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“Geopolitics: Keys and Trends” (El Viejo Topo, 2026), by Federico Aznar Fernández-Montesinos

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Abstract:

The book under review, the first volume of a trilogy and featuring a foreword by the well-known journalist Juan Luis Cebrián, offers a geographical approach to the geopolitical upheavals brought about by the changing world order, of which war is one manifestation. Complexity is one of the defining features of the twenty-first century and stems both from the intensification of global interdependence and from the contradictions it generates. Federico Aznar Fernández-Montesinos analyses these transformations from a geographical and multidimensional perspective, examining the main geopolitically active regions and the economic, military, technological, cultural and diplomatic factors shaping the transformation of the world order.

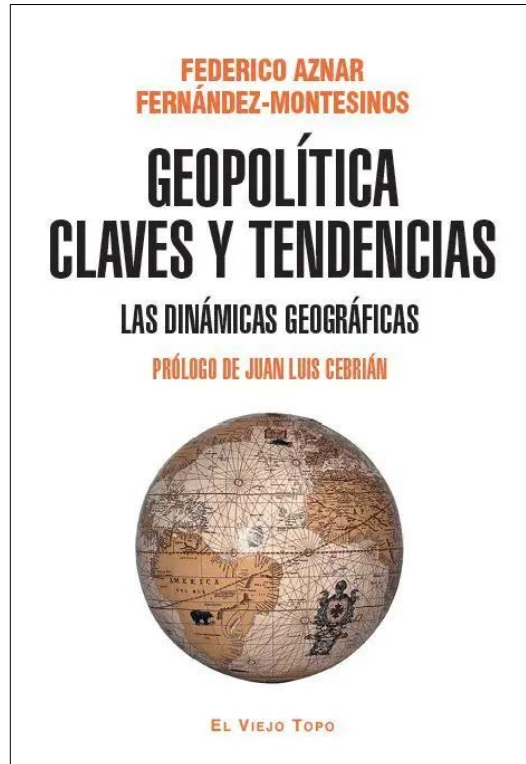
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Complexity is the hallmark of the 21st century. This stems from the interrelationships through which globalisation advances, as well as from the contradictions that these new relationships progressively incorporate. The result is a growing difficulty in comprehending a scenario that increasingly appears irrational, chaotic or evanescent.

Globalisation manifests itself in multiple flows whose direction is also difficult to discern; this is precisely what geopolitics will provide by pointing the way to the future and facilitating the positioning of the international actors to whom it offers guidance. Geopolitics is thus elevated to the status of a science that sheds light on international relations and, in doing so, also becomes a kind of state consciousness.

Furthermore, globalisation is counterintuitive. It brings differences closer together; in this way, far from bringing positions closer, it magnifies discrepancies; it makes us forget what we have in common, whilst this proximity fosters the clash of identities. In fact, this is precisely how it progresses, which is why it is by no means a peaceful phenomenon.

Understanding such a scenario requires identifying the pieces of the jigsaw and, consequently, simplification. This is what has led to the resurgence of geopolitical", insofar as it offers intuitive and seemingly workable solutions to complex problems. And it does so for a non-expert audience as well. Globalisation and geopolitics are intertwined

and mutually reinforcing. For its part, simplification constitutes a call to action. Understanding things more quickly than others is a guarantee of success when the world is viewed as a zero-sum game.

This trend is not confined to academia or government institutions; it is also reaching businesses, including medium-sized firms that are entering international markets and seeking to equip themselves with risk indicators and maps to guide their investments. Geopolitics will serve to contextualise such processes.

The book in question, the first in a trilogy that seeks to address such a wide-ranging issue from different angles, is written by Federico Aznar Fernández-Montesinos, a Commander in the Spanish Navy, who holds a degree and a PhD in Political Science and is an analyst at the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies (CESEDEN); the book draws on his experience of over 20 years at CESEDEN dealing with these issues. It also features a foreword by the renowned journalist Juan Luis Cebrián.

The book focuses on geographical dynamics in geopolitically active regions. In line with this approach, following a chapter devoted to the theoretical framework, the book examines areas such as the West, US politics, the Mediterranean, the Sahel and Africa, the Middle East, the Arab–Israeli conflict, Iran and the Persian Gulf conflict, Central Asia, the China–US geopolitical region, the Asia-Pacific and its organisations, the Arctic, Greenland, technology, and the United States’ return to the Western Hemisphere...

In short, ‘revisionism’ is a term from the Marxist tradition, but we believe it is a useful concept for the current geopolitical moment, as various forms of revisionism are converging and are, moreover, linked to a shift in the roles of the key players.

So, could President Trump’s United States be a revisionist power, whilst a conservative China is committed to upholding the rules and consensus? The point is that they are not the ones responsible, however much they may be active agents in the changing order we are currently witnessing. They are playing their cards. And the fact is that the international order – shaped by the balance of power between nations – is shifting. However, it is very difficult to measure a state’s power, let alone compare it.

A clear indicator is economic power, although there are different ways of measuring it. And all these methods clearly show the West’s loss of power. Thus, at purchasing power parity and in 2023, according to the World Bank, China had 34,643 trillion dollars (18.76

per cent of global GDP), the US 27,36 trillion (14.8 per cent), the EU 27,125 trillion (14.68 per cent) and Russia 6,452 (3.49 per cent). The global total stands at 184,653. The change in the composition of the base price basket in 2026 further exacerbates this situation to China's advantage, as it could reach up to 22 per cent of global GDP

In any case, the combined GDP of the aforementioned players barely exceeds 50 per cent of global GDP, whilst that of the United States and the EU stands at 29.48 per cent. By contrast, the combined GDP of the countries that met in Bandung in 1955 has risen from 8 per cent of the global total to over 40 per cent. The BRICS countries alone account for 37 per cent. The co-evolution of China and the US (with the US providing markets and technology and China providing cheap labour) explains this transformation, particularly from 2001 onwards with China's accession to the WTO.

This is a process that began with Nixon's visit to China in 1972 and has proportionally benefited China far more. Its GDP in 1994 was lower than that of Spain. Thus, the Pax Americana has made the 'rise of the rest' possible by creating and redistributing the world's wealth.

The figures relating to this convergence may be open to debate, but the West's loss of relative power is evident. However, there are other aspects beyond the economic sphere. There is the military sphere, where the West's advantage is clear – even when the Machiavellian nature of strategy confuses strength with power. Or its cultural power. Or the fact that international institutions are shaped by its diplomatic influence...

And, as for technology and innovation—which determine the future—China rivals the United States, whilst here in Europe we find ourselves sidelined from the competition. Different technologies are intertwined and their effects reinforce one another. As a result, a single technology can bring about a paradigm shift. We are in the midst of a Fourth Industrial Revolution, the key to which is Artificial Intelligence.

In short, the West defines itself as a civilisation, that is, a collection of cultures with a common heritage. However, in practical and general terms, its sphere of influence is geographically bounded by a system of military alliances underpinned by a shared ' ' technology. The transatlantic link is key to its cohesion; it grants a leading role to the United States within a pluralistic Europe which, de facto, has even relinquished this leadership, and whose core is the EU.

But the United States, on its own, faces enormous difficulties in projecting its power. Thus, at a global level, it lacks the capacity to ‘impose’, however much it may have the means to do so, and only has a limited capacity to ‘prevent’. And the transactional diplomacy that accompanies its approach gives it a contingent nature; that is, it remains valid only as long as circumstances do not change. These circumstances are also affected by what has come to be known as *‘imperial overstretch’*; that is, they stem from the fact that its role as a global power is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain economically as a result of its loss of relative power.

Thus, US public debt stood at 122 per cent in 2024, which has even caused the country to lose its top credit rating. Private debt, meanwhile, stood at 142 per cent. The sum of the two is 264 per cent – an exorbitant figure, and one not far removed from China’s 287 per cent, to say the least, given that China has significant hidden debt. Consequently, the core of President Trump’s controversial policy is directly linked to the country’s financing. This ranges from tariffs to demands on NATO member states for higher levels of military spending; investment commitments in the US negotiated with the EU and other actors in parallel with the tariffs; and the restructuring of US military deployment....

The shift in the world order is not merely a change in the positions or rankings of countries; there is no reliable indicator that can summarise or generalise it. And even less so one that brings with it a form of recognition by the international community, a prerequisite for the order to be effective and real.

It is a multidimensional interplay that remains unresolved both at a disaggregated level and, even less so, in global terms. In fact, the situation also varies by area or region, which adds further uncertainties and contradictions. Moreover, these are not symmetrical, which could generate something akin to blood clots that, by turning the local into the global, may cause the world’s circulatory system to collapse.

These aggregates (population, technology, military, diplomacy, etc.) extend into different spheres, each with its own distinct progression, and cannot be subsumed under a single summary figure that expresses the power of each state in question and also serves to compare it with its surroundings.

China may surpass the United States economically, but it is far from possessing political, cultural, technological and military power that is even remotely comparable on a global

scale. And this is despite the fact that the world's culture has been moulded by the power and character of the United States, which consequently enjoys the advantage of its position.

A multipolar world necessarily encompasses multiple geopolitical frameworks. The upheaval caused by wars such as the one in Ukraine has disrupted quite a few of them; but, in the long run, this would have happened anyway. The point is that this war has abruptly laid bare the West's loss of power.

Thus, at the UN General Assembly, although there was a majority condemnation of Russian aggression – 141 votes out of 193, with only 5 against – 35 countries abstained and 12 did not participate, the majority of them African – 17 of which abstained – or Asian. And compliance with the sanctions imposed on Russia was highly inadequate. The fact is that this war, together with those in Gaza, Azerbaijan and Iran, signals a shift in the international order. And this is alongside other regional conflicts, such as the one between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Not surprisingly, war is an abrupt and bloody reordering of geopolitical relations. And it is not the cause but the symptom of the consolidation of an ongoing process.

But, paradoxically, the alliances that underpin the West – such as NATO, which is fundamentally a political alliance – are weakening, whilst the resolution of the problem at hand points in the opposite direction.

Thus, the United States appears to be retreating into its own hemisphere, into Ibero-America. This return to regional priorities is the result of its loss of global power. Previously, the power it wielded over the rest of the world left Latin America, its hinterland, in its shadow. But this is no longer the case, as evidenced by China's presence on the continent, which is forcing the US to divert resources from other areas to return to its 'backyard', which is expanding to include the Arctic.

Nevertheless, China is not confronting the United States but is occupying the spaces the latter is abandoning, for example, in the Middle East. In fact, the disruption of the status quo, which affects regions such as the Arctic – where climate change (the melting of ice, the emergence of new sea routes and greater access to resources, but also the creation of new borders) has directly transferred the uncertainties of the shifting world order to this hitherto marginal region.

Thus, China can bypass the Strait of Malacca – Taiwan continues to form part of its coastal front line and is key to controlling its access to the Pacific – and gain direct access to Europe. Furthermore, globalisation, which is the keystone of the process of change, is not a peaceful phenomenon, but rather a process of cultural rationalisation imposed by the dominant culture, in this case, Western culture. We are facing a process that is inherently conflictual in nature, as befits its rationalising character. Nevertheless, most conflicts are not military in nature, however much they may be presented as such, but rather conflicts of identity, which is the path to progress.

Russia and China share a border and a past fraught with disagreements. The barren wilderness of Siberia is the natural hinterland of an overpopulated China – and this is becoming even more so with global warming; unlike Russia, China accounts for 17 per cent of the world's population, 7 per cent of its land area and 6 per cent of its water resources – on which Russia runs the risk of becoming economically dependent. It is for this reason that this relationship is perceived as being of a temporary nature, yet is nonetheless prioritised by China.

The opportunity for the Asian giant is undeniable, which also underscores the temporary nature and limitations of this relationship. China's natural *hinterland* coincides precisely with the world's *heartland*. This means that the global balance of power tilts in favour of whoever Russia chooses to support; paradoxically, Russia may find itself cast in the role of arbiter in the global contest and, to some extent, in the distribution of spoils. In terms of latitude, the area stretches from the Arctic, pivoting on the belt formed by Iran and Central Asia. For Russia to exist, it needs to be and act as an empire.

And yet globalisation is not a process that has been completed and has consequently generated an equally global agenda; rather, multiple local agendas coexist, the transposition or combination of which proves equally difficult.

Thus, there is no such thing as global terrorism, however much it may seek to present itself as such, since its understanding and references are, ultimately, local. In fact, jihadism has failed even in its mere attempts to unify the various local processes under a religious banner. It has shifted towards adopting more local approaches, to the detriment of its global unification (Al-Shabab in Africa could be a good example). Its secondary nature and its limited geopolitical value are the reasons why it is now being tolerated.

Added to the levelling and rationalising effect of globalisation is the fact that the regulatory framework within which this exponential increase in the level of interconnection is taking place is obsolete, as it has not structurally kept pace with this growth. This relative deregulation has led to a return to the Hobbesian paradigm—that is, to power, to the capacity to impose, as the source of law.

The arrival of the second Trump administration in 2025 has precipitated many of the geopolitical problems that were foreshadowed prior to its accession to power; yet, for all the spectacle of populism, it has not represented any break with the underlying trends guiding the future of international society, let alone that of American politics. It has simply accelerated the process of emergence and made it more explicit.

The conclusions to be drawn from all this are crystal clear: a shift in the world order; an increase in conflict as a consequence of the process of levelling out that is taking place on a global scale and which will place Western states under significant strain, given that the rules they themselves have established for international society – which has, moreover, been created in accordance with Western axiological codes, such as, to begin with, the very idea of the state and of democracy – lie at the root of the decline of their societies; and yet, as a third major conclusion, the survival of Western culture as the linchpin around which globalisation is taking place.

We live in a world of convergence and, as a result, one of growing conflict, in which Western states will have to convey to their societies the loss of relative power they are experiencing, with all the conflict that such a situation entails.

The effort required by this work, as one can appreciate, has been considerable. What is curious and significant is the constant identification of overlaps and interconnections amidst such diversity – often unexpected. Contradiction and complexity are the order of the day here. The aim was to identify such tangles. Geopolitics serves to represent the ‘*skyline*’, the map of what is significant; that is the objective of this work. Once such a panorama of interactions has been brought to light, it is appropriate to move on to more specific studies and seek out more refined and up-to-date data. And having done so, to rethink the ‘*skyline*’ once again.

The book is a useful guide for this purpose. As Juan Luis Cebrián says: “It is an enlightening book, the result of an immense and sustained effort on the part of the author,

which offers new perspectives and an expert analysis of today's fast-paced reality – one which we hope will not lead to tragedy”.

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