



## Introduction

These are not good times for Western democracies. The wave of optimism that in the 1990s gave birth to the happy idea of the 'end of history' is now behind us. Although after the collapse of the Soviet Union the world experienced a boom in the number of countries that successively and uninterruptedly joined the select group of regimes meeting the parameters of liberal democracies, the euphoria was short-lived. The moment of unipolar US splendour, unchallenged by the initial weakness of the new Russian Federation and the discreetness of the People's Republic of China, was conducive to this democratising upsurge across the globe. But the window of opportunity closed a few years ago, when these powers emerged from their respective humiliations and presented their own amendments to the principles of US-style multilateralism. Authoritarian regimes have since proliferated under the umbrella of a multipolar and asymmetric global governance model, with a clear democratic backlash in certain Western countries<sup>1</sup>.



Unfamiliar with the constraints of an international order based on respect for commonly accepted norms, authoritarian leaders find the Grey Zone the ideal playground for the use of all kinds of hybrid confrontational procedures. In a kind of anything goes, except crossing the threshold of open warfare, they systematically resort to diplomatic, commercial, technological or military pressure, which democracies are more reluctant to use, subject as they are to the rule of law and the control of their respective public opinion.

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed study of the regression of democracies around the world, see: LINDBERG, Steffan and KOLVANI, Palina. 'The autocratic virus.' Available in *Foreign Policy*, May 2021. <https://www.politicaexterior.com/articulo/el-virus-autocratico/>

This produces an asymmetry that clearly tilts the balance on the side of those who lack democratic controls.

A few months before the elections that brought Joe Biden to the presidency of the United States, we published in this same forum a Document in which, contrary to other opinions, we ventured that a hypothetical election of the Democratic candidate would not radically change the climate of confrontation with the so-called revisionist powers: the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation<sup>2</sup>. Repeated statements by the then candidate and, later, the now president were evidence, if not indications, that swords were still in raised with regard to both Russia and, above all, China.

### **New areas, more possibilities for (cooperation) conflict**

Several factors have brought us to this situation of generalised conflict. New and disruptive technologies are fundamentally changing the face of the battlefield, as the recent confrontation between Armenia and Azerbaijan has shown<sup>3</sup>. Globalisation, the proliferation of non-state actors and the incorporation of new relational spaces only add more fog to the ever-fuzzy aspect of war.

The traditional Land, Sea and Air have lost their monopoly as the domains in which relations between states were settled, for better and for worse. Multilateral control mechanisms (institutions, treaties, forums, legislation, etc.) designed to govern these relations are ambiguous when 'global common spaces' expand. The progressive melting of the waters of the Arctic Ocean, a region hitherto passive to human activity, will open up new trade routes, facilitate access to valuable raw materials on its seabed as well as fishing grounds, and is already witnessing an evident militarisation of its coasts.

Airspace grows vertically and now incorporates outer space, beyond the Earth's atmosphere. If at first it seemed that this would be an area of exclusive interest to the

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<sup>2</sup> DACOBA CERVIÑO, Francisco J. *When the storm passes... calm will still not be restored*. IEEE Analysis Paper 25/2020.

[http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs\\_analisis/2020/DIEEEA25\\_2020FRADAC\\_finales2020.pdf](http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2020/DIEEEA25_2020FRADAC_finales2020.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> MARÍN DELGADO, José Alberto. *War of drones in the South Caucasus: lessons learned from Nagorno-Karabakh*. IEEE Opinion Paper 21/2021.

[http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs\\_opinion/2021/DIEEEO21\\_2021\\_JOSMAR\\_DronesCau caso.pdf](http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2021/DIEEEO21_2021_JOSMAR_DronesCau caso.pdf)

major powers, the progressive cheapening of technologies needed to access it has opened its doors not only to other states, but also to private initiative. The possibilities for progress and scientific advances for mankind are growing... at the same time as a new arena is opening up for the clash of interests and competition between state and non-state actors in outer space.

But it is in cyberspace that all kinds of hostile activities between all kinds of actors are taking place most intensively. From intrusions into private computers to the denial of services to a public or private institution; or the massive attack on the computer systems of a state, which can paralyse the provision of essential services for society: transport, health systems, energy distribution, education, finance, etc. The difficulty of attributing authorship of such interference, its low cost and the ease with which it can be carried out make the cyber sphere an ideal space for generalised and permanent conflict. Both true and false news circulate simultaneously, making the public's mind the target of their cyber-attacks. The aim is to influence public opinion, whether one's own or that of others: reality is not relevant, but the target society's perception of it. As a result, land, sea, air, outer space and cyberspace are joined by a sixth area of confrontation: the cognitive domain. And once again, the potential for conflict multiplies. The war is not what it used to be, and the worst thing is that the big players have decided to take the gamble, and are even doubling down.

### **The two (or three) big players on a collision course**

The change of White House president in January 2021 took place on a global stage of '*Great Power Competition*'. Biden's arrival raised high hopes that his predecessor's oft-criticised decisions on international relations would be replaced by a more moderate approach from the new administration. His repeated allusions to multilateralism and his hints to reuniting with traditional allies were welcomed by many. But the undeniable progress in these areas should not blind us to the fact that, as far as China's great rival is concerned, little or nothing has changed with respect to the relations inherited from Trump. Trade, technology and the persistent geopolitical tensions in Pacific waters remain on a collision course. The March 2021 meeting of the Chinese and US delegations

in Anchorage revealed a highly worrying tension and dialectical aggressiveness in media coverage of the event<sup>4</sup>.

In the case of Russia, Biden has shown a significant change compared to Trump's previous ambiguity. Warnings about Russian military deployment in the vicinity of the Ukrainian border or the case of opposition leader Navalny have led to very serious accusations from the American to his Russian counterpart, unusual in the diplomatic world, however frosty relations may be<sup>5</sup>. These growing tensions between the United States and Russia, barely quelled by the few agreements following the Geneva summit<sup>6</sup>, as with China, present the European Union with a very uncomfortable situation that could drag it, against its own interests, into a clash of giants from which Europeans can expect nothing good.

The People's Republic of China has left the low-profile and low-key policy of Xi's predecessors behind. Aware of the country's undisputed commercial and technological power, the Chinese president has responded to US sanctions and vetoes on its technology companies by launching his own geopolitical challenge. In addition to the 'New Silk Road' and the 'Made in China 2025' technology initiative, China's undisguised assertiveness in the China Seas and massive and sustained military spending make the People's Liberation Army a formidable military tool.

Russia too, especially since Putin's second presidential term at the helm of the Federation, has presented its credentials as a major regional power, albeit with aspirations of being on a par with the two global giants. Despite its weaknesses and shortcomings, Moscow has been able to become the arbiter of developments in its

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<sup>4</sup> 'Washington y Pekín constatan sus divergencias en una tensa cumbre en Alaska' ('Washington and Beijing note their differences at a tense summit in Alaska'). 20 March 2021. Available at: <https://www.elperiodico.com/es/internacional/20210320/china-estados-unidos-11592999>

<sup>5</sup> 'Biden calls Putin a murderer and says he will "pay a price" for Russian interference in his election'. 17 March 2021. Available at: <https://es.euronews.com/2021/03/17/biden-llama-asesino-a-putin-y-dice-que-pagara-un-precio-por-la-injerencia-rusa-en-sus-elec>

<sup>6</sup> 'Biden y Putin: 3 puntos de encuentro y 3 desacuerdos que quedaron claros en la primera reunión entre los dos mandatarios' ('Biden and Putin: 3 points of agreement and 3 disagreements that became clear in the first meeting between the two leaders'). 16 June 2021. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-internacional-57504805>



geographical environment, from Libya to Armenia and Azerbaijan; from the Black Sea to the Middle East; not to mention its penetration into Africa and its interests in the Central Asian republics and the Arctic. Revenues from its large hydrocarbon reserves have gone, in large part, to rebuild an armed forces that had become obsolete after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In addition, alongside the United States, it remains the world's other major nuclear power and has a permanent seat on the UN Security Council.

### **'Non-wars'**

The word 'war', in its traditional meaning, seems to have fallen into disuse, instead preferring to speak indistinctly (and therefore wrongly) of confrontation, clash, tensions, conflict, etc. But, on the other hand, the same term is used—with the same lack of rigour—to refer to alleged wars of various kinds: commercial, technological, cultural warfare. In any case, conflict—let us accept the term in its broadest meaning, including that of war—is manifesting itself in this 21st century with unusual vigour.

Fearful of the global hecatomb that a direct military confrontation between the great powers would bring, they are looking for different ways to compete in order to avoid a head-on clash, and they are not lacking in options. In practice, globalisation has created a single world market in which the emergence of China as a major exporter has shaken previous trade balances. In 2013, in Astana, President XI presented the 'New Silk Road', a gigantic programme of investment in land and maritime infrastructure to provide an outlet for the country's huge and increasingly high-quality manufacturing output. The United States, aware of the threat that Chinese penetration poses to markets previously held captive by US producers, has reacted with a battery of tariffs of dubious effectiveness. The Beijing government, for its part, responded in kind, creating an atmosphere of widespread mistrust from which no international actor has been able to escape.

Even more worrying from a Western point of view, is China's intention to lead, in the short term, the cutting-edge technologies that will shape the model of future societies<sup>7</sup>: artificial intelligence, big data, 5G, robotics, nanotechnology, biomedicine, blockchain, etc. The

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<sup>7</sup> PARRA PÉREZ, Águeda. Post-pandemic challenges? China moves forward. IEEE Opinion Paper 80/2020. [http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs\\_opinion/2020/DIEEEO80\\_2020AGUPAR\\_China.pdf](http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2020/DIEEEO80_2020AGUPAR_China.pdf)

US reaction has been to hinder or ban the penetration of these new technologies from China, similar, by the way, to what Beijing has been doing much earlier in relation to Western companies. These cross-technology vetoes are spreading to other regions. Europe has legislated to protect its technological know-how and leading companies, and has limited the presence of Chinese components in 5G networks. Meanwhile, India has banned certain Chinese applications on national security grounds<sup>8</sup>. If this trend towards mutual technological exclusion, together with the aforementioned trade barriers, is not reversed, we risk heading inexorably towards a global disconnection that is undesirable in such an interconnected world.

Commercial and technological competition is the battleground of these generalised 'non-wars' in which large and medium-sized powers confront each other without coming to blows. But there are other disputes, of a geopolitical nature, that do bring us dangerously close to the edge of the abyss, not so much because war is deliberately sought but because, at any given moment, accumulated tension could lead to a loss of control of the situation.

The hottest spot in these '(still) non-wars' is undoubtedly in and around China's inland seas, which many analysts have described as the 'Chinese Caribbean'. In line with its interests, Beijing is equipping itself with a powerful naval force that has set off alarm bells in coastal states. Taiwan is the most worrying element of discord between China and the United States in the region. The commitment to the security of the island of Formosa and other neighbouring countries, as well as the guarantee of free navigation in these inland seas, explain the regular presence of the US Navy, and even those of some European countries. The key question here is whether, when the time comes to repel military aggression by the People's Republic against its 'rogue province', the US commitment would be strong enough to engage in a war with none other than China. And Beijing

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<sup>8</sup> 'India prohíbe Tik Tok y otras 59 aplicaciones chinas "por seguridad"' ('India bans Tik Tok and 59 other Chinese apps "for security"'). 1 July 2021. Available at: <https://www.lavanguardia.com/internacional/20200701/482040668537/tik-tok-india-aplicacion-prohibiciones-seguridad.html>

makes no secret of its intentions: *'The PLA will resolutely defeat anyone attempting to separate Taiwan from China and safeguard national unity at all costs'*<sup>9</sup>.

Further north, two other US allies, Japan and South Korea, face the challenge posed by North Korea for different reasons. For Tokyo, in terms of the nuclear threat; for South Korea, in addition to the above, because of all the connotations related to the hypothetical and desired reunification, a possibility that clashes head-on with the interests of Beijing, the main supporter of the North Korean dictatorship. To the south, freedom of navigation through the Strait of Malacca is of vital importance so that the flow of goods is not interrupted. The ease with which this transit through such a narrow, uncontrolled passage could be prevented at any given moment explains China's search for direct outlets to the Indian Ocean from the mainland, bypassing Malacca, via Myanmar or Pakistan.

China's presence in the Indian Ocean, together with border disputes in the Himalayas, brings a new and not insignificant player into the equation: India, which in turn has serious differences with Pakistan, especially in relation to the disputed Kashmir. Pakistan is a country bordering the chaos of Afghanistan, a nuclear power, a haven for Islamic radicals and a favoured partner of China. As a result, New Delhi's traditional non-alignment stance is shifting significantly towards greater understanding with the United States and other Pacific democracies, such as Japan and Australia, in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), a kind of Asian NATO that China is not at all happy about.

The Arabian Peninsula and its environs are another source of instability for which no acceptable solution can be envisaged in the foreseeable future. The Abraham Accords sponsored by Trump, and unchallenged by Biden, bring Israel closer to its until recently irreconcilable Arab enemies to face together the threat of Iranian nuclear escalation. The sure losers, once again, will be the Palestinians. Russia, with its strong support for the Syrian regime, has earned itself a privileged position in the region, in which any possibility of an agreement requires Moscow's approval, and ensures its military presence in the Mediterranean from naval and air bases in eastern Syria. Turkey, meanwhile, is

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<sup>9</sup> The People's Republic of China's White Paper on National Defence in the New Era 2019. Available at: <https://www.dsn.gob.es/es/actualidad/sala-prensa/libro-blanco-rep%C3%BAblica-popular-china-sobre-defensa-nacional-nueva-era-2019>



simultaneously playing two difficult games with two difficult interlocutors: Russia and its NATO allies.

Africa, from a state of precariousness dating back to the colonial era, is once again the focal point of the ambitions of the great foreign powers. China, in search of resources and raw materials; Russia to open markets in which to sell its modern military equipment; and, for various reasons, also the Gulf states, Israel and Turkey. And they do so by taking advantage of the lack of interest from the United States, which is busier and more preoccupied with the Asian scenario. The European Union, in turn, is torn between the evidence of its necessary involvement in the development and stability of the continent, especially of the closest region of the Maghreb and the Sahel, and its own regulatory and budgetary limitations and the weakness of a foreign policy subordinated to paralysing unanimity in decision-making and strategic discrepancies of member states. As a result, jihadism is rampant in much of the continent. Organised crime networks, in symbiosis with terrorist groups, weak institutions, rampant demographics and the consequences of global warming leave millions of young people with no hope for a better future and no alternative but to join jihad or seek their El Dorado in Europe.

The Americas have been hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic with a considerable setback to the promising levels of progress and well-being achieved, albeit not across the board, in previous decades. The persistent difficulty of these countries in reaching regional integration agreements, so necessary in a globalised world, prevents them from joining forces and competing adequately in global markets. In return, Chinese penetration threatens to deplete strategic mineral reserves and fishing grounds.

### **And, also, the ‘yes’ wars**

The polyhedral conflict that we have been describing does not exclude the abundance of warlike confrontations, wars in their most traditional sense, to which the major and medium-sized powers, which settle their disputes through third party actors—proxies—in the so-called proxy wars, are by no means alien. Most of these ‘hot spots’ are distributed precisely in Europe's immediate surroundings: from the Atlantic waters of the Gulf of Guinea, the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, a Middle East extended to incorporate Iran, the

Caucasus and Afghanistan<sup>10</sup>. Far from having been eradicated, jihadist terrorism is keeping Europe's periphery aflame and, lest we forget, is also active within its borders.

The most worrying aspect of this long list of wars, some better known than others but all equally destabilising for the societies that suffer them, is that the prospects for their peaceful resolution are slim.

### **At the roulette wheel in Brussels and Geneva, all on the red (dragon)!**

President Biden's first international tour was undoubtedly a profound one. In an intense week, the US leader met with the British Prime Minister, attended meetings of the G-7 and the European Union, and the Alliance summit in Brussels, ending with a highlight: his face-to-face meeting with Vladimir Putin. The president's objectives were several, all of which had already been announced prior to his trip. The most repeated was to insist time and again that the United States has returned to multilateralism and understanding with allies, only to make it clear to Russia that not everything goes, and to China, on the contrary, that there will be more of the same.

Expectations prior to the Geneva meeting were not high, and the limited results of the meeting did not disappoint. An agreement in principle to continue on the path of controlling the nuclear arsenal, the return of ambassadors and a few allusions to the fight cybercrime; little else. Or nothing less. Since a comprehensive agreement was not possible, the expressed wishes for better, predictable and stable, yet tense relations can be described as a positive start—no one expected more<sup>11</sup>.

With the playing field established with Russia, the real challenge for the United States is posed by the military might of the People's Republic of China. With this country identified as the main strategic adversary, Pentagon chief General Austin has sounded the alarm

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<sup>10</sup> For more information, see: DACOBA CERVIÑO, Francisco José. *European Strategic Autonomy: neither with you, nor without you...* IEEE Analysis Paper 13/2021.  
[http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs\\_analisis/2021/DIEEEA13\\_2021\\_FRANDAC\\_Autonomi\\_a.pdf](http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2021/DIEEEA13_2021_FRANDAC_Autonomi_a.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> A Genève, Joe Biden et Vladimir Poutine entament un dialogue stratégique à pas comptés. 17JUN21. Available at: [https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2021/06/17/a-geneve-joe-biden-et-vladimir-poutine-initient-un-dialogue-strategique-a-pas-comptes\\_6084459\\_3210.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2021/06/17/a-geneve-joe-biden-et-vladimir-poutine-initient-un-dialogue-strategique-a-pas-comptes_6084459_3210.html)

to concentrate all his Department's efforts in the Pacific<sup>12</sup>. With this claim, of the threatening resurgence of the red dragon, Biden intends European allies to close ranks and thus send a signal of unwavering unity in facing the challenges posed by the Asian power. An overwhelming logic from a strictly American point of view, but one that allies on this side of the Atlantic will have to rethink carefully. Without underestimating the importance of the Chinese challenge, European leaders are aware that a maximum, black-and-white stance, without nuance, is not advisable. Neither towards China, with whom Europeans have a wide range of trade relations, nor towards Russia, an inevitable neighbour with whom it would be better not to get along badly with.

This unpleasant either/or choice, so disliked in the European Union, is also greeted with equal concern in other regions of the globe. This is particularly significant in the case of the Asian countries, close to the Chinese giant, which they do not want to be dependent on and subordinate to, but which they cannot ignore or, much less, confront. Their economy and security inevitably depend, if not on aligning itself unconditionally with Beijing, at least on not earning its open hostility. To a greater or lesser extent, the dilemma is repeated in the Middle East, Africa and Latin America.

Another undesirable consequence of this gamble, all on red, is the mutual rapprochement of those who feel so harshly challenged. Beijing-Moscow cooperation finds in the shared adversary good reasons for closer ties, despite the historical grievances of the past, the divergent interests of the present and the certain frictions of the future. This explains the repeated efforts—mainly by France and Germany—to seek lines of understanding, at least in certain fields, with neighbouring Russia. Efforts that are strongly opposed by some European partners<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> "Get to work": US defence chief tells Pentagon to sharpen China focus'. 10JUN21. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/jun/10/get-to-work-us-defence-chief-tells-pentagon-to-sharpen-china-focus>

<sup>13</sup> 'La UE rechaza la cumbre con Putin propuesta por Alemania y Francia' ('The EU rejects the summit with Putin proposed by Germany and France'). 25 June 2021. Available at: <https://www.lavozdegalicia.es/noticia/internacional/2021/06/25/ue-rechaza-cumbre-putin-propuesta-alemania-francia/00031624641199324941599.htm>

## Conclusions



The main cause of this global unrest is the struggle for world hegemony between the former hegemony holder, the United States, and the new challenger, China. It would be naïve to expect the challenged and the challenger to give up their respective ambitions. Moscow, seeking a seat at the big boys' table, is aligning itself with Beijing and playing its cards very cleverly. China welcomes this harmony and secures an invaluable source of raw materials and hydrocarbons of which it is an avid consumer.

The result of this three-way game is generalised instability, which multiplies the stimuli for confrontation, kinetic or otherwise, from which it is very difficult for other countries to escape. When challenges shared by humanity as a whole (climate change, cybercrime, terrorism, organised crime, nuclear proliferation, pandemics, etc.) require cooperation, at least in these fields, the road is fraught with obstacles. Realistically, the most we can aspire to is coexistence, understood as a difficult balance between collaboration, where necessary, and acceptably regulated commercial and technological competition.

In this worrying and complex scenario, with new tools (technological and commercial) for confrontation in old and new spheres, especially in cyberspace, all international actors are affected by unleashed '21st century' conflict. The two major powers—or three if we include Russia—like daring card players, have not only 'seen' the challenge, but have decided to go further and have chosen to up the ante. There is no sign of a change of

course in the ‘*Great Power Competition*’ and so many and varied conflicts—commercial, technological, geopolitical... and also wars—are unlikely to be reversed.

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