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Hacia una nueva bipolaridad.
Tertium non datur?

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Towards a New Bipolarity. Tertium non datur?

Abstract:

The rise of China alters the established geopolitical panorama, forcing a confrontation with the United States, which has been its partner in this transit. A confrontation that takes place in technological terms and leaves the European Union with few options when part of the dispute is resolved on its territory.

Keywords:

Geopolitics, China, United States, Europe, International Relations.

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Resumen:

El ascenso de China altera el panorama geopolítico establecido forzando al enfrentamiento con Estados Unidos, que había sido su socio estratégico en este tránsito. Un enfrentamiento que se sustancia en términos tecnológicos y deja con pocas opciones a la Unión Europea cuando parte de la disputa se dirime en su territorio.

Palabras clave: Geopolítica, China, Estados Unidos, Europa, Relaciones Internacionales.

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The logic of globalisation

The international society constitutes a system of open systems whose key to the vault is globalisation. It is balanced because the systems tend to adjust to each other progressively and automatically, giving it great inertia. Any disturbance affects all its parts, creates uncertainty and makes the whole react against its alteration. This is why *Brexit* has experienced great difficulties; there have not been significant modifications to the treaty between Mexico, Canada and the United States; and the implementation of tariffs is delayed and reduced. It is not easy to unravel such an interlocking fabric.

The levelling logic of globalisation has also led to convergence between advanced and emerging economies. And with it the “rise of others”¹ accompanied by an increase in interdependence. The result is greater multipolarity.

The actors have different identities that are combined without being integrated, making the addition of interests a multi-faceted element that is even loaded with contradictions. The result is a hybrid system: The friend/enemy –and even ally– categories are insufficiently explained. In each case, the actors are guided by predominant interests, which, moreover, fluctuate, making any possible balance or continuity difficult. Worse still, there is an internal struggle to define one’s own interests that is not alien to the outside, since there is continuity between spaces.

Globalisation has also brought democracies and autocracies into direct contact. Companies aligned with authoritarian political powers settle in democratic states and benefit from the regulatory framework of ordinary ones while Western companies are denied minimally equivalent access.

In short, the second decade of the new millennium seems to close an era, which in the 80s was opened by Reagan and Thatcher. These leaders drove globalisation, deregulating markets and opening economies. Paradoxically, forty years later, multilateralism is losing its relevance and many of the international initiatives promoted by the West after the end of the Second World War are being deconstructed. In fact, it is precisely the United States and the United Kingdom that are now resorting to

¹ ZAKARIA, Fareed. (2009). *The world after the USA*. Espasa.

protectionism (the former) or moving away from the great integrationist experience² (the second, which even discusses fulfilling its international obligations). Liberalism and neo-mercantilism meet on the international stage.

The United States is trying to prevent the collapse of an *Imperial overstretch*. This trend was not started by Trump, with his *America First*, and nor does it look like it will be reversed in the future.³ Moreover, the *American First* policy refers to the time frame in which interests are defined, which is shortened, and not so much to those that are –and always have been– in line with each nation; the long term only made them less visible and, furthermore, paradoxically, more substantial. Real power and visibility are inversely related.

The American turn towards Asia Pacific was and is a geopolitical necessity. The rise of a China that has become the “factory of the world” is causing an alteration of the *status quo* both globally and regionally and has consequences of all kinds.

The rise of China

China’s relationship with the West has experienced multiple ups and downs. The country held the lead in world GDP until the opium wars of 1839-1860. This was followed by multiple rebellions in the years that preceded the end of the Qing dynasty, defeat in the Sino-Japanese War in 1895, the consequent proclamation of the Republic in 1912, a civil war that began in 1927 and resumed after the end of the Japanese occupation in 1945. The Chinese call this period “the century of humiliation” and consider that it only ended in 1949, with the triumph of the Revolution and the establishment of the People’s Republic of China,⁴ an agrarian society with a literacy rate of less than 20%.

Kissinger sponsored the political bid to maintain a relationship with China that would separate it from Russia. In 1972, the visit of President Nixon –whose administration included Secretary of State Kissinger– laid the ideological foundation for the expansion

² ROSALES, Osvaldo. “The keys to the China-United States economic conflict.” Flacso, August 2018. <http://www.flacsochile.org/slider/las-claves-del-conflicto-economico-china-estados-unidos/>

³ SAHAGÚN, Felipe. “Introduction” in *Strategic Panorama 2019*. Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies.

⁴ FRÍAS SÁNCHEZ, Carlos Javier. “China, a giant with feet of clay?” *Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies*, DIEEEA 108/2019.

of relations between the two countries. Kissinger became its main defender of the model, intervening personally to modulate relationships even in periods of crisis such as the *Tiananmen* massacre.

China began reforms in 1978. The hybrid and composite nature of its political form –a mixture of indigenous socialism and capitalism– gives its external action a dual and ambivalent nature. Thus, hand in hand with the market economy abroad and economic dirigisme at home, it opts in practice for pragmatism in the form of “state capitalism”. Its model –legitimised on efficiency– has been based on an abundant, low-skilled and cheap labour force, supported by “economies of scale” in terms of either production or consumption (internal market).⁵

In 2001, China’s accession to the WTO after 15 years of negotiations created the objective conditions for the overflow of the framework of relations. This has led to the “peaceful rise” of the Asian country, i.e., without threatening the system of established balances and with discretion, following Deng Xiaoping’s maxim of hiding power and waiting for the moment.⁶ Thus, it postponed until after 2015 its military needs; its Armed Forces still do not correspond to its political power.

China and the United States, starting from scratch, have developed a relationship of strategic interdependence, complementarity and mutual benefit that has made possible their progressive coupling and integration since 1972. Certainly, who has benefited the most has been China, as it is the least developed part and, therefore, the one most likely to improve comparatively.

We should not forget that, three decades ago, the US economy accounted for 28% of the world economy and the Chinese economy accounted for only 2%. In 1988, the American per capita income was 25 times that of China, while today it is “only” four.⁷ Just think that the Spanish economy surpassed the Chinese economy until 1994.

Measured in purchasing power parity, China has been the world’s largest economy since 2018 (17% of world GDP), followed by the US (15.8%) and the euro area as a whole (11.9%).

⁵ *ibidem*

⁶ ZORRILLA, José Antonio. (2006) *China the coming spring*. Gestión 2000

⁷ FRÍAS SÁNCHEZ, Carlos Javier. *Opus citatum*.

The United States is China's largest export market, while China is the United States' largest import market. It accounts for almost 20% of that country's GDP. The US, on the other hand, is its largest market and accounts for 19% of exports of Chinese goods.⁸ Such a trade deficit is the inevitable result of the international division of labour and the optimal allocation of resources.⁹

China's purchase of American debt – 17% of the total; it is the main financier of its US fiscal imbalances – it supplements the lack of US private savings, balances the system and closes the circuit. The Achilles' heel of its economy is a low savings rate.¹⁰ This is not necessarily a weakness against the Asian country: a massive sale of debt would depreciate the dollar making US products more competitive and would also damage the value of Chinese reserves. Its companies are listed on international markets and would also be affected.

The United States, in turn, incorporates other additional benefits of the relationship. Chinese imports not only contribute to lowering inflation, but also increase US purchasing power, especially in the middle and lower income segment. US trade with China results in average savings of \$850 per household per year.¹¹

Yet the United States has watched helplessly as it lost its relative power: 38% of world GDP in 1970, 32% in 2000, 28% in 2008 and 22% in 2018. That is why it seeks to rebalance the framework of relations and equality in the rules of the game. In this way, it wants to access the Chinese internal market under conditions equivalent to those enjoyed by Chinese companies; and not be subject to the draconian conditions that the size of its internal market allows it to impose.

To refer that doctrinally, a whole geopolitical concept has been pointed out, the *Sharp Power* to conceptualise and explain its procedure: an asymmetry in the relations and the instrumentation of the rules, values and moral principles of the West in its own benefit.

⁸ WANG Wen "Co-Evolution, the Future of the China-US Relationship" *La Vanguardia* 07.05.2019

<https://www.lavanguardia.com/vanguardia-dossier/20190705/463285426599/coevolucion-futuro-relacion-china-eeuu.html>

⁹ *ibidem*.

¹⁰ ROSALES, Osvaldo. *Opus citatum*.

¹¹ WANG Wen *Opus citatum*.

However, the system is dynamic and rebalances itself. Thus, on the one hand, the economic rise translates into improved working conditions that reduce the advantage; on the other hand, the increase in the prices of raw materials –caused by the launch of an economy of such size– decreases the benefits of cheap labour. As for the “economy of scale”, rivals are emerging with sufficient capacity to be able to act in an equivalent way. This is the case in India, Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam.¹² We return to the levelling function of globalisation and internal consumption as the necessary engine of a different projection stage; with such a change, the Chinese economic rocket would be progressively freed from its dependence on the outside, which was the propeller of the previous projection phase.

However, the economic *shock* has not yet been translated into diplomatic, political or military terms. We are in a period of transition. The United States remains the indispensable power.

The strategic environment

The result is that East Asia has succeeded in making the dream of the North American Free Trade Agreement a reality: to form a regional manufacturing centre that would take advantage of the productive advantages of each of the party economies.¹³

But it is also an open loop. China is the main market for exports from the EU, Japan, South Korea, Brazil and the G20 as a whole. Its slowdown would affect these economies.¹⁴ Integration makes it difficult to retaliate against China, since they are shorting the market in a quasi-speculative way.

Simultaneously and as a result of the process of ascension, and already before the conflict with the United States, the big firms were moving a good part of their activities from China to even lower cost countries such as India or Vietnam.¹⁵

¹² FRÍAS SÁNCHEZ, Carlos Javier. *Opus citatum*.

¹³ HERNÁNDEZ, Roberto “US-China trade relations and trade in industrial and agricultural goods; implications for Mexico”. *Mexico and the Pacific Rim*, vol. 9, No. 27, January-December, 2006, pgs. 25-39 University of Guadalajara, Mexico

¹⁴ ROSALES, Osvaldo. *Opus citatum*.

¹⁵ ALLEN, Gregory C. “Understanding China’s AI Strategy: Clues to Chinese Strategic Thinking on artificial Intelligence and National security” *Center for a New American Security*, February 2019

In 2012, the arrival of Xi Jinping brought a change of attitude, which materialised in the launch of the Silk Road and Strip Initiative, as it was a visible alteration of the status quo. Xi considered that the stage of development and low profile with its priority placed on the economy was coming to an end: a GDP equivalent to 15% of the world's was difficult to hide and it already had a sufficiently developed internal market.¹⁶

As a result, there was a progressive cooling of relations with the West. China moved closer to Russia in order to gain strategic depth and avoid an eventual encirclement. This has been reinforced with advantages such as the fact that the melting of the Arctic offers in terms of shortening the distance to Europe by 30 to 40%. China feels it needs a buffer with the West. As a famous Chinese proverb says, “without lips teeth feel the cold”¹⁷

China and Russia are also revisionist powers that promote an interested multipolarity, and prior to their primacy; they want to assert their geopolitical capital: one their population (25% of the world's), the other their territorial extension (Russia 25%).

Kissinger argued that the United States should relate to both. This relationship had to be better than the one they had with each other. The two countries share 4,000 kilometres of borders, a conflicting past and divergent geopolitical interests: Chinese exports to Russia do not reach 2% of the total and can hardly grow. Siberia is the natural Chinese hinterland and its power asymmetry is growing strongly.

In this game of crossed relations and paradoxical consequences, the United States could also be interested in weakening the EU to avoid an equidistant position between both giants¹⁸ Its commitment to bilateral negotiations between countries rather than with organisations is along these lines. Supporting Brexit itself and anti-European movements does not help to improve the perception of Europe.

Even so, the shift towards Asia-Pacific was a strategy initiated by Obama and of which Trump is only continuing and not as forcefully as his predecessor: in his strategy, withdrawal in general prevails.

¹⁶ FRÍAS SÁNCHEZ, Carlos Javier. *Opus citatum*.

¹⁷ ZORRILLA, José Antonio. (2006) *Opus citatum*.

¹⁸ OTERO-IGLESIAS, Miguel; STEINBERG, Federico. “International economic scenario: growth, uncertainty and risks” *Strategic panorama 2019*. Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies.

The Silk Road and Strip Initiative is an ambitious project launched in 2013 as a sort of reissue of the *Marshall Plan* that shaped US relations with its allies and made the creation of the EU possible.

The aim is to bring the two extremes of the Eurasian landmass closer together. The project includes 60 countries in Africa, Asia, Europe and the Middle East, 75% of the world's energy reserves, 70% of the world's population and would generate 55% of the world's GDP. This project obviously clashes with American politics.

Its ultimate aim is to free the country from its dependence on foreign markets once it has reached an adequate level of development. Therefore, with foreign materials and resources guaranteed, the key is to activate internal consumption to generate self-sustained growth. Consequently, the next phase of the development process is the stimulation of internal consumption, which explains the indebtedness (public and private) that can already reach 300% of the GDP and becomes an Achilles' heel of the regime.

In this way and when the mentioned launch of the internal consumption has taken place –the Chinese GDP closed in 2017 confirming the tendency towards a consumer economy (62.19 % of it)– there has also been a search of the concordance of power in military terms, in addition escalating in the technological conflict.

This is why some authors consider the US withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPP) in 2017 to be wrong. This twelve-nation agreement was geo-economically beneficial to the US Administration because it brought US exports closer to Asian markets by offering these nations commercial alternatives to their dependence on China.¹⁹ It was precisely China's exclusion from this Treaty that led to the launch of the New Silk Road Initiative.

¹⁹ BLACKWILL Robert D. "Trump's Foreign Policies Are Better Than They Seem?" *Council Special Report No. 84 April 2019*

The chinese-american conflict

Henry Kissinger refers in his book *China* to the case of the Crowe memo. The latter, drawn up in 1907, considered the confrontation between Germany and the United Kingdom to be inevitable, thus contributing to it. As Thomas' theorem reminds us: "if people define situations as real, they are real in their consequences."

The conflict is new because it is part of a relationship of interdependence forged over thirty years, which translates into dense links between the contenders.

The trade confrontation is detrimental to the United States because of its level of dependence. But it is much more so for China, whose economy may even collapse. Such a confrontation, even if it is posed in commercial terms, is substantially political. The point is that it is derived from technology to avoid economic costs. This is a different plane and one that is formulated in terms of the future and a change of paradigm.

In this context, China has strongly defended a multilateral order based on rules that it neither complied with nor broke openly. In fact, in them it seeks legitimacy for the change of the current order.

In the United States, the Chinese issue is not only a foreign policy issue since, to begin with, it affects its domestic policy (the so-called *Flyover States* have been economically affected by the relationship with China), while at the same time it aims to change the international liberal order by considering that other countries have abused the existing rules to their detriment.

Americans' criticism of China is not far removed from the reasons that led to the trade confrontation with Japan in the 1980s: forced technology transfers, unfair trade practices, limited access for foreign companies, regulatory favouritism for locals.²⁰

²⁰ ZAKARIA, Fareed. "The New China Scare: Why America Shouldn't Panic About Its Latest Challenger" *Foreign Affairs*, January/ February 2020. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2019-12-06/new-china-scare>

Finally, the trade war was “formally” declared in March 2018 when tariffs were imposed on Chinese products on the grounds of “unfair trade practices” and the theft of intellectual property. China also responded with sanctions –focused on states that had supported President Trump electorally– as well as devaluation of the yuan. And from there they have been expanding through a game of tension/distension characteristic of a negotiation process.

The United States, seeking to rebalance relations, has imposed tariffs even on its traditional allies. Its attitude to the WTO challenges the regulatory framework by forcing rules under the guise of “national security” when dealing with trade issues related to steel and aluminium. In fact, the WTO itself has been blocked by US opposition to the appointment and renewal of appeal judges.²¹

This type of unilateralist and extraterritorial attitude, which is repeated in the case of the sanctions against Iran or with the reactivation of the Helms-Burton law –with which those who do business with Cuba and intend to do business in the United States can be sanctioned, replicated in the Iranian case–, harms European companies economically and stresses even more the relationship with their allies.

Trade warfare also negatively affects trade in general as it involves an artificially induced misallocation of resources, while undermining trust between countries by replacing the existing regulatory framework –rules-based international cooperation, and the WTO– with the law of the jungle. In this way, the legitimacy of the system is undermined by forcing the rules from the exceptional to give shelter to power politics. And when the system is destabilised, uncertainty is generated, something that is uniquely negative for business.

That is why the greatest medium-term damage from this trade war is to the playing field; i.e, to its hard-won multilateral trading system. It loses credibility and exhibits the lack of existing legal security. These are tangible, high-value goods that will take years to regenerate but the visibility of the consequences will be delayed. In fact, the countries most affected have been those most integrated into the regulatory framework.

²¹ MONIER, Stéphane. “The Art of Commercial War.” *Expansión*, 08.02.2020, pg. 43.

And it is not easy or straightforward to guess the consequences; for example, US companies using steel or aluminium lose competitiveness as a result of rising costs, which will also end up being passed on to employment. There are 385 thousand steel and aluminium jobs compared to 6.5 million US jobs that use steel or aluminum as inputs. Tariffs on Chinese products do not automatically increase demand for US products either, but rather divert it to other countries in line with their competitiveness. Tariffs also affect Taiwan, Japan, Korea, Hong Kong and Singapore, economies that provide China with much of the most sophisticated goods, inputs and services. ²²

According to the United Nations (UNCTDA), approximately 21 billion dollars, or 63% of the 35 billion dollars in lost Chinese exports were diverted to third countries, while the remaining 14 billion dollars simply disappeared or were picked up by US producers. Among the third countries that have supplied part of the demand for the 35 billion losses in Chinese exports, Taiwan also stands out, which has contributed some 4.2 billion in the first half of 2019. Mexico got 3.5 billion, the European Union 2.7 billion and Vietnam 2.6 billion. ²³

As can be seen, there are contradictory situations and balances. This is due to the high levels of productive integration in the area. On the one hand, the punishment for Chinese exports is also a punishment for other Asian countries that bring parts, pieces, components and services to China; this is the country that finally assembles the products and sends them abroad. On the other hand, they benefit from a new direct access to the US market.

Therefore, the trade war is generating fragmentation, disintegration and uncertainty in the markets, with serious damage to the global system. Moreover, given its limited nature, if it is not to be implemented without further damage it must be transferred to other areas such as technology. The ultimate battle, if any, should be over the reference currency.

²² ROSALES, Osvaldo. *Opus citatum*.

²³ UN News "In the US-China trade war, both lose and Mexico wins". UN News 05.11.2019 <https://news.un.org/es/story/2019/11/1464941>

But, let us be clear, what China is trying to do is change the geopolitical balance sheets. To this end, and as a preliminary step, to bring about the emergence of an international order that is multipolar and more in line with its interests. We have a precedent precisely in the rise of the United States and Japan at the end of the 19th century; this meant the move from a *European concert* to a *world concert of powers*.²⁴

Geopolitics of technology

After a long period of growth, China has made its position visible and is challenging the United States not only in the economic field but also in the military field (with its rearmament and its claims to territorial waters), in the diplomatic field (with its proposed Silk Road) or in the technological field.

A war is a clash of powers; it is not an inherently bloody activity but rather inherently political. It embodies a dialectic of self-improvement that can even be released virtually –in terms of power– and even symbolically, rather than materially. It is clear that the degree of integration and complementarity achieved between China and the United States makes it very difficult for them to deal with each other economically and financially without hurting themselves. As Zygmunt Baumann says, “Postmodern wars seek to promote global free trade by other means.”²⁵

Technology thus becomes a factor for decoupling insofar as it alters the balances and allows for the escape from the otherwise mutually beneficial and firmly consolidated dynamics in force. China now has the advantage of having already developed its domestic market, which gives it greater strategic autonomy –even with all the dependencies of the external environment– and adds a bargaining chip. That is why the real confrontation is not economic or commercial but technological; and it becomes evident when China begins to dispute the leadership in the field of productive and technological innovation.

²⁴ FRÍAS SÁNCHEZ, Carlos Javier. *Opus citatum*.

²⁵ BAUMANN, Z. (2002). *Liquid Modernity*. Buenos Aires: FCE, pgs.16-17.

That is why they are deriving their efforts from this plane to change the framework of the confrontation and to carry it out in the future. The fact is that technology becomes a source of power in every sense; hence the geopolitical reading of its effects. Due to its disruptive value, it is a *game changer*, i.e., a factor of high impact change that can even lead to a paradigm shift and thus a radical change.

China also perceives that the country's decline began when, at the end of the 18th century, it turned its back on the Industrial Revolution. This is, reciprocally, the opposite of the progressive success of the West. After this historical lesson and in view of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, it intends to lead this process by 2050, that is, a century after the establishment of the new Republic.²⁶

The race for technological leadership is taking place between the United States, the European Union and China. It is about controlling global value chains by providing the technology on which they are based. In this sense, *Huawei* was leading the implementation of 5G technology on which the connectivity of the future will be based. China in such a domain is ahead of the West, which does not yet offer comparable technology. The important thing is to gain time to react.

The United States is unable to impose its criteria because it does not offer alternatives and does not award sufficient prizes.²⁷ Nor does Washington forget that the European powers, including the United Kingdom (which has abandoned *Huawei* in search of a good treaty with the United States after *Brexit*), joined the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank at the time, despite Washington's resistance. This competition risks fracturing Europe, both technologically and politically, as the game is played on its turf.

Artificial Intelligence is the basis of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. As novel as its possibilities are, they have yet to be evaluated and it may be the key element of such a geopolitical revolution: the centre of technological and innovation gravity is shifting towards Asia Pacific, although such a change is still only a trend.

²⁶ ROSALES, Osvaldo. *Opus citatum*.

²⁷ ZAKARIA, Fareed. *Opus citatum*.

Conclusions and prospects. *Tertium non datur?*

The alteration of geopolitical balances incorporates undeniable risks. Globalisation is leading the world to a more multipolar balance as a step towards a new bipolarity. In this context, any problem, even local, is already a problem of humanity as a whole.

Four decades of Chinese American co-evolution explain the current situation. This economic binomial cannot be suddenly broken without great losses for everyone – including the entire international society– even if China was the most affected. That is why its challenge is not only economic but fundamentally technological, since technology and innovation determine the future and allow for a change of paradigm. Now, paradoxically, third countries are required to distance themselves from China.

Technology is catching up with politics, and from there with geopolitics. That is why the great powers are trying to create the technical standards and control the new technologies, thus forcing countries to position themselves geopolitically.

The nature of the Chinese challenge is different and much more complex than it appears. China's promotion is based on rules in which it participates, but which it also does not fully comply with. The United States uses the exceptions provided for at the cost of the loss of legitimacy of such an attitude; and makes relations with its own allies suffer.

That is why the rules, the normative framework, which has taken so much time and effort to build, will suffer as a result of its questioning and the subsequent delegitimisation and loss of confidence that will be generated and finally translated into economic terms. This is despite its obvious inadequacy for an increasingly globalised world.

In any case, the West is not going to disappear as a result of these changes. However, the tension to which the new situation subjects Europe is remarkable, as a significant portion of the struggle is being settled on its territory. The lack of integration in the Union means that each country has to make its own decisions. First in economic terms, then in technological terms and finally in political terms, as if they were zero-sum options; and in all areas, making overall coherence difficult even at national level.

This also puts a great deal of stress on the Union as a whole, which seems to be required to do little less than align or submit. And this is at a time when the EU cannot even stand up to the United States, which, let us not forget, was the driving force behind its creation.

The concurrence of the Union is essential for the West to exceed China's GDP today. NATO –which, although seen as a mere military organisation is de facto the only bilateral bridge linking the two continents– has absorbed the stress of the last four years without collapsing, proving its solidity and effectiveness as an anchor. The November elections in the United States are of particular geopolitical significance because of the choices that will be made.

December will be an interesting month, whether in terms of health security, *Brexit* or geopolitical options after the US elections. *Tertium non datur*²⁸, that's what the British (or their elites) seem to have wanted to tell us in 2016, although maybe they were wrong.

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²⁸ Third parties excluded, a third option is not possible.