Analysis
Paper

43/2025 10/06/2025

Jorge Dezcallar of Mazarredo

A world in deep transformation

A world in deep transformation

This analysis is part of the *Strategic Vision 2025.*
Issued in March 2025

Abstract:

The world is undergoing changes of a geopolitical nature, accelerated by the ongoing wars, like have not been seen in a long time. They have closed down the international system to give way to another yet to be defined. The old rules established by the victors of World War II are no longer valid and new ones are needed to better reflect the plurality of the world.

Advances in technology, in particular in Artificial Intelligence, pose a huge challenge, and the nuclear weapon has made a strong comeback in the geostrategic arena.

As the world faces a dangerous decade in which the US and China look askance at each other and the world's center of gravity is shifting towards the Pacific Ocean, Europe is in danger of being marginalized.

The war in Ukraine has favored the emergence of what has come to be known as the Global South. These countries do not wish to take sides between the major powers and prefer to leave all options open to align themselves according to their convenience at any moment.

Keywords:

Geopolitics, World order, Great powers, Global South, Technology, Nuclear weapon.

How to cite this document:

DEZCALLAR DE MAZARREDO, Jorge. *A world in deep transformation*. IEEE Analysis Paper 43/2025. IEEE web link and/or bie link[3] (accessed day/month/year).

The war in Ukraine goes far beyond a border dispute over securing strategic territories and responds to deep-seated forces of change in the geopolitics that have governed the world since the end of World War II. When Xi Jinping visited Moscow in March 2023, he said to Putin as they parted: “Right now, changes are taking place that we have not seen in a hundred years, and we are the ones driving those changes.” A smiling Putin replied: “I agree.” He was probably recalling the phrase attributed to Lenin that “there are decades when nothing happens and weeks when decades happen.” Or something very much like that. And here we are.

In *Empires of Eurasia. How Imperial Legacies Shape International Security*[1] , Jeffrey Mankoff argues that a new "imperial age" is being born in the heart of Eurasia where four old empires — Russia, China, Iran, and Turkey — are today pursuing “imperial geopolitics” that lead them to intervene in the affairs of their neighbours, either by force of arms, as with Russia in Ukraine and Iran and Turkey in Syria, or through commerce and ethnic and linguistic ties, as China does in Central and Southeast Asia. Mankoff believes that this imperial past is not merely rhetorical, but that it goes much further, in that these four countries, because of that past, neither consider themselves nor wish to be nation-states confined to clearly defined territories. They regard themselves as “civilisation-states”, somewhat above good and evil, with influence reaching far beyond their established borders. The same might be said of China, India, or the United States. Whether or not that is true — and it seems to me that it is — there is no doubt that Russia’s imperial past is deeply present in the choreography and symbolism surrounding the public appearances of the President of the Russian Federation.

In Putin's mind — as in that of many others — there exists the conviction that we are witnessing the end of one geopolitical era and the beginning of another, and it is well known that such a moment is particularly uncomfortable and unstable. As Claudio Magris puts it, when one age dies and another has yet to be born, we find ourselves in “the age of monsters”. That is precisely what is happening, for the West is losing strength, the Global South is gaining influence, the planet’s economic centre has shifted from the North Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific, and a number of emerging countries — such as China, India, Brazil, Indonesia, South Africa, Mexico, Nigeria, and others — want two things that are just but difficult to obtain without upending the status quo: a redistribution of power in the

[1] Yale University Press, 2022.

world and a new set of rules to govern global geopolitics. This was the topic of discussion at the opening of the United Nations General Assembly held in New York in September 2024. Though I do not believe this constitutes a new order — for it will not be easily achieved — it is undoubtedly a new disorder.

These countries are right because the victors of the Second World War shared power and influence in the world at Yalta, Cairo, Potsdam, Teheran, San Francisco, Bretton Woods, and so forth, creating the UN and its Security Council, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund. Today, eighty years later, the world has changed dramatically, yet these institutions remain the same. António Guterres, Secretary General of the United Nations, recognized this when he said at the BRICS summit in Johannesburg something as obvious as "global governance must represent today's power and economic relations, not those of 1945". As simple as that. He is quite right because the victors of World War II divided the power pie among themselves without allowing anything to change in the three quarters of a century since then, as is shown by the fact that France is on the UN Security Council with a permanent seat and the right of veto and India, which is also a nuclear power and has 1.4 billion inhabitants, but was then, in 1945, still a British colony, is not. Or that there is not a single African or South American country on the Council. Or that the United States does not want to relinquish control of the IMF, which it has held since its very foundation. Or that China has more or less the same votes as Italy in the World Bank. Clearly, there is a serious problem of representation.

These are things that have to change, ideally from within, although it is not easy to do so because, for example, in the UN Security Council, which everyone agrees should be reformed, all the permanent members have the right of veto and are willing to exercise it to prevent any change that goes against their interests. If reform is not initiated from within, it will be forced from without — which I do not believe would be preferable — because reality is stubborn and will ultimately prevail, whether through reform, expansion to include others, or simply by the creation of new institutions more attuned to the times, leaving the old ones jobless and empty of substance. This is already beginning to happen, as evidenced by the creation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, which has already begun operations. That which does not adapt will break, and the current distribution of power is not only unjust and out of step with the times, but also

dysfunctional when it comes to addressing global issues such as climate change, nuclear proliferation, food and health security, poverty, and growing inequalities, not to mention the urgent need for digital regulation. The world's geopolitical organisation prevents these challenges from being tackled as effectively as needed, because the partial solutions offered by individual states are simply insufficient.

The same applies to the rules: those by which we are governed are too white, too Christian, and too Western. For some, they are even too masculine. They are the product of Christian civilisation, Greek philosophy, and Roman law; they passed through a Renaissance that placed the individual at the centre of creation; through Francisco de Vitoria and Hugo Grotius and their principles of international law; through Descartes, who distinguished between the realms of man, nature, and divinity; and through the Enlightenment, which placed doubt at the heart of rational debate, for without doubt there is no progress. This was perfectly acceptable for a United Nations that in 1945 had 53 members — fairly homogeneous — but today, with 193 members, most of the world's population is non-white and lives in countries with different cultures and civilisational paths, neither better nor worse, simply different.

In China, heir to Confucian philosophy, respect for authority and meritocracy take precedence over democracy, just as they consider that the group should prevail over the individual. I recall a lively discussion some time ago with the rector of al-Azhar University in Cairo, in which he told me that it was not that he thought gender equality was wrong, but that it was much worse: the very concept offended him because it was the opposite of what Allah revealed to the Prophet through the mouth of the angel Gabriel and he recorded in the Holy Qur'an; or that he did not share the idea of relegating religion to the private world when in his opinion it should permeate all the acts of the believer's daily life. Hence the incomprehension and irritation of Muslims at offenses against Mohammed or the Qur'an, which they consider blasphemous, and our profound differences over freedom of expression. In the summer of 2023, vociferous mobs stormed the Swedish and Danish embassies in Baghdad and Tehran in protest at the burning of a Qur'anby a provocateur in Stockholm. The UN Human Rights Council adopted shortly afterwards, with the vote of 28 of its 47 members, a resolution condemning religious hatred and "calls upon States to review their laws [...] with a view to identifying gaps that may impede the prevention and prosecution of acts and advocacy of religious hatred [...] and to take

immediate steps to fill such gaps." Only the European countries, the United States, and Costa Rica voted against it, revealing how Western values are now in retreat in the face of the accelerated shift in global power relations. Following the resolution, the Danish government (where provocateurs have burned up to 150 Qur'ans in recent years) decided to amend the law to protect, in public spaces, "the improper treatment of objects of religious significance to a community." I understand it, but I do not agree. I believe one should not scorn what is a religious symbol for a billion Muslims — I would never do so, for some things, though legal, should not be done because they are unethical, and I do not like to offend others' feelings — but I also believe that restricting freedom of expression is the wrong path, for it has no end.

We Westerners see ourselves as clean and spotless, but that is not how others see us: José Ignacio Torreblanca wrote, in an article published in *The European Council on Foreign Relations* on August 28, 2023, that:

> "ECFR surveys show that many countries in the Global South no longer see the European Union as an actor that defends an open, rules-based system, but one that pushes them to join European and American efforts to defeat Russia and contain China. They see a world of sanctions, export controls, investment reviews and protectionist measures that harm their growth and interests."

All this under the pretext of defending our values. Events such as the storming of the United States Capitol — in the leading country of the West and head of the democracies — damage our image and do not enhance the prestige of the values we uphold. The same applies to perceptions of hypocrisy and double standards in our handling of the crises in Iraq, Ukraine, and Gaza today. In my opinion, they are right.

Therefore, reconciling our Western values with those of these countries is not easy, but we must try, because today it would not be possible to adopt the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by consensus as it was in 1948, in a United Nations that was far more homogeneous and far smaller. The price of not doing so is a divided world, a decoupling that could lead us to live under incompatible systems of norms, Internet governance, or financial transfer mechanisms (like SWIFT).

The matter is pressing, and the exponential development that artificial intelligence has undergone in recent times makes it even more urgent, for, as the British historian Arnold Toynbee said decades ago, the dust raised by the gallop of the horses of history prevents us from clearly seeing what is happening around us. And he is quite right, because today it is galloping out of control. If Émile Zola was concerned in 1840 about the damage the tremendous speed of the railway (thirty kilometres per hour) could cause to the brain, today the acceleration of historical tempo is out of control due to the convergence in our short lives of four revolutions: the atomic or technological (robotisation), the bit or digital, the gene or biological, and the demographic, which has more than tripled the world's population from 2.5 billion in 1945 to 8 billion today. Together, they are causing changes of unprecedented magnitude, as well as rivalries to secure the food, energy, minerals, and knowledge necessary to fuel them, while progressing at such speed that governmental attempts to legislate on them are frustrated.

Artificial intelligence offers so many advantages — from facial recognition to text generation — that we sometimes forget its enormous risks, such as spreading disinformation on an industrial scale, developing pathogens or facilitating access to algorithms that can be used to produce medicines as well as chemical weapons. The cinematic attack on *pagers* used by Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria in September 2024 is just one example of the possibilities AI offers that sends a shiver down your spine when you look at your own cell phone.

In this regard, it is worth recalling Angela Merkel's call — before leaving politics — to convene a global technology conference in order to jointly establish the rules to supervise an unbridled progress which, along with advances unthinkable just a few years ago, also creates risks and ethical dilemmas. Since the time has passed when Europeans and Americans dictated the rules, this is something we must all now do together. Many scientists are concerned about this issue, and therefore the great powers, without setting aside an inevitable rivalry, should be capable of cooperating on something that concerns everyone, in line with the proposal made by the directors of the leading artificial intelligence laboratories, who in May 2023 issued a statement saying that "mitigating the risk of extinction from AI should be a global priority, alongside other societal-scale risks such as pandemics or nuclear war." The problem is that, although it is imperative to regulate it, it is not easy because it progresses very rapidly, as Markus Anderljung and

Paul Schafer warned in their article “How to Prevent an AI Catastrophe”, published in *Foreign Affairs* on 14 August 2023: “The dangers of AI in today’s society come from yesterday’s models,” and for that reason, some scientists have called for a pause in the development of its most advanced algorithms. Generative AI is the greatest leap humanity has taken and, as Sam Altman says, it is not certain that it will turn out well. In response to these warnings, a first important step was already taken in November 2023, in what I believe is the right direction, to try to control artificial intelligence. It was at Bletchley House, near London, where a process began that culminated in the adoption of the first AI regulation during Spain’s recent presidency of the EU. It is somewhat ironic that AI is a creation of Americans and Chinese, and yet we Europeans are the first to try to regulate it.

Be that as it may, it is imperative that we are able to regulate AI before it dominates us, as Yuval Noah Harari has strikingly put it. The United Nations is so preoccupied with the issue that it has devoted special time to it and the Future Summit, held during the UN General Assembly in September 2024, advocated the creation of an international agency because "technology is too important, there is too much at stake to rely solely on market forces and a patchwork of fragmented patchwork of national and multilateral actions." Amen.

Another threat — and not a minor one — is nuclear, which, like the Guadiana River, appears and disappears according to Putin’s interests at any given time. It is now increasing because contacts between Americans and Russians that ensured peace during the Cold War have been interrupted: the Nunn-Lugar Agreement to build trust has been abandoned, as have the Open Skies Treaty and the INF (on medium-range missiles in Europe). Moreover, Russians and Americans have also suspended the START treaty on intercontinental ballistic missiles, which is particularly serious when each has 1,600 warheads and both are modernising their stockpiles. China, for its part, which has “only” 300, is increasing them at a good pace and expects to have 1,000 by 2030. In other words, there are more bombs and less control. As if that were not enough, Russia has renounced the axiom of not being the first to use nuclear weapons, and Trump has said he will once again authorise underground nuclear tests, those carried out outside laboratories, which are expressly prohibited by the CTBT (Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty), signed by 187 countries but not yet in force because Washington and many

others have not ratified it. The result is that when the Soviet Union fell, the Doomsday Clock, which measures the proximity of a nuclear crisis, was set at nine minutes, and today it stands at just seventeen seconds. According to US intelligence services in October 2022, the risk of Russia using nuclear weapons in Ukraine was a chilling 50%. As a consequence, war rhetoric is returning, defence budgets are increasing (by 7% since 2023, now representing 4.2% of global GDP — more than that of Italy or Brazil), and compulsory military service has returned in some countries such as Latvia, Lithuania, Serbia, Croatia and Sweden. For now.

In September 2024, the nuclear debate has been reignited again in the wake of the controversy between Biden and Starmer over whether to allow the Ukrainians to use allied long-range missiles against targets inside Russia. Putin has said that this would have consequences because it would involve us in war, and the loquacious Dmitry Medvedev added color to the issue by saying that they would leave Kiev ironed out as "a giant gray, melted blob." The British-American discussion ended in November 2024 when Biden and Starmer allowed Zelenski to use American (ATACMS) and British (Storm Shadow) missiles capable of penetrating up to eight hundred kilometers into Russian territory. Moscow responded on 21 November by launching a new medium-range hypersonic missile, the Oreshnik, capable of carrying a nuclear warhead, over Dnipro. Not only that, but it expanded Russian military doctrine to allow the use of nuclear weapons when the country is attacked by another non-nuclear power with the support of nuclear powers. Plain and simple.

Also Donald Trump unilaterally abandoned the nuclear deal with Iran, which increased instability in the Middle East that Israel, Hamas, Houthis, Hezbollah and Iran itself have been busy pushing to the limit. There were discreet indirect talks between Americans and Iranians in Oman for a new treaty, but Tel Aviv's "targeted assassinations" (such as that of Hamas leader Haniye) and Tehran's response in the form of missiles and drones over Israel have thwarted them as Jerusalem probably wished. Today Iran is enriching uranium without control and above the limits permitted by the International Atomic Energy Agency, which brings it dangerously close to being able to acquire a nuclear weapon and this is, for Israel, an unacceptable existential risk, since Tehran is not renouncing its objective of destroying "the Zionist entity". Moreover, if Iran gets the bomb, the Turks, Saudis and Egyptians will want to have it too, and that would provoke an undesirable arms race in

the Middle East. The Iranians claim they do not want it, but it would be very naïve to believe them — especially when they see how North Korea has become untouchable after crossing the nuclear threshold. A glimmer of hope came from the moderate speech of Iran's new president, Pezeshkian, at the 2024 UNGA, offering to resume nuclear talks based on the agreement torpedoed by Donald Trump in 2016. With Trump's return to the White House, both countries will have to make decisions: Iran must decide once and for all whether it wants to remain a revolution or become a normal state, and whether to try to cross the nuclear threshold to become untouchable like North Korea. The United States, for its part, must determine whether to negotiate a new JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) — the name of the nuclear agreement Trump torpedoed in his first term — or to return to a policy of "maximum pressure" (sanctions), or even one where "all options are on the table", which is a euphemism for regime change (although Trump's lack of appetite for foreign adventures suggests he may not take that path, which is what Israel's most extreme factions would prefer).

Kim Jong-un, the satrap who rules unchecked a paradise of communist automatons in which people are starving, mocked Donald Trump in a couple of meetings in which he gained international legitimacy for nothing, and today he is an untouchable nuclear power with increasingly powerful missiles that can already reach the American coasts while, like Iran, he supplies armaments to Russia for its "special military operation" in Ukraine. It has also sent it ten thousand soldiers to fight. There they have it clear: more guns and less butter. It cannot be ruled out that one day it may cooperate with Iran and help it to cross the nuclear threshold and thus enter the select club in which there are already countries involved in conflicts, such as Israel, and others that get along very badly, such as Pakistan and India. There are also the Europeans France and the United Kingdom. If you add the Americans, Chinese and Russians, that's already too many.

This poses a serious problem for Europe which, without the American nuclear shield provided by NATO, could be at the mercy of an expansive Russia if Trump, who won the election, does what he said he would do: not help Europeans who do not spend enough on defense, or even leave NATO (which is impossible because he will never get the necessary 2 votes in the Senate) or empty it of its content by denying it arms and funding (which is perfectly possible). A European autonomy in defense is not credible without the nuclear weapon and, after Brexit, only France has it in the whole of the European Union.

There is no choice but to talk about the issue, however thorny it may be and however little our politicians may like it.

All in the hope that it is not too late for such a conversation, because China and Russia may no longer be interested — as the United States and Europe still are — in adapting the geopolitical order inherited from the Second World War, since they consider it dead. This is the thesis argued by Mark Leonard in his article “China is Ready for a World of Disorder”, published in the July–August 2023 issue of *Foreign Affairs*. This belief is evident in their differing responses to the war in Ukraine: while Washington views Russian actions as a challenge to a rules-based order that must be reinforced, China believes that order has long been the fig leaf by which the West sought to disguise its dominance and interprets the Russian invasion as a sign that the world is entering a phase of disorder from which it must protect itself. Reform is no longer viable; the time to do so has passed. Today, reality is something else entirely, and it has already prevailed: the world we know is disintegrating.

According to this thesis, Xi is also convinced that what defines the world of the 21st century is disorder rather than the multilateral order that characterised the 20th century and which, with its flaws and exceptions (Vietnam, Iraq…), provided us with stability for the past seventy-five years. Xi believes the wind is in his sails and that China is better prepared than the United States to take advantage of what lies ahead. However, China may be a giant with feet of clay, trying to take on more than it can truly handle, as Ignacio de la Torre aptly notes in his article “On the Fall of Empires and China’s Economic Decline”, published in *Política Exterior* in October 2023, where he argues that China’s weaknesses will prevent it from economically surpassing the United States. In my view, he is quite right.

Mark Leonard confirms that Xi Jinping is convinced the world increasingly identifies with disorder rather than order, that China is better prepared than the United States to deal with it, and that this necessitates what is referred to as a “holistic” approach to national security. This can no longer be framed solely in terms of military threats, but must also include cultural, economic, technological, commercial, and biological challenges, among others—since everything today is susceptible to becoming a weapon—against which precautions must be taken. The Chinese believe the world is not experiencing a new Cold War because there is no ideological competition akin to that of 1945 and because, as

Gavin Mortimer noted in an article published in *The Spectator* in September 2024, today's competition is between liberal capitalism and state capitalism. Economic power is far more dispersed, the world now has an interdependence that did not exist then, and the current geopolitical structure departs from the centre-periphery model in economic or security matters in favour of another, more polycentric, framework of competition and/or cooperation. In this scheme, China could dominate without imposing its model on anyone, because the world will be richer and more diverse and will avoid stable blocs or alliances—more in line with what the Global South is already pursuing today.

As is Russia itself. This is the view of Kristi Raik, Deputy Director of the International Centre for Defence and Security in Tallinn, Estonia, who clearly highlights the fear inspired by Russian expansionism in neighbouring countries, and they cannot be blamed for it. In an article published in *Foreign Policy* in November 2023, she argues that Europe faces a complicated future dominated by antagonism with Russia, as Moscow will never accept a balance of power that diminishes the sphere of influence it held during the Tsarist and Soviet eras, whereas Europe can never accept the existence of spheres of influence on the continent. This will lead—in her view—to a scenario in which, once it has rebuilt its military capabilities, weakened by the war in Ukraine, Russia will again seek to revise the balance of power in Europe. To prevent this, the West will have no choice but to follow a proactive policy of containment that includes credible defence capabilities and the admission of Ukraine into NATO.

As wars accelerate the march of history, the invasion of Ukraine has accelerated the process of enlargement of the European Union towards the Balkans as a geostrategic necessity in order to avoid "grey zones" over which Russia could one day pretend to extend its zone of influence, which Putin wants to make coincide with the borders of the former USSR, something that makes the hair on the back of many neighbors' necks stand on end. Loopholes are not good because they give ideas. This was discussed at the Granada summit of the European Political Community. Ukraine is the clearest example of this acceleration of the historical tempo: it applied for admission shortly after the Russian invasion and only a few months later, in June 2022, it managed to be designated as a candidate country. Quite a record. Since then, Ukraine has been working to meet the conditions required for EU membership, the so-called "Copenhagen criteria", on some of which (fight against corruption, against the power of the oligarchs) Ursula von der

Leyen acknowledged that substantial progress had been made during her visit to Kiev in November 2023, which fueled Ukraine's hopes that negotiations could start very soon, in early 2024, as agreed at the 2023 European Council held under the Spanish presidency. When the Gaza conflict had just erupted, this is the kind of message that Kiev, fearful of taking a back seat in Western attention, needed to hear. That is why its Foreign Minister thanked it in Berlin by saying that "we made our reforms and passed the legislation necessary to comply with and implement the recommendations [...] Ukraine will become an added value, not a burden for the European Union", which will now also have to start making the internal reforms (number of commissioners, voting rights, unanimity rule, etc.) that the future enlargement towards the Balkans demands. Since then, the war continues, with Russia advancing in the last months, while the process of rapprochement, slow but sure, of Ukraine to the EU and, even more complicated, to NATO, is still alive. In this regard, the Washington Summit, in July 2024, reaffirmed the willingness to welcome Ukraine into its midst when it meets the conditions and the members decide. That is to say, yes, but when circumstances permit and not, of course, while the current conflict persists, about which the arrival of Donald Trump to the presidency sows some doubts, as he has assured that he would favor a negotiation between Russia and Ukraine to put an end to it in a very short time. It will not be easy to bring them to an agreement, it will not be a good idea to sacrifice Ukraine (in territory, in a future access to NATO) and it will not be good to give a victory to Moscow that rewards aggression and eventually encourages others. Another problem for Trump is that once negotiations begin, all the pressure of public opinion will fall on him; Putin has no opinion to worry about.

The war in Ukraine has also favored the emergence of what has come to be known as the Global South, one of the most important events of recent times, the result of what Fareed Zacharia called *the rise of the rest*, the appearance on the world geopolitical scene of a number of countries (no less than 134) with ambitions to revise the distribution of power that was made in 1945. These countries, rich or poor, spread across Africa, Southeast Asia, the Pacific Ocean and Latin America, have experienced rapid growth in recent years and differ from the Non-Aligned Movement or the G77 of the last century in their much less ideological affiliation, since they do not fly communist or anti-colonial rebellion banners, but rather, as Sarang Shidore says in his article on the G77, they have a much stronger commitment to the G77, as Sarang Shidore says in "*The Return of the*

Global South," in *Foreign Affairs* (August 31, 2023), they are driven "by national interest," want more strategic autonomy, more political power in global geopolitics, and very concrete issues such as attracting investment and trade, asking for more aid to combat climate change, and pressing for debt relief for the neediest countries . Theirs is a pragmatic and de-ideologized approach that allows them at any given moment to approach the tree that gives the best shade.

The countries of the Global South do not wish to take sides among the major powers and prefer to keep all options open—aligning when convenient or not at all. Saudi Arabia and India are paradigm examples of this trend: the Saudis, once firm allies of Washington in the Middle East (the US remains their main arms supplier), have opened up to China—first economically, through oil exports, and then politically, with China facilitating the resumption of diplomatic relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran while also negotiating oil prices with Russia under OPEC+. This is what is called a *politique tous azimuts*. Turkey is a NATO member but maintains good relations with Russia while seeking influence in Central Asia, placing it in competition with both Russia and China. India has distanced itself somewhat from Russia (though it buys increasing amounts of oil and liquefied gas and remains its main arms customer) while opening to cooperation with the US in the Quad Pact (with Japan and Australia), whose explicit aim is to contain China in the Pacific—even as India remains a member of BRICS alongside China.

Regarding Ukraine, these countries not only refuse to impose sanctions on Russia (unless mandated by the UN), but have increased trade with Moscow: by 68% in the case of the United Arab Emirates, 87% for Turkey, and as much as 205% for India. These are just a few examples.

The Global South's quest for independence was visible throughout 2023 during the last Ibero-American Summit in Quito in March, the EU–CELAC meeting in Brussels in July, and the BRICS summit in Johannesburg in August. At all of these events, emerging countries displayed an unprecedented level of defiance and firmness regarding the war in Ukraine and Western positions. Thus, the Ibero-American summit could only agree—after great effort from Spain—on a vague text that neither condemned nor named any country and merely called, in general terms, for a "comprehensive, just and lasting peace throughout the world based on the United Nations Charter, including the principles of

equality, sovereignty and territorial integrity of States." There was no way to condemn Russia.

Something similar happened at the EU-CELAC (Community of Latin American and Caribbean States) summit, held in Brussels in July 2023, to which it was not possible to invite Zelenski, who had requested to be able to explain his views to the attendees in order to gain support. It was not that there was no agreement, it was just that there was clear opposition to his presence from some Latin Americans. Most CELAC members blame Russia for the invasion and have supported the four resolutions that the UN had adopted on the matter so far, but do not want to apply sanctions against Russia. The reasons are varied, from thinking that they should be imposed by the UN and not by the countries, to latent anti-imperialism vis-à-vis the United States and anti-colonialism vis-à-vis Europe, a vague tradition of non-alignment, seeing double standards in Western morality - which does not treat the Iraq and Ukraine conflicts in the same way, not wishing to antagonize Russia, on whose fertilizers they depend, or the same generosity of Russia towards Europe and the United States during the pandemic, when Russia (and also China) sent them vaccines (Sputnik V) and masks that these countries could not buy due to Western hoarding.

Another example was the summit held by the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) in Johannesburg in August 2023. Those gathered there took another turn of the screw, advocating a new approach to international relations and abandoning the policy of confrontational blocs in favor of allies united by common interests, such as development or social welfare, with free choice of political model without outside interference. All this with a new architecture that involves the creation of new economic and financial institutions and -as a desideratum- a progressive abandonment of the dollar as the universally accepted currency. In South Africa, the BRICS agreed to expand the number of members and, among some thirty candidates, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Iran, Ethiopia and Argentina (Javier Milei declined the invitation when he arrived at the Casa Rosada) were invited to join the group as of January 1, 2024. The criteria followed to make this selection and leave out other applicants such as Indonesia or Algeria are not known. The enlarged group will gather 35% of the world's GDP, 46% of the world's population, and its GDP will be higher than that of the G7, which has only 30% of the GDP and less than 10% of the population. If manages to act in unison—which

will not be easy due to disagreements between India and China, Egypt and Ethiopia, or Iran and Saudi Arabia, or due to Cairo's, Abu Dhabi's, and Riyadh's own friendships with Washington—it could eventually become a counterweight to the G7 or a significant force within the G20, though such an outcome does not appear likely in the short term.

Their major agreement is on the need to reform the United Nations Security Council, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. These are very important changes that China supports. Raja Mohan, in the article "*The BRICS Expansion is not a Triumph for China*", published in *Foreign Policy* on August 29, 2023, says that, although the BRICS will take time to shift their economic weight to the political arena, what is happening shows that Europe can no longer count on the Global South as it has been and that it has to "come down from the pedestal where it has been placed since the end of the Cold War and fight in the mud with the Chinese and Russian challenge". Sounds like good advice to me and, in fact, the G7 has already started to respond with the *Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment*, while Washington has been very careful in prosecuting the latest coups in Africa, avoiding even calling them that.

This war also hastens the end of Western domination of the world. Europe and then the United States have been hegemonic powers for the last five hundred years, since the beginning of the Modern Age: Portugal, Spain, England and the United States have had "empires on which the sun did not set" and, thanks to them, our culture and our values have been imposed with considerable economic benefit for us and at a cost also very high for others - and we do not think enough of it as we should, while they certainly do—, for it is estimated that no fewer than thirteen million slaves were taken from Africa between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, as stated by Simon Sebag Montefiore in *The World. A Family History*. This resentment is what occasionally arises in countries like Mexico when it demands that Spain apologise for the conquest or when it does not invite King Felipe VI to the inauguration of President Claudia Sheinbaum. It shall pass.

When we look at the maps we have at home, we see, quite naturally, that their centre is occupied by the North Atlantic Ocean, with Europe to the right and the United States to the left. We have seen it this way since school and it seems natural to us, but it is no longer so, and we should become accustomed to viewing things differently — an image where the centre of the map is occupied by the vast liquid expanses of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, flanked to the left and right by Asia and North America respectively, and

with Europe in the top left-hand corner, almost off the map, like a projection towards the Atlantic Ocean of the great Eurasian landmass. This is the world towards which we are heading at speed. Europe is no longer the centre.

In what can be called the "Venice syndrome". Europe can be seen as it once happened to Venice, which received spices from the Moluccas on camels that crossed India, the Arabian Peninsula and Egypt before embarking in Alexandria to sail the Mediterranean and arrive in the Serenissima. Then, from Venice, they were distributed throughout Europe at great profit. The Mediterranean Sea was the economic center of the planet until Bartolomeu Dias rounded the Cape of Good Hope in 1482 and, shortly after, Christopher Columbus arrived in America, transferring this central situation to the Atlantic Ocean, where the spices from Polynesia and the silver from Potosi arrived by ship to the Iberian Peninsula. The wealth passed into the hands of Portugal and Spain, and Venice collapsed. Today, history is repeating itself and the world is moving towards the Pacific and Indian Oceans and, more specifically, towards the Strait of Malacca, through which 60% of global maritime trade flows and around which 65% of the population and 62% of the world's GDP are concentrated. We had better get used to the idea and look at the map as I have indicated above, because Europe, which used to have 25% of the world's population and now has only 6%, which loses competitiveness and GDP to the United States every year, may find itself in the very near future projected towards an Atlantic Ocean where less and less will happen every day.

What seems clear is that, in the very short term, disorder will prevail as the world inexorably moves towards multipolarity or, better still, towards an imperfect bipolarity in which China and the United States are the great hegemons with a gross domestic product of $23.3 trillion and $17.7 trillion respectively, at a sidereal distance from Russia ($2.1 trillion) or India itself ($3.1 trillion). However, when the hegemons want to discuss weapons, they will have to rely on Russia, which has 1550 nuclear warheads deployed, and if they want to discuss the economy, they will have no choice but to talk to the European Union (23.3 trillion dollars of GDP... the same as the United States). These hegemons are today faced with the difficult decision of determining whether they want to compete or, on the contrary, wish to collaborate. Or a controlled combination of both options, competing on trade or human rights issues and cooperating on others such as climate change or food and health security, which is undoubtedly the most desirable scenario. The rest of us are watching this

struggle as observers, with no real ability to influence its decision because, in the short term, competition between the hegemonic powers is taking over, a new *great power competition* with Cold War flavors in which Washington has set itself the goal of "containing Russia" and "being more competitive than China" while these two countries join forces because they are convinced that the United States is trying by all means to prevent them from attaining the global power and influence conferred by their history, their culture and their political and economic weight.

All this contributes to writing the epitaph of the geopolitical order that emerged in 1945. That is why Kevin Rudd has said that we are in a dangerous decade, because in it the rivalry between the United States and China has to break water somewhere and, if or when it does, the war in Ukraine will be a mere scratch on the surface of what can happen. The desirable thing is that they can come to an understanding and agree on a new distribution of power in the world and new rules that will govern geopolitics in the coming years. The other alternative is so horrible that I prefer not to consider it because there would be no one left to read it either.

In reality, *rebus sic stantibus*, there are three future scenarios that can be hypothetically considered on a planetary scale, assuming that another black swan does not appear and turn everything upside down again. It would not be the first time:

Worst-case scenario. Everything that could go wrong, does go wrong. Undesirable, yet...

- Russia defeats and dismembers Ukraine provoking a wave of impotence, frustration and revanchism in Ukraine while insecurity settles in Europe or war breaks out and, in the worst case scenario, leads to a conflict between Russia and NATO, in other words, to World War III.
- The European Union and NATO have failed in Ukraine and are entering a crisis. The consequences are worse for the European Union and negatively affect our welfare societies.

- The United States and Europe blame each other and distance themselves from each other.
- China, emboldened, does not want to be less and seizes the opportunity to invade Taiwan with all the consequences that would follow and that could dwarf the war in Ukraine.
- The Israeli-Palestinian conflict spills over even further, implicating other Middle Eastern countries, oil prices and world stability. Open conflict with Iran. Vital maritime trade through the Straits of Hormuz and Bab-El-Mandeb is affected, with global consequences.
- The arrival of Donald Trump in the White House plunges the world into the risks inherent in the unpredictability of his behavior. Multilateralism is shrinking as international organizations lose weight. Trump imposes tariffs on half the world and trade wars begin.
- The economic crisis is shaking China, which is exporting less, and this is having repercussions throughout the world because it also needs to import fewer raw materials.
- Supply chains are disrupted, globalization and trade suffer. Recession on a planetary scale with several blocs at odds with each other erecting protectionist barriers. *Decoupling.*
- Artificial intelligence, uncontrolled and in the hands of undesirables, becomes an immediate danger to the survival of mankind.

Optimal scenario. Desirable, but...

- The Ukrainian war ends with a negotiation leading to a peace treaty that works miracles and satisfies everyone. Russia is reintegrated into European security structures.
- China is not giving up on Taiwan, but is putting it off until later, in the hope that its unrenounceable integration into the motherland will one day be resolved peacefully.

- The United States and China are cooperating to address major global issues: global warming, nuclear and food security, AI challenges, new power-sharing in the world and new rules accepted by all, including the countries of the Global South.
- An agreement is reached between Israel and Palestine on the basis of the two-state formula, putting an end to a centuries-old conflict. The multiple crises in the Middle East are resolved and an amicable sharing of spheres of influence in the region takes place. The nuclear agreement with Iran is resumed.
- In the United States, Trump reverses course and opts to strengthen the transatlantic relationship and NATO.
- The world economy is rebounding strongly and inflation is under control. Globalization makes the world more interconnected and interdependent every day. Trade wars are avoided.
- There is broad international agreement to regulate the risks involved in the development of artificial intelligence.
- The European Union is making progress in its integration and is equipping itself with common policies (foreign, defense, AI, energy, capital, migration, etc.) that enable it to influence the course of the world and maintain its enviable standard of living.

Medium scenario. The most likely?

- The war in Ukraine is going on forever, with or without armistice, with more or less stabilized fronts and World War I-type trenches. The conflict can be reignited at any moment and this creates insecurity on the continent. The humanitarian drama, the refugees and the high economic cost for all continue to test the seams of Europe.
- Swords are held high between Russia and the West in a dangerous and unstable balance as Russia's drift towards China is accentuated.

- China continues to harass and threaten Taiwan, but does not dare to take the decisive step and invade the island. It decides to bide its time and have time to arm itself better.
- The conflict between Israel and Hamas, Hezbollah and others is closing falsely, as it has always done, and threatens to flare up again at any moment with the potential to engulf the entire region. Iran continues to flirt with nuclearization, but without actually taking the step.
- The United States and the European Union continue to cooperate, but they are drifting apart as they do not see things the same way, especially in relation to China or the Middle East. There is mutual distrust. American protectionism is growing and irritating in Europe.
- There is no agreement on a new distribution of power in the world or new rules for its functioning. The United Nations is suffering the consequences. Frustration and unease are growing among the countries of the Global South, which are seeking their own way out of bloc politics.
- The world avoids recession, but inflation persists, affecting it in very different ways. Inequalities are increasing. Citizen discontent is growing. Populism is on the rise and the countries of the South are struggling to pay their foreign debt.
- The WTO is still in crisis and the world is limping in the face of major global problems such as global warming, nuclearization, growing inequalities, AI risks, international terrorism, food or health insecurity, etc., aware of the localist limitations to face global problems.
- The AI continues its rampant development, but without yet endangering our relative control.

Any one of these options, and perhaps even more likely, a combination of them, can determine the future.

The hope that can be harbored is that the future is not written and to a large extent depends on us. We know the problems, we know how to solve them and we have the necessary tools to do so. We only lack leadership, political will and a geopolitical context

that allows the necessary international cooperation to face problems that are global and cannot be faced individually. The world we leave to our children will depend on what we do, and especially on how we do it.

In the specific case of Europe, perhaps the arrival of Donald Trump as president of the United States will be the stimulus it needs to do what it knows it must do to maintain its enviable standard of living. That means more Europe, even if the situation of our two main engines, France and Germany, is not exactly the most favorable today.

*Jorge Dezcallar de Mazarredo**
Ambassador of Spain