



Reconcentration Around Empires

Carlos Blanco

Professor, Comillas Pontifical University, Spain;
Fellow, World Academy of Art and Science

Abstract

The article offers a brief reflection on how the contemporary geopolitical landscape is favouring the recovery of the classical idea of imperial hegemony around a relatively small number of axes.

One of the most striking phenomena of our time is the *reconcentration* of geopolitical influence around blocs closely related to ancient empires. What seemed to have faded away after the Cold War, with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the socialist field, has regained strength on the current international scene. On one side, we have the United States, Canada, the European Union, and countries in their orbit such as Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, and—albeit problematically—Japan. There is no doubt that this bloc includes some of the world's leading economies, not only in terms of gross domestic product but also in terms of innovation, measured fundamentally by the number and quality of registered patents. At the opposite end of the spectrum, China shines, increasingly attracting a greater number of satellites, both natural and adventitious, such as the many African nations that are benefiting from the copious investments the Asian giant has made on the continent. Countries such as Ethiopia, Cameroon, South Africa, and the Ivory Coast are clear examples of this trend. It is clear that these investments are not free. The debt these countries accumulate with China continues to grow. Even so, the number of infrastructure projects is significant, and the recent expulsion of French forces from the Sahel and Central Africa only highlights a clear shift in hegemony in Africa. Russia, for its part, the largest country in the world, although it does not stand out in any indicator (neither GDP nor number of patents) beyond the strictly territorial and military ones, seems poised to reclaim its position as the fourth major imperial force, alongside the United States, the European Union, and China. In addition to regions naturally close to it, such as the Central Asian republics, its sphere of influence has increased significantly in Africa and Latin America. In this sense, it is joining China in expanding its networks beyond Asia. The invasion of Ukraine, which has undoubtedly weakened it, does not, however, translate into a renunciation of this centrality on the geopolitical level.

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Until well into the 18th century, it is not bold to claim that China, the Middle Kingdom, was the world's greatest power. Remote and unknown, shrouded in mystery to Westerners, the long and brilliant Ming Dynasty, followed by the Manchu-based Qing Dynasty,

consolidated a strongly centralized state that brought peace and prosperity to its inhabitants. This process dates back to great preceding dynasties such as the Song, Tang, and Han. A deeply hierarchical, pyramidal society, in fact, was capable of significant innovation in numerous areas. The most populous country on earth did not seem to have imperial ambitions beyond its borders. Governing such a vast nation was enough. This policy of “slavery within, freedom without,” in the sense that the emperor’s subjects did not enjoy the civil liberties and political pluralism that were beginning to emerge in Europe in the 18th century, contrasts with European colonialism in Africa, the Americas, and Asia. The defeats caused by the British during the Opium Wars represented a terrible humiliation for what had been one of the greatest powers in history, and it is no exaggeration to say that the current Chinese leaders’ obsession is not only to develop the country and turn it into the world’s leading economy, but also to make amends for the fateful 19th century. China today stands as one of the leading countries in technological innovation, for example, in the field of artificial intelligence. Although it is the country with the largest number of patents, it is clear that in quality they are not yet comparable to their American and European counterparts. However, few challenge the hypothesis that they will soon reach the level of Western patents. What may have been driven initially by unethical practices, such as industrial espionage, now seems to have reached a cruising speed that arouses fear in other parts of the world.

Democracy is an essential value and praxis for respecting human dignity, our freedom, and our right to be what we choose.

In the last century, the American political scientist Samuel Huntington spoke of an inexorable “clash of civilizations.” Drawing on criteria such as religion, language, and cultural history, he distinguished eight civilizations (Western, Latin American, Slavic, Islamic, Confucian, Japanese, Hindu, and African). Although the number is questionable, and other scholars will surely unify or separate these civilizations, it seems indisputable that today we are witnessing a reconcentration of political, economic, and cultural power around classical axes: the Western (and here I allow myself to separate Western Europe from the United States; although many accuse the European Union of following uncritically the Americans, due to its political structure and culture, geography, proximity to other regions, etc., it is not immediately subsumable), the Russo-Slavic, and the Chinese. The proximity between the latter two may not necessarily be temporary, but perhaps destined to become stronger. However, it is undeniable that these are two distinct geopolitical, religious, cultural, and economic axes, which have currently strengthened ties, to the point of forming an alliance due to a common enemy: the West.

Huntington’s remaining civilizations oscillate between these major axes. Their loyalty is not guaranteed. Not even Japan, a traditional ally of the West since its defeat in World War II, can risk completely committing to the West. It is an Eastern power, forced to coexist with Russia and China, with whom it has engaged in painful military confrontations. Regarding Latin America, the fabric of its alliances is very complex, especially because some countries are clearly inserted into the Sino-Russian bloc, while others vary depending on who holds political power. Africa, however, seems unequivocally inclined toward the Sino-Russian

axis, while India claims its own place, its own centrality, its own status as a major cultural and geopolitical center. Let us not forget that until the fall of the Mughal Empire, it was one of the largest, richest, and most powerful countries in the world, and that during India's golden age—the Gupta period—it fueled fundamental mathematical, scientific, and technological innovations, such as the invention of the number zero and the decimal system. The cultural core that presents the greatest challenges for analysis is the Islamic one. It suffered from Western colonialism (and, centuries earlier, it was a colonial power throughout the Eastern Mediterranean, the Balkans, the North African coast, numerous enclaves in sub-Saharan Africa, Central Asia, and India) and is plagued by problems of democratic consolidation that do not appear resolvable in the medium term. The Palestinian conflict, the clash with a West closer to Israel, only complicates the geopolitical landscape. Therefore, although it may be a provisional thesis, it is not bold to argue that, in general terms (and with notable exceptions, such as Morocco), the Islamic world is closer to the Sino-Russian bloc than to the West. The Gulf countries depend economically on Western purchases of gas and oil, but in many respects they clearly align with the other bloc.

War can and should be avoided. The fact that hegemony is divided among three, four, or more imperial axes does not imply a condemnation to large-scale confrontation.

It is a constant in history that hegemony has been simultaneously contested by several powers. In the classical West, Carthage and Rome constantly fought for supremacy over the Mediterranean; in the Middle Ages, first the Holy Roman Empire faced the Papacy and then, with the development of the Modern Age, national states like France faced other powers, such as the Spanish Habsburg Monarchy. During the Middle Ages in the Near East, the Abbasid Caliphate clashed with the Byzantine Empire, and for almost three centuries, a certain geopolitical balance developed between the heirs of the Eastern Roman Empire and the caliphs of Baghdad, broken by the outbreak of the Crusades. Although one power occasionally prevails over the other, and even destroys it (as happened with Carthage), new rivals always emerge. The Romans fought the Parthians without ever achieving a decisive victory; indeed, they were often defeated by the Persians. The three great thalassocracies that humanity has ever known, Spain, Great Britain, and the United States, have always had powerful rivals.

The time of unchallenged US dominance is over. The world will have to coexist with four major "imperial axes": the United States, the European Union, Russia, and China. The first two are democratic; the second two are not (although one is nominally so, democracy does not consist only of holding elections, but also of respecting individual rights and the separation of powers). The key question is how to extend the spirit of democracy to the other two major imperial axes that have emerged, and which in reality recapture what has existed for centuries (in the case of Russia, at least since Ivan the Terrible, who expelled the Tartars, and especially with the Romanov dynasty and its territorial conquests in Asia).

It may seem utopian to rely on the United Nations system to act as an arbiter between these powerful axes, but one cannot lose hope that technological and social progress will also translate into a dissemination of the great principles of international legality and respect for individual freedoms. The triad of freedom, democracy, and prosperity has brought the West decades of peace, development, and wellbeing such as no one has ever known. It is true that we Westerners have frequently practiced a policy of “freedom within, slavery without,” and that colonialism and wars beyond our borders reveal our unforgivable hypocrisy when dealing with nations outside our cultural orbit. However, past misgivings cannot dominate the present and the future. Each generation has the right and the duty to find its own horizon and pave its own path. Humanity cannot demand uniformity, but rather diversity within unity, plurality based on principles that respect that same humanity in each of its members. In my opinion, democracy is an essential value and praxis for respecting human dignity, our freedom, and our right to be what we choose. Even so, within the democratic spirit, there is room for diverse ways of conceiving the world and humanity. One can then speak of a *pluralistic humanism*, which integrates diverse notions of the human around a common foundation, around a universal ethics.

Strengthening international institutions such as the United Nations, the International Criminal Court, is the best way to contribute to this pursuit of peace, freedom, and democracy.

The critical observer will argue that the conflict between these major imperial axes is unavoidable in light of history. I accept that partial conflicts will arise, because perpetual peace is a utopia, toward which we must strive, but whose ideal ignores the nature of human relations. Nevertheless, I do not accept that these conflicts will transcend specific issues, such as tariff disputes, to escalate into a full-scale conflict. War can and should be avoided. The fact that hegemony is divided among three, four, or more imperial axes does not imply a condemnation to large-scale confrontation. In recent years, a logic of war has prevailed (Afghanistan, Iraq, Ukraine, Gaza, etc.), the triumph of force over reason. All our efforts must be directed toward achieving peace and the rule of law. Strengthening critical public opinion, especially in Russia and China, as well as using the means that technology provides us to expose the crimes of all powers and to spread democratic ideas is a necessity. Every human being deserves to be free and to live in a world of peace, with democratic guarantees. Human intelligence, which has allowed us to reach into space and unravel the secrets of the material world, is our best tool for organizing ourselves wisely and fairly. Strengthening international institutions such as the United Nations, the International Criminal Court, and the various arbitration and exchange bodies that exist on a global and regional scale, is the best way to contribute to this pursuit of peace, freedom, and democracy.

Author's Contact Information

Email: cbperez@comillas.edu