington Post* or his CNN programme *GPS* and public discourses, like the Kuala Lumpur date hosted by the Securities Commission.

It appears that every pressing globalisation issue, no matter how wide and exponential, is within Fareed's radar — American globocop dominance but homegrown vulnerabilities, trouble in the Middle East, the African malaise, China's economic powerhouse, Indo-Chinese defiance, Asean's place in the world — they all are effortlessly analysed and presented. While Fareed's prose is lucid, even dry, it is essential in that he gets his ideas and message across unhidden and precise as was his routine when he sat down, legs crossed and hands clasped, with NST's commentator *Azmi Anshar* and political editor *Shahrul Sayuthi* in a series of tête-à-tête with the Malaysian media.

**Question:** America is seen by many critics and pundits as weakening in the eyes of global economy. It is no longer the top dog. Is that the real situation now?

**Answer:** Dynamics is not about the decline of America but rise of other countries. That creates a more equal world — America will not be able to dominate the way it used to in 1995 or 1996 during the Asian economic crisis. We are not entering a world of American decline or weakness — that is an exaggeration.

To be a global power, one must have all components — economic, military, political and cultural. I think the United States retains a very powerful set of tools that constitutes an impressive portfolio.

However, in Latin America, it is Brazil. In the Middle East, it is Turkey; in Asia, it is China and India.

**Question:** America is a walking paradox. You are a leader of many things — pop culture, military, business and technological innovation — but you find it difficult to protect yourself against something like the government shutdown, gun issue and

**right-wing extremism. A lot of people are saying that that's the way America is punishing itself.**

**Answer:** There is a need to view these from a historical perspective. In the 1960s, America was 35 per cent of world gross domestic product but there was the Soviet Union, which was a superpower alongside the US. There was internal division in the US (like) the civil rights. Vietnam was the external wound that tore the country apart. Also, there was Watergate. (The) US has always been a messy democracy.

China does have problems but they are suppressed. The US is very transparent. In the short run, it's terrible but in the long run, it's very good.

**Question:** Americans are getting popular here in Southeast Asia following Chinese

**assertion of territorial claims. There are many worries here about the language used by Chinese and how the Americans can balance and assist. Care to elaborate?**

**Answer:** My prediction: there will be a greater appreciation for Americans not just here but also in the world. China was giving money without lectures on democracy... but that comes with certain conditions (like) recognising China in certain ways. For example, the border issues.

I do not believe that China is being imperialist or colonising but it is clearly trying to assert (its) powers.

In that context, the US is seen as a more useful friend. I think America and Southeast Asia are handling this quite well.

For America, it's much better to have China succeed than fail but we also want a China that respects other countries.

**Question:** What do you think of the way Malaysia is handling its foreign policy?

**Answer:** For instance, it's close to the Americans but at the same time, chummy with the Chinese. The way it handles its military procurement — getting it from the Russians and the Americans. Is this kind of foreign policy sustainable in the long run?

**Answer:** I think Malaysia has handled its foreign policy quite well. Naturally, you would want to maintain your independence but I would argue that there is a kind of natural bond that Malaysia has with the US. There are common geopolitical concerns with regards to China. But there is also a great deal of common culture, political system and values.

I noticed in Malaysia, people are interested in and connect to America, and the American dream in a way that they don't to the Chinese. Even Chinese in Malaysia don't have that fas-

ination (with China). People are talking about the Chinese migrating from Malaysia but they don't go to China. They go to Australia, Singapore and the US. They're not "going back" to China. With China's rise to power, people are not fascinated by the Chinese dream. They respect China but they don't fall in love with it.

Malaysia and America have a greater degree of a society-to-society bond, which ultimately makes for a strong alliance not just government-to-government bond.

**Question:** I'm intrigued by that. I think America's hold on the world is through its immense pop culture where the only thing that is stopping you is your imagination. Look at your movies, for instance. I'm amazed at the technology and ideas. People say that's entertainment but I see a lot more. How do you see America's pop culture hold on the world, not just movies, but books, magazines and the Internet lifestyle?

**Answer:** What you say is absolutely right. Now, Hollywood is making movies for the world. All pop culture is a reflection of the idea of America. At its core, it is about an individual's ability to be himself or herself to exercise maximum amount of freedom and individuality. That comes through music, lifestyle and movies.

That's why people still look to America as a place where you can be yourself. A place where you can exercise your individuality to the maximum extent — no cultural or social inhibitions. (It's) very different from a place like China. Partly the reason Malaysia is comfortable with that world. Malaysia is a big messy multicultural pot where people are comfortable with differences and make sense of it and live with it.

**Question:** It is said that India may overtake China because even though it is lagging behind, its people have better individuality as opposed to China, which is very restrictive. Do you agree with this?

**Answer:** No. China's economy is three times that of India's. It is still growing faster than India. At this point, India can't catch up. India would have to do so much faster than China to catch up. In two or three decades, that's not going to happen.

China has perfected its development model. It has found a formula with the ability to plan and execute. China is ahead and will remain ahead. (But) India will do well because there is lot of human and individualistic talent. They are more productive and their capital usage is efficient. (India) has a lot more globally minded companies compared with China. India has more advantages but ultimately, China's powerful pro-growth policy will keep it ahead.

**Question:** Now that you mentioned China's pro-growth policy, do you think that's the right model for the developing countries?

**Answer:** Here is the problem. In China, you have the dictatorship that has been proven to be very pro-growth. Reasonably, it has got its economic policy right and it is careful about abuse of political power. They have a two-term limit. How do you get that in a dictatorship? Most dictatorships look more like (former Philippine president Ferdinand) Marcos than they do China.

How do you make sure that you get a limited pro-growth dictatorship? I don't know... I think China and Singapore are locked in to this. If I can get (former Singaporean mentor minister) Lee Kuan Yew to run America, I will be interested. But how do you make sure that you got Lee and not Marcos? That's the problem with dictatorship. You can't be sure what you can get. Most dictators are terrible with

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economic policy. They run the politics into the ground and they also run the economy into the ground.

Yet, if you could find the rare case of a dictatorship that is pro-growth, then it leads to the big challenge that China is facing, that is, what now to do with the politics. I don't believe that the system will collapse but I can see that the Chinese government has a very great concern about the fate of the Communist Party. They do feel that the legitimacy of the Communist party is under threat.

**Question:** Do you think Malaysia is also practising pro-growth dictatorship?

**Answer:** I think Malaysia has done well even though it's a single-party dominated state that could lead to bad directions. By and large, in the past 15 years, there's been a movement in the right direction. Malaysia always benefited by being part of the flock of geese that strives to move in the same direction as the other East Asian countries. But it does face real challenges of investing productively in human capital.

**Question:** Your views on the prime minister (Datuk Seri Najib Razak)?

**Answer:** Najib is a very bright man and good leader. He has won the (general) election and he has gotten the Umno election out of the way in the direction that he wanted it. Now, he probably has two years to implement his agenda before politics rears its head again. In these next two years, he can set his legacy and should ask himself, what does he want to be remembered for.

In the next two years, he should put in place policies to make things happen. I hope that is what he will do because he is a very bright man.

He knows where Malaysia needs to go... move from investing in physical capital to human capital. It's not just funding education but making the society more merit-based and having more skilled workers working on merit, education and skills rather than other things. It doesn't have to happen overnight and it doesn't have to be revolutionary, but it has to start moving in that direction. Otherwise, you will get left behind.

