

¿Hay que oponerse a la desoccidentalización del mundo?

Resumen:

La batalla en la cumbre de la geopolítica mundial gana intensidad cada día que pasa. La crisis derivada de la retirada de Afganistán está dando ocasión a que las potencias globales y regionales tomen posiciones. La pregunta sobre si los valores occidentales son universales es ahora una cuestión geopolítica. Las ideas y las creencias son de nuevo parte del campo de batalla.

El mundo, que en los últimos cinco siglos se había ido occidentalizando al ritmo que se globalizaba, ha iniciado la fase de desoccidentalización. Urge dar una respuesta estratégica a la situación que esto está produciendo.

Los ciudadanos de Occidente somos universalistas y nos cuesta concebir un mundo donde otros sistemas de valores se midan con el nuestro. La solución no se va a encontrar remando contra corriente y oponiéndose a un proceso histórico que ya parece imparable.

La clave va a residir en la capacidad de las sociedades occidentales para recuperar la confianza en sí mismas y hacerse más resilientes, mitigando las profundas divisiones que se están produciendo en su propio seno.

Palabras clave:

Geopolítica, poder, valores y creencias, resiliencia, Occidente, Asia, occidentalización, desoccidentalización.

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Introduction

As Felipe Sahagún¹ recalled, two years ago we wanted to devote our 'Strategic Panorama' to reflecting on the increasingly evident phenomenon of the de-Westernisation of the world. That year, the Munich Security Conference entitled its report *Westlessness* (that could be another term for de-Westernisation), which led to an intensified debate on the issue. Now, the withdrawal from Afghanistan has led to numerous headlines about the West's loss of influence over the international system.

Indeed, over the last five centuries, in an initially slow process, the world has been progressively globalised by the action of the European empires and then also by that of the US. Thus, the international community's major references are of European origin: customs such as dress; political concepts such as the State; relationship tools such as diplomacy; methods of knowledge such as science; means of travel such as the aeroplane; artistic expressions such as cinema; English as the *lingua franca*, etc.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, the rise of the Western powers that ended up sharing out the world gave rise to a certain anthropological racism—more or less conscious—that gave white men superior capacity and responsibility.

Additionally, the West has always been universalist since its origins in medieval European Christianity when the Western half of Europe was Catholic, which means 'universal'.

After the abrupt end of the Cold War, a mirage made it seem that globalisation, Westernisation and modernisation were equivalent categories and that history was marching inexorably towards the universal adoption of the Western-inspired liberal-democratic model, which Fukuyama called the 'end of history'.

In a very short time, the dynamic has been reversed and we are now witnessing the opposite process, worrying about a future where powers representing very different models of society will compete. At the same time, the West is showing signs of internal crises that weaken its leadership.

¹ SAHAGÚN, Felipe. *Panorama Estratégico 2020*, IEEE, Introduction, p. 9. Available at: http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/panoramas/Panorama_Estrategico_2020.pdf

Tensions at the pinnacle of global geopolitics are on the rise. The peace and prosperity of future generations will depend on the strategic designs developed to respond to new challenges. This leads to the question: what should be done in the face of the de-Westernisation of the world?

The West breaks into history

Since when has the West played a leading role in world history? In the Anglo-Saxon world, the prevailing view is that the Westernisation of the world began with the Industrial Revolution, when the GDP of the Western powers surpassed that of the Asian powers (Figure 1). This is a purely quantitative economic parameter, since in 1820 the population of Asia was four times that of Europe².

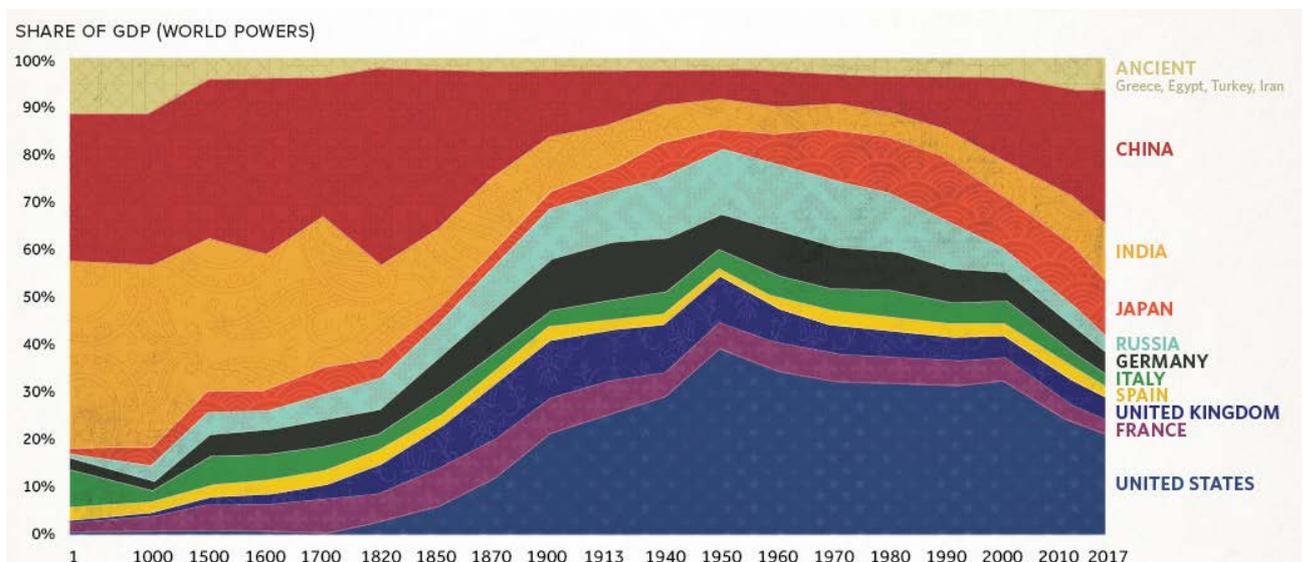


Figure 1. Historical development of GDP. Source. *The Atlantic*.

However, since the 16th century, thanks to domination of the great oceans and the establishment of trade routes across them, European kingdoms began a progressive process of globalisation that not only brought the American continent out of anonymity, but also, for the first time in history, brought the populations of Asia and Europe into direct contact.

² MADDISON, Angus. *The World Economy: Historical Statistics*. Development Center Studies, OECD Publishing 2003, p. 243. Available at: <http://piketty.pse.ens.fr/files/Maddison2001Data.pdf>

The small kingdoms of the old continent were not only ahead of the rest of the world in innovation thanks to the scientific revolution, which also occurred in the 16th century, but they were incorporating larger and larger portions of the planet into their domains. Before the onset of the Industrial Revolution, European empires had taken control of large parts of India and incorporated into their spheres of influence territories in Asia that had previously been tributary to the Chinese Empire.

China and Japan resisted Western influence, but by the mid-19th century they eventually gave in to British and American gunboats. From then on, every society that wanted to modernise, starting with Japan, did so following the patterns set by European societies.

Over the next century, the world adopted Western ideas and practices. But if Western societies had been divided between Catholics and Protestants since the 16th century, in the early 20th century the greatest polarisation in the social and political model was between absolute monarchies and democracies. The latter were clearly led by the Anglo-Saxon Protestant world that saw itself as the most genuine expression of the West³.

As a consequence of the strong leadership exercised by the Anglo-Saxon world in Western societies as a whole, a certain assimilation between Western and Anglo-Saxon identity took place, so that the rest of the West has partly adopted its way of contemplating and interpreting world history. Thus, following a Hegelian logic, it is commonplace to assert that in order to modernise, societies must have gone through a reformation stage like the Lutheran one.

Reactions to the Westernisation of the World

In the Islamic world, the catharsis that resulted from the break-up of the Ottoman Empire led to the emergence of schools of thought—such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafism—which rejected the imposition of social and political models alien to their tradition and culture. Today's radical Islamic terrorism has its roots in this phenomenon and has become one of the major forces opposing the Westernisation of the world.

Until 1979 with the Iranian revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, radical and terrorist movements within Islamic societies were of little concern in Western capitals

³ See FERGUSON, Niall. *Civilization. The West and the Rest*. Allen Lane, 2011.

insofar as, beyond the issue of Palestine, the problem remained essentially confined within their borders.

After World War II, Europe's colonial powers handed over global dominance to the real winners of the great struggle: the US and the Soviet Union. The globe was thus divided into two great opposing world views, the liberal-democratic and the communist. The West closed ranks in the fight against the Soviet threat, which meant that the political and economic model of the leading nation, the US—a nation born with the vocation of being the city on top of the hill and therefore an example to others—identified itself with the legacy and values of the West. The East-West divide of a more geographic-strategic nature came into line with the East-West divide of a cultural and ideological nature.

The 'definitive' victory of the West

The overwhelming victory of the 'capitalist' bloc seemed to confirm the dawn of a liberal-democratic era which, thanks to globalisation, greatly favoured by the spectacular development of communications, would spread the prosperity and the political and economic categories of the Western democratic powers throughout the world. Underlying this was the firm conviction that democratic values are universal. None of the other civilisations make such a categorical statement; perhaps Islam comes closest.

In our societies there is the widespread interpretation that 'the Westernisation of the world tends to merge into a broader global agenda in which it loses its Western contours and in which extra-Western and even anti-Western actors must necessarily participate. This approach confronts us with the paradox that, to the extent that "Western values" triumph and become universalised, they cease to be properly Western⁴'. The weakness of this approach is that few outside the West understand it in this way.

Initially, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the victorious bloc led unchallenged by the United States, opened the doors of the club of democracies to the countries on the other side of the Iron Curtain, but after 9/11 the attitude of welcome and accompaniment was replaced by one of imposition, as collective security demanded. It was only a question of forcing an advance in the process of convergence towards the model of a free society open to progress that was to take place sooner or later. A commitment to human rights

⁴ LÓPEZ-ARANDA JAGU, Ricardo. 'El futuro de Occidente en el orden global' [The future of the West in the global order]. *Panorama Estratégico 2020*, IEEE, p. 75.

and democracy gave legitimacy to the interventionism in other countries internal affairs that this entailed.

It was against this backdrop that the US intervention in Afghanistan took place, and 20 years later it is back to square one.

But previously, also since the end of the Cold War, Beijing and Moscow had teamed up to oppose the Washington-led international order that promoted the Westernisation of the world and did not accommodate Chinese and Russian aspirations to participate—at least in their intended large areas of influence—in the concert of powers that, in their view, should lead the international order.

Poles of the same sign repel each other

Both revisionist powers, who distrusted each other more than the USA, failing to find a satisfactory fit in the system of global governance, chose to join forces to undermine the US hegemonic order by directly rejecting its value system. Ideas and beliefs are power and whoever wins that battle has a great advantage on the geopolitical chessboard.

Moreover, both the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation are aware of the enormous attractiveness of the Western model of life and the values that underpin it, and see it as a threat to both their territorial integrity and the stability of their political regimes.

History teaches us that every dominant power eventually generates a coalition that challenges its primacy. It was very difficult to expect a great power to occupy such a privileged position for long without making concessions to other powers able and willing to challenge it. Russia would have accepted the existing order if it had been respected as a first-rate member, even if the US would have acted as *primus inter pares*. China's case is different because in its rise it claims ever greater shares of power. But the inevitable process of transformation of the international system resulting from the emergence of a country of the size and personality of the Asian giant would have taken place more gradually and with less friction.

As Ambassador Bregolat states, ‘what China "is", regardless of what it "does", is what alters the global balance⁵. To oppose it, even more so after the recklessness with which more than a Century ago the imperialist powers subdued the proud ‘Empire of the Centre’ is tantamount to adding fuel to the boiler of the ‘Thucydides Trap’ in a decade in which, as Kevin Rudd states, we will live dangerously⁶.

The geopolitical landscape is further complicated by an India that is rapidly reclaiming its position among the major powers and the rebellion of the middle powers: Iran, Turkey and soon Indonesia, which do not recognise any leadership and do not wish to align themselves with the interests and balances of the major dominant states.

In a nutshell: Beijing and Moscow team up to oppose Washington; New Delhi reaches out to Washington to balance Beijing; New Delhi and Moscow maintain a cross-relationship—in line with their old friendship—to make it clear that they are not strategically dependent on the larger partner; Tehran and Ankara find ample space to defend their ambition. Classical geopolitics is on the rise.

The crisis of Afghanistan, which is where it needs to be to play a key role, therefore presents the perfect opportunity for each player to show its cards.

All this is taking place in a context where the centre of gravity of human activity is shifting towards Asia and, as Parag Khanna reminds us, Asians feel that the 21st century belongs to them and that their nations are self-referential and no longer have to look to the West as a model⁷. Their greater success relative to the West in combating COVID-19 has only reinforced this conviction.

The weight of the colonial period on the national consciousness of the nations that achieved independence from the imperialist powers means that the desire to overcome Western tutelage reinforces this feeling. ‘While World War II is Europe's "never again", colonialism is the colonised world's "never again"⁸.’

⁵ BREGOLAT, Eugenio. ‘Cuestión de tamaño’ [A question of size]. *Revista de Política Exterior* no. 203, September/October 2021.

⁶ RUDD, Kevin. ‘Short of War. How to Keep U.S.-Chinese Confrontation From Ending in Calamity’. *Foreign Affairs*, March-April 2021.

⁷ KHANNA, Parag. *The Future is Asian: Commerce, Conflict and Culture in the 21st Century*, Simon & Schuster, 2019.

⁸ AIYAR, Pallavi. ‘¿Qué quiere decir Europa cuando habla de valores?’ [What does Europe mean when it talks about values?] *Revista de Política Exterior* no. 203, September/October 2021.

Thus, in a very short time, the process of world Westernisation is being reversed and this coincides with a visible internal crisis in the West that is manifesting itself in the stagnation of the EU, *Brexit*, various populisms, the fracture of American society, lack of faith in institutions, attacks on historical symbols, etc.

The overall situation is not promising. While Western nations have brought the world astonishing material progress and a special concern for human dignity, they have also made mistakes and abused their position of privilege. Everyone who has power uses it to a greater or lesser extent. It is in human nature. Hence the need to create barriers and balances to contain it.

However, the alternative presented to us in this multi-polar world of increasingly complex transition portends as many abuses of power if not more, and seems to show little regard for human freedom, the foundation of human dignity.

What to do then?

There are many questions. Two of them stand out above the rest:

Are Western-inspired democratic values truly universal?

Would this make them mandatory?

If the answer to the first question is yes, we are obliged to resort to the Socratic method of the successive 'why', seeking the ultimate reason for this statement. In the end, the great questions of good, evil and truth inevitably arise.

Can democratic consensus perform the functions of truth?

Can a consensus, which is so necessary for coexistence, be imposed on those who did not participate in the genesis of this agreement?

If democracy was born to accommodate in the same society people with different beliefs, convictions and points of view, with the aim of living together peacefully on the principle of mutual respect, alternation of power and majority rule, can we speak of a unique value system?

Can a non-permanent value system, whose mainstream has changed significantly in recent decades, claim to be universal?

Should the other regions of the world then adjust their codes of conduct to fit the processes that Western societies are undergoing?

Any answer requires many nuances. But above all, we must bear in mind that, no matter how strong one's own convictions, to claim to the rest of the world that the value system created and spread by the West is universal is an act of moral arrogance very difficult for others to accept; the civilisational supremacy it exudes is hurtful. All the world's cultures recognise that without modesty there is no exemplariness, and therefore no moral leadership.

If only as a matter of practicality, any attempt by Western societies to influence others in defence of principles that are considered inalienable must henceforth be done with a lower profile and with credible respect for the societies they wish to help. The other side has to be part of the equation.

Pallavi Aiyar in *Política Exterior* magazine gives us the point of view and sensitivity of this other side: 'Is Europe's promotion of its values to the rest of the world a modern extension of the "white man's burden"?' The emphasis on values 'is not useful as a basis for an attempt at global leadership. For if the claim is to moral leadership, that morality must be recognised by those who are supposed to be led. Unfortunately, this is not the case⁹'.

The second major question is easier to answer because human beings have the right to live, within certain limits, according to their own convictions, even if they are mistaken.

What are these limits?

Who decides if it is wrong?

The latter issues are more difficult to address.

Thinking back, a paradigmatic case emerges in which moral imperative demanded unequivocal action by the international community: the Rwandan genocide in 1994. The reaction of Western powers was disappointing. Maybe we are purging for it.

Such a complex and dangerous international system and such a sensitive and difficult-to-harmonise set of issues suggest prudence and the adoption of a strategic design that adapts to the world that is shaping and that places the emphasis on structuring the international system on the basis of possible consensus, in the knowledge that the

⁹ AIYAR, Pallavi. *Op. Cit.*

strategic panorama is full of mutual animosities and that mechanisms are needed to resist impositions and defend against threats from other actors.

Excessive efforts to impose one's own values produce a counter-reaction, especially when one is no longer the strongest. Moreover, time seems to be against the West. Thus, a call to create value-based fronts and alliances is like looking for a short cut through a minefield. Wars with a high probability of ending in defeat should not be fought.

The weakness of Western societies is their multiple divisions, the passion to impose one's convictions on one's opponent and the intensity of the polarisation this is producing, in contrast to the more empathetic democratic mood of past decades.

Conclusion

The history of the West over the last five centuries, although full of contradictions, is a vibrant reality and has led to a process of Westernisation of the international system that, after the end of the Cold War, came to seem definitive.

Since its medieval beginnings, the West has always been universalist and it is in the nature of its societies to view the world from that perspective.

While the Western powers were the most powerful, their leadership was accepted as much by imposition as by admiration.

Now that power is much more evenly distributed and an Asian power, China, is emerging with the potential to rival the US for global supremacy, while the Asian continent itself is proving to surpass Western nations in many respects, the leadership of Washington—and thus of the West as a whole—is being questioned and the universal worth of its value system in doubt.

Acceptance of a belief system is a power multiplier for the power behind it and the West's rivals, particularly revisionist states and Islamic radicalism, are unwilling to make concessions in this regard.

On the other hand, the Asian states close to the US for strategic reasons, will no longer accept the moral tutelage of Western powers that harks back to the worst memories of the colonial period.

Undoubtedly, the Western way of life has a great capacity to seduce other societies and this will produce competition between internal currents in one direction or the other.

As so often has happened, the geopolitical battle is now also an ideological-philosophical and beliefs dispute that recalls that legend set in the Middle Ages in which the Franciscan William of Ockham, fleeing from the authority of Pope John XXII, fell to his knees in Pisa at the feet of Emperor Ludwig of Bavaria, then excommunicated, and proposed *Imperator, tu me defendas gladio, ego te defendam calamo* ('Emperor, defend me with the sword and I will defend you with the pen')¹⁰.

Trying to stop the de-Westernisation of the world is an unrealistic task. It is now a matter of devising a strategy to find the best possible fit in a clearly divergent international system, of putting the main effort into the defence of peace, of being prepared for turbulent times and of promoting one's own convictions with sincere respect for the beliefs and sensitivities of others.

Hope should never be lost, but Western nations should start by striving to restore harmony within their own borders and weld the many fractures that weaken them. Resilience is going to be one of the keys to the battle that has just begun.

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¹⁰ VALVERDE, Carlos. *Génesis, desarrollo y crisis de la modernidad* [*Genesis, development and crisis of modernity*]. BAC, 1996, p. XIX.