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*Francisco José Dacoba Cerviño\**

**Saving Private West!  
Western decline**

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## *Saving Private West! Western decline*

### *Abstract:*

*The North American hegemonic moment that followed the demise of the Soviet Union created the false illusion that the model of global governance of which the United States was the main guarantor was here to stay. It was not so. Several factors have contributed to this hegemony being shorter than expected. The result is the "de-Westernization" of the international order. Multilateralism gives way to an increasingly multipolar world.*

*The West is in retreat and must react to continue enjoying its freedom and well-being. To do this, and before facing external threats, it must first repair the damage within the western vicinity.*

### *Keywords:*

*West, uncertainty, multilateralism, multipolarity, blocs, coexistence.*

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## ¡Salvar al soldado West! El declive de Occidente

### Resumen:

El momento hegemónico norteamericano que siguió a la desaparición de la Unión Soviética creó la ilusión, falsa, de que el modelo de gobernanza global del que los Estados Unidos eran el principal garante, había llegado para quedarse. No fue así. Varios factores han contribuido a que esa hegemonía fuera más breve de lo que cabía esperar. El resultado es la «desoccidentalización» del orden internacional. El multilateralismo cede paso a un mundo, cada vez, más multipolar.

Occidente está en retroceso y tendrá que reaccionar para seguir disfrutando de su libertad y bienestar. Para ello, y antes de afrontar las amenazas externas, deberá primero reparar los desperfectos en el interior de la comunidad de vecinos occidental.

### Palabras clave:

Occidente, incertidumbre, multilateralismo, multipolaridad, bloques, coexistencia.

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Steven Spielberg's great movie, *Saving Private Ryan*, shows us in its opening shots how General Georg Marshall, in the midst of the maelstrom of conducting operations after the Normandy landing, receives a file informing him that three of the four brothers that an American family had sent to fight in World War II have now died. Only one of them has survived. Marshall decides that Private Ryan, deployed on French soil, should be found and evacuated from the front line. In order to do this, Captain Miller is ordered to lead the rescue operation in the heart of occupied France. A few years later, as President Truman's Secretary of State, Marshall would pilot the reconstruction plan that bears his name in order to save, on this occasion, the soldier Europe. Today, 75 years later, it is another "soldier" who needs to be rescued; his name is West.

### **The decline of the West**

It is obvious that the world is undergoing a process of profound reconfiguration. It would be surprising if this were not the case, since peoples and societies, throughout history, have always been in a state of continuous evolution. On this occasion, this process of change is global in scope, affecting everyone simultaneously, large and small players alike. And it is happening at a dizzying speed, as never before. Both circumstances are mainly the result of the application of new technologies, especially communication technologies. The world is getting smaller, borders are blurring, news (and non-news) is spreading around the globe in real time and no one can escape it. It is therefore a rapidly moving international order, with no expectation of close stability, which is a faithful response to the concept of constant change coined by Heraclitus<sup>1</sup>.

The most significant feature of this global and dizzying dynamic is its uncertainty. We know that the order of global governance that we have been familiar with for decades is shaky, questioned from within and from outside, and we are not yet able to specify what the new playing field that replaces it will look like... although we can make a little of it

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<sup>1</sup> PARDO DE SANTAYANA, José. *La revolución de Heráclito, todo fluye y nada permanece en el orden mundial multipolar*. IEEE Analysis Paper 05/2020.

[http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs\\_analisis/2020/DIEEEA05\\_2020JOSPAR\\_multipolar.pdf](http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2020/DIEEEA05_2020JOSPAR_multipolar.pdf)

out. In this interregnum, as Gramsci pointed out<sup>2</sup>, monsters, doubts, misgivings, tensions and risks arise. But when we talk so repeatedly about uncertainty, we once again fall into an excess of Eurocentrism, extending to what we usually know from the West. Because uncertainty goes by neighbourhoods. Us Westerners, used to setting the tone, are most anxious to scrutinise the future, trying to see how the new international scenario will take shape. And there are no shortage of reasons for us to be anxious.

The speeches of the world's leading leaders at the latest Munich Security Conference, which is usually held at the beginning of the year in the Bavarian capital, have revealed many profound discrepancies in the assessment of the world situation. Discrepancies not only between Western representatives and those of other powers, which is understandable, but also between leaders on both sides of the pond. This trend has been substantiated in the 2020 edition, which was convened under the disturbing slogan of *Westlessness*. The corresponding report, prepared by Ambassador Ischinger, President of the Conference, details the factors and circumstances that lead the organisers to conclude with such a laconic diagnosis: the world is becoming less and less Western<sup>3</sup>. According to the report, this is due to causes attributable to Western societies themselves, *Westlessness in the West*, of which President Donald Trump's address to



<sup>2</sup> Antonio Gramsci: "El viejo mundo se muere. El nuevo tarda en aparecer. Y en ese claroscuro surgen los monstruos".

<https://citas.in/frases/65675-antonio-gramsci-el-viejo-mundo-se-muere-el-nuevo-tarda-en-aparece/>

<sup>3</sup> MSC. Munich Security Report 2020. Westlessness.

[https://securityconference.org/assets/user\\_upload/MunichSecurityReport2020.pdf](https://securityconference.org/assets/user_upload/MunichSecurityReport2020.pdf)

the United Nations General Assembly in September 2019 may serve as an example: “the future does not belong to globalists; it belongs to patriots<sup>4</sup>.” And also, of course, due to external causes, *Westlessness in the World*.

In this brief analysis, we will not open the debate –which has been going on for some time– about what the West is. It would be difficult to agree on an uncontroversial definition and, in any case, the diatribe would do nothing to dispel the uncertainty. There is, as López-Aranda points out<sup>5</sup>, a militant Westernism, formed by countries that share the same cultural substratum that has its roots in the old Europe, and a universalist Westernism that, beyond a specific cultural space such as the one mentioned, incorporates a system of common values and norms of coexistence. Let us therefore make a generic reference to the characteristics that are accepted as belonging to the Western model: freedom, commitment to representative democracy, human rights, the rule of law, free markets and submission to rules and controls based on multilateralism. It is not, therefore –although the term is– a geographical concept that covers only Europe and North America. It is an inclusive proposal that also applies to the democracies of the other continents, whatever their cultural framework.

The recent US election campaign has left us with disturbing images of a social polarisation that will be difficult to reverse for the next Administration. This concern is shared by the new president, Joe Biden, who as one of his immediate priorities has identified the need to address a radicalisation with a strong racial component<sup>6</sup>. In Europe, shaken by the shock of the Brexit, it is almost impossible to find a topic of discussion that does not give rise to bitter confrontations between its members: energy supply, immigration, Chinese penetration, relations with the United States or Russia, perception of risks and threats, etc. Even the definition of democracy itself is interpreted

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<sup>4</sup> Donald J. Trump, “Remarks to the 74th Session of the United Nations General Assembly,” 24 September 2019,

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-74th-session-united-nations-general-assembly/>

<sup>5</sup> LÓPEZ-ARANDA JAGU, Ricardo. *Panorama Estratégico 2020*. Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos. [http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/panoramas/Panorama\\_Estrategico\\_2020.pdf](http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/panoramas/Panorama_Estrategico_2020.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Agencia EFE (08NOV20): A day after their victory was declared, the team of US president-elect Joe Biden revealed on Sunday their plans for the transition of power, with the pandemic, economic recovery, racial inequality and the climate crisis at the top of their priorities.

<https://www.efe.com/efe/usa/america/biden-trabaja-desde-ya-en-la-transicion-con-pandemia-como-prioridad/50000103-4389188>

differently by some EU governments. These internal problems on both sides of the Atlantic inevitably have an impact on the until recently unquestioned transatlantic link. In view of all this, it seems that the greatest threat facing the Western bloc does not stem only from external elements but also lies in its own lack of internal cohesion. *Westlessness in the West.*

Hyperglobalisation has left losers along the way. Also in North America and Europe, whose working classes have seen their jobs transferred to Asian countries where wage costs are much lower. The economic crisis that began in 2008 hit the Western economies particularly hard, giving wings to the then nascent populist movements. The uneasiness this produces is materialising in the rise of radical, nationalist and populist identity positions, which object to the model from within.

This loss of Western relevance has been largely due to America's decision to renounce the quasi-hegemonic leadership it exercised, and with pleasure, just a couple of decades ago. Endless wars, with no plausible results, have demotivated an American society that has no shortage of internal problems on which to focus its efforts and resources: controlling the pandemic and economic recovery will be some of its priorities in the immediate future.

As far as Europe is concerned, its glaring absence in the management of the many serious conflicts around it cannot be hidden. The Mediterranean basin, understood in its broadest sense as extending from the Sahel in the south to the Caucasus in the east, including the whole Middle East region, is a scenario in which the script is dictated by third powers or, worse, in which countries belonging to the same Alliance or Union defend conflicting interests. High Representative Josep Borrell lamented this situation when, while still a candidate for the post, said that our credibility as Europeans would be negligible if we were not able to solve the problems of our immediate neighbourhood<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> J. Borrell: "we will not be credible in our ambition to be a geopolitical actor, if we are not capable of solving the problems of our immediate neighbourhood." <https://theobjective.com/borrell-fija-en-los-balcanes-y-rusia-sus-prioridades-como-jefe-de-la-diplomacia-europea/>



The two most significant entities, at least as far as we as Spaniards are concerned –the European Union and NATO– are going through difficult times. Assertions by then US President-elect Trump, such as that NATO is obsolete<sup>8</sup>, although subsequently retracted<sup>9</sup>, do little to foster understanding among Allies. More recently, the growing tensions in the Mediterranean between Turkey and Greece, the latter with the support of France, abound in this perception of internal clashes. Very different strategic visions coexist in the European Union (countries of the East in relation to those of the South) and conflicting interests are defended in specific scenarios, such as the war in Libya.

Faced with this panorama of internal divergences, withdrawal and lack of leadership, it is easy for those from outside to reject the Western proposal and advocate their own principles and values, which do not necessarily coincide with those in force up to now. The absence of Europeans and Americans in key regions of the world and in the management of armed conflicts is quickly made up for by the arrival of Russia, China, Turkey and Iran. The Middle East is a good example of the latter.

In the specific case of China, its evolution in recent decades is simply impressive because it is disproportionate, both socially and, above all, economically. The global crisis that began in 2007 affected the Western economies much more, as they had to retreat to their own needs, which enabled China to present itself as a welfare state for weak third countries, seriously affected by the crisis, through loans and development aid. A preview of what, a few years later and already under Xi's presidency, would materialise in the *One belt, one road* initiative. The informally-known-as the New Silk Road is the Asian giant's proposal of a "Chinese-style" multilateralism, alternative to the one found in the West<sup>10</sup>. A multilateralism that focuses on breaking down trade barriers, but which ignores everything related to sustainability or people's rights. In addition to this, there is the technological, geopolitical and diplomatic challenge. After many decades of absence, China is achieving a leadership that was absent in the United

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<sup>8</sup> BBC News (16ENE17): Trump worries Nato with 'obsolete' comment. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-38635181>

<sup>9</sup> BBC News (12ABR17): Trump says Nato 'no longer obsolete.' <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-39585029>

<sup>10</sup> AMBRÓS, Isidre. *El multilateralismo asiático, un orden internacional con características chinas*.

IEEE Opinion Paper 150/2020.

[http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs\\_opinion/2020/DIEEEO150\\_2020ISIAMB\\_multilateralismoAsia.pdf](http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2020/DIEEEO150_2020ISIAMB_multilateralismoAsia.pdf)

Nations agencies, where it already chairs seven of these agencies<sup>11</sup>, has launched initiatives such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).

Ever since the Obama Administration, this Chinese strength has attracted the US government's maximum attention, which explains the shift in the centre of gravity of world geopolitics to the Asia-Pacific region, to the detriment of the centrality Europe enjoyed during the long decades of the Cold War. The European Union, for its part, has also undergone a significant shift in its stance towards the penetration of the Asian giant. If in 2013 the Union's Agenda for 2020 identified China as a strategic partner for a multilateral international order<sup>12</sup>, in 2019 the categories of economic competitor and systemic rival also came into play<sup>13</sup>. The warning light was lit in 2016 with the acquisition by a Chinese company of the German technological company Kuka<sup>14</sup>, and with initiatives such as the one known as 17+1, in which certain countries in Eastern and Southern Europe, some of them EU Member States, have signed various cooperation agreements with China<sup>15</sup>.

Russia, unlike the major Asian power, is not in a position to propose, let alone impose, its own model of global governance. But it can, by word and deed, object to the Western proposal. President Putin was very clear in declaring the liberal idea obsolete. He did so in an interview with the *Financial Times* in June 2019 on the occasion of the G20 summit in Osaka<sup>16</sup>. In its immediate surroundings, Russia has been able to make the most of its growing military capabilities, in addition to an intelligent policy of supporting local actors, to regain a prominent role in the extensive geographical arc that stretches

<sup>11</sup> GARCÍA MORITÁN, Roberto (14MAY20). <https://www.infobae.com/america/opinion/2020/05/14/la-onu-con-impronta-china-y-la-universalidad/>

<sup>12</sup> European External Action Service. [https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/china/docs/eu-china\\_2020\\_strategic\\_agenda\\_en.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/china/docs/eu-china_2020_strategic_agenda_en.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> European Commission (12MAR19) EU-China. A strategic outlook. <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-eu-china-a-strategic-outlook.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> El Economista (08AUG16): "Chinese firm Midea takes over almost 95% of the Kuka robot manufacturer": <https://www.eleconomista.es/empresas-finanzas/noticias/7754335/08/16/La-firma-china-Midea-se-hace-con-casi-el-95-del-fabricante-de-robots-Kuka.html>

<sup>15</sup> PARRA PÉREZ, Águeda. *The Digital Silk Road: the great Chinese globalisation*.

IEEE Opinion Paper 38/2020.

[http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs\\_opinion/2020/DIEEEO38\\_2020AGUPAR\\_sedadigital.pdf](http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2020/DIEEEO38_2020AGUPAR_sedadigital.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> Financial Times (28JUN19): Vladimir Putin says liberalism has 'become obsolete.'

<https://www.ft.com/content/670039ec-98f3-11e9-9573-ee5cbb98ed36>



from the Caucasus (let us recall that it was Russia that finally imposed a ceasefire agreement on Nagorno-Karabakh), through the Middle East and into the Mediterranean to the coasts of Libya. A growing presence that is not alien to the rest of the African continent.

Without going as far as the Chinese and Russians, other actors also have their own agenda outside the liberal scheme. Turkey feels called upon to regain the old Ottoman presence in the far-off lands of Central Asia (with the exception of East Turkistan, now Sinkiang, so as not to disturb the Chinese dragon), a region where peoples with a Turkic language and culture are settled. It has intervened actively in the Caucasus, supporting Azerbaijan; and in Syria, to contain the Kurdish peshmergas. In the Mediterranean, following the discovery of considerable natural gas reserves, it is experiencing serious friction with the neighbouring coastal countries and is also playing a leading role in the development of the war in Libya by supporting one of the warring parties. All this is causing misgivings and tension between allies and neighbours.

Finally, Jihadist terrorism is a persistent threat that is being reorganised and strengthened following the setbacks suffered in the Middle East, as the attacks on European soil periodically remind us. Although it is fair to acknowledge that these are only a tiny part of the total number of attacks perpetrated by these terrorist groups in Africa, the Middle East or Afghanistan. In addition to the above-mentioned alternatives, there is another proposal, that of a Salafist Caliphate, which clashes head-on with Western values. *Westlessness in the World*.

### **The future... isn't it already written?**

The arrival of the new US Administration is regarded by many as a long-awaited opportunity to turn the tide of multilateralism, to regain a certain American leadership in the world and to foster new trade, technological and security partnerships between at least the liberal democracies. A network of agreements that are essential for addressing, in the best possible conditions, the challenge posed by other powers and which has been damaged by American unilateralism during the Trump four-year period. No doubt there will be some of that. Both when he was only a candidate and once he was confirmed as the new president, Biden has reiterated on many occasions that he wishes to tread the path of revived multilateralism, heal the open wounds with the allies

and return to leading the world, albeit in a different manner. Rather than *America first!*, *America's back!* But it is one thing to say it and another –very different– to see to what extent he will be able to carry out this global commitment.

Restoring the lost trust between democracies must avoid the undesirable effect of reinforcing the drift towards multipolarity, much less bipolarity. The world cannot afford to fall back into a bloc dynamic. The former US president's commitment to *strategic decoupling* is not viable on a planet that, like it or not, is deeply globalised and interconnected. There is no place for watertight compartments, encapsulated commercial or technological ecosystems. International order will appear heterogeneous; there will not be a one-colour system of governance. Different systems will coexist, which will force us to seek coexistence. Even the major powers will have to give up imposing “their” model. International relations must be very fluid; flexible, rather than dogmatic. Cooperating with ideologically opposed regimes is difficult, of course. The key to success will be to identify common interests and build opportunities for collaboration on them. The pandemic could have been, and was not, a good occasion to make progress in this line. It will therefore be necessary to reach agreement on those matters where agreement is possible, while at the same time managing disagreements. All this while remaining faithful to the values and principles that cannot be renounced.

We have recently had a clear example of this variable geometry, in this case in the field of trade relations, with the agreement signed in the framework of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) by China, by the ten member countries of ASEAN, and by Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand... without the United States<sup>17</sup>. The signatory Pacific democracies, which are undeniably aligned with America in so many areas and also undeniably at odds with China in many others, have still signed an agreement that will bring them major trade benefits.

The pandemic caused by the SARS-Cov-2 virus has, for the first time, affected the whole of humanity almost simultaneously, causing a global health crisis and, as a consequence, an economic crisis, also global, whose true dimension is far away from being known. Contrary to what this global affectation might suggest, the challenge was

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<sup>17</sup> El País (15NOV20). China and 14 other countries sign the world's largest trade agreement. <https://elpais.com/internacional/2020-11-15/china-y-otros-14-paises-firman-el-mayor-acuerdo-comercial-del-mundo.html>

not met in a coordinated and collaborative manner by the international community. On the contrary, the multilateral institutions played a very mediocre role in management, and the major powers engaged in a bitter exchange of reproaches and accusations about the origin of the virus. But not only a pandemic requires a multilateral approach. Risks such as those arising from global warming, the revived arms and nuclear race, cyber-attacks, organised crime, cross-border terrorism and mass migrations can only be effectively addressed through international collaboration. The challenge facing the international community is none other than to overcome the positions of the trenches.

### **Will Private West survive?**

The West is in a daze. The multilateralism it was comfortable with is fading away. In its place a multipolar order has emerged, asymmetrical due to the different capacities of the powers around which this polarity is structured. An order that is moving decisively towards a kind of G-2, with the United States and China at the forefront. Bad news, from a new bipolar world. Worse still, if Ian Bremmer's prediction that the international order is evolving from a G-8 format (G-7 after Russia was not invited because of the annexation of the Crimea) to a G-20 format, to finally reach G-Zero mode<sup>18</sup>. The resulting chaos in international relations would be the worst possible scenario.

But before looking outside for blame, liberal democracies should settle their internal disputes and rebuild on the principles and values that have brought them here. Without renouncing the defence of legitimate individual interests, but stressing that only from a common vision can the huge challenges posed by the rest of the global players be met with certain guarantees. Jim Mattis, in his farewell letter following his dismissal from the post of US defence secretary, pointed out that no power, not even the United States, can defend its interests except through strong agreements and alliances with natural partners<sup>19</sup>. This is a call to review the deteriorated links in the Western security network, a matter in which Mattis is a more than authoritative voice, but which can also be extended to the rest of the relations between democratic states.

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<sup>18</sup> BREMMER, Ian. From G8 to G20 to G-Zero: Why no one wants to take charge in the new global order. NewStatesman (11JUN13). <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/politics/2013/06/g8-g20-g-zero-why-no-one-wants-take-charge-new-global-order>

<sup>19</sup> MATTIS, Jim. Farewell letter (31DEC18). <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2018/12/31/jim-mattis-farewell-letter-hold-fast-he-urges-pentagon-employees/2450291002/>

Only once one's wounds have been healed will it be time to confront external threats, be they commercial, technological or military in nature. With their feet on the ground, aware that it is already too late to prevent China's rise. The Empire of the Centre is back, and we have to live with that reality. With determination and without defeatism, because the Chinese wager has its own limitations. The Beijing authorities are not getting all the benefits they expected from their presence in the world. The excessive diplomatic aggressiveness of the "wolf-warrior"<sup>20</sup> is intended to counter criticism of the obscure management of the pandemic in its initial weeks and of the attitude in Hong Kong, the Taiwan Strait, Sinkiang, the Himalayas or the surrounding seas. Russia, for its part, will persist in its assertiveness in the immediate environment... which is ours too, as Europeans. And to this list we must also add Jihadism, Iran, North Korea, the militarisation of outer space, the Arctic Ocean, cyberspace, etc.

Many hopes, perhaps too many, are placed on the new American president. Biden himself does not miss an opportunity to state that his country has a vocation for leadership: *America is back, and ready to lead the world, not retreat from it*<sup>21</sup>. A "returned" United States is more than welcome to design, together with the allies, a renewed form of leadership. Far from the arrogant cowboy, a leadership shared with like-minded people, which is perceived as a responsibility assumed by all, not as an imposition. The West needs to make itself heard with a strong but single voice, proclaiming its determination to moderate, if not reverse, the drift towards multipolar order. Biden is expected to come to the rescue of the grieving soldier West, in the manner of the filmmaker Captain Miller from our movie of choice. An excessive task which, precisely for this reason and in its own interest, cannot be avoided by other Western actors.

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<sup>20</sup> The Diplomat (15MAY20). Interpreting China's 'Wolf-Warrior Diplomacy.'  
<https://thediplomat.com/2020/05/interpreting-chinas-wolf-warrior-diplomacy/>

<sup>21</sup> BBC News (25NOV20): 'America is back', says Biden as he unveils team.  
<https://www.bbc.com/news/election-us-2020-55057751>

In the final scenes, an elderly soldier Ryan returns to the European theatres of war from which he was rescued, reflects and wonders if so much sacrifice had been worthwhile to save him. Yes, Ryan was probably a good man for the rest of his life, worthy of the high price paid. Meaning that, with all its internal problems and despite his shortcomings, the West deserves to survive the siege it is being subjected to. From outside... and from inside.

*Francisco José Dacoba Cerviño\**

ET Brigadier General

Director of the IEEE