

Book Review: Power Shift: On the New Global Order by Richard Falk

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*In **Power Shift: On the New Global Order**, Richard Falk examines the challenges and changes to global politics since the end of the Cold War, covering issues including the rise of drone warfare, climate change and the growing significance of non-state actors. He focuses particularly on the key role that US militarism has played in engendering many of these shifting relations on the world stage. Although marked by an undercurrent of pessimism, this urgent call for cooperative and humanitarian solutions to contemporary threats is powerful and convincing but its reach may be limited by its high academic style, finds Caroline Varin.*

***Power Shift: On the New Global Order*. Richard Falk. University of Chicago Press. 2016.**

Find this book: 

In *Power Shift: On the New Global Order*, Richard Falk looks at the challenges facing a changing world in the early twenty-first century. From drone warfare to climate change and the role of non-state actors within the modern state, one of the leading minds in international law highlights the difficulties that an 'outmoded' system is struggling to address. At times alarmist and often critical, Falk offers a warning that the human species may risk its own survival unless there is a dramatic and urgent adaptation to this new reality.

An underlying theme of *Power Shift* is the unjust power system that was put in place by the winners of World War II. The structure of the United Nations, according to Falk, ensures that government interests will continue to prevail over the global interest. As a result, growing threats to the planet are wilfully ignored by both political leaders and the public, exacerbating the situation and causing unnecessary suffering. Responses, when they do occur, tend to be regressive, with governments taking the opportunity to curb human rights and tighten their hold on power. Media compliance and fearmongering further enable this political extremism, which has little tangible effect on the actual threat. On the other hand, the immediate and irreversible threat of climate change is pushed out as much as possible from the political consciousness and left to the private sector to deal with when a profit can be derived from their efforts. These behavioural trends are led by the United States, the leading power in the current system and a country that has been able to conduct itself beyond the realm of accountability, ensuring its dominance for the past half-century.

One area in which this US dominance is evident is in [the increasing use of drones](#). These weaponised aircrafts are systematically used and abused by the United States outside of combat zones – as is the case in Yemen, Somalia and Mali (51). The sweeping presidential powers allocated by Congress and the ongoing secrecy surrounding drone strikes has enabled a 'logic of perpetual war, and the related acceptance of the idea that everyone, including citizens and residents, are potential enemies' (62). This approach contravenes both international human rights law and the laws of war that prohibit extra-judicial executions and the targeting of civilians not engaged in combat operations. For Falk, the United States has set a dangerous precedent. By developing these technologies and applying an unaccountable and unrestricted drone policy, the US has irrevocably changed the way wars will be conducted in future.





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Richard Falk echoes André Malraux's dictum that the 'next century will be religious or will not be'. In his chapter on the post-secular divide, the author highlights the 'highly unexpected return of religion to an increasingly globalized public space of world politics' (20). The return of religion into the public sphere is arguably not so surprising: the growing trend in the West towards secularism was likely to trigger a opposite reaction, both in countries where secularism was perceived as a foreign imposition but also among European and US citizens who have experienced these changes as an erosion of fundamental values and have sought solace in more extreme forms of faith. Regardless, this increase in religiosity has been integrated into the rhetoric and oftentimes the actions of political leaders, and is threatening to divide the globe along secular-religious identities. This phenomenon has been aggravated by the 'War on Terror', led once more by the United States.

The USA's militaristic hegemony is slowly being countered by the rise of new players in the global system. China, Russia, and to a lesser extent Brazil and India, have been challenging existing power structures and exploring alternative institutions to carry out international diplomacy. This new block may in time overturn the hierarchical set-up of the United Nations while upholding its value system. It could also, according to Falk, reverse the prevalence of hard power in favour of soft power 'based on cultural values, ethical norms, and the guidelines of law' (123). However, this is all reliant on effective popular mobilisation as changes in attitude will not be led by the self-interested managerial classes, who are 'helplessly addicted to hard power solutions' (124).

Power Shift is effectively a rejection of realist politics in the twenty-first century, as Falk makes an urgent cry for cooperation and humanitarianism as the solution to current and future threats. Despite his emphasis on justice and morality, there is an underlying sense of pessimism throughout the book. Indeed, his last chapter, 'Does the Human Species Wish to Survive?', and his references to Jared Diamond's book [Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive](#) suggest an overwhelmingly hopeless future. This is due to 'the inability of humanity to act like a species' (256), preferring instead to adopt tribal identities bounded in a statist mentality.

In *Power Shift*, Falk makes a powerful and convincing argument for policymakers facing the new century's challenges. Unfortunately, the highly academic style and elements of the editing – such as several typos and numerous paragraph-long sentences – will limit his audience to an elite few, restricting the impact necessary for a shift in public consciousness.

Caroline Varin is a lecturer at Regent's University where she specialises in global conflict and international security. She received her PhD from the London School of Economics and holds an LLM from the Università di Bologna. Caroline is the author of *Mercenaries, Hybrid Armies and National Security* (Routledge), and *Boko Haram and the War on Terror* (Praeger). [Read more by Caroline Varin](#).

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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