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The Geopolitics of Future Wars

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The world shaped by the European empires in the second half of the nineteenth century, by its very multipolarity, caused the First World War (1914-1918) and the Second World War (1939-1945). Despite being distinctly named, both were part of the same conflict, separated only by an intermediary cease fire.

At the end of this period of significant tragedy, in 1945 the United Nations was born with the purpose of promoting and maintaining peace in the world, a purpose which was, arguably, never reached. The Security Council was instituted with five permanent members China, the United States, France, the then-Soviet Union and the United Kingdom with power to veto any multilateral resolution. The strong ideological antagonism between the capitalist and communist systems structuring these powers led, however, to the promotion of conflict as opposed to peaceful resolution under the rules of the international law.

A bipolar international system emerged from this very intense struggle, based on the prevalence of the use of force in spheres of influence, which lasted until the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989). Centred around the United States and the Soviet Union, this system was characterised as a period of dangerous stability. The nuclear arsenals of both parties led to the concept of mutual assured destruction; a theoretical possibility to extinguish the planet in a matter of hours prevented *World War III*.

In this context, two major military alliances were formed: in the West, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), and in Eastern Europe, the Warsaw Pact. The conflicts between them happened indirectly, through support states or insurgent groups in Latin America, Africa, Asia and the Middle East. Occasionally, as in Vietnam and Afghanistan, the United States and the Soviet Union's troops engaged directly with insurgents, but not with each other. Communists acted to destroy capitalism, and vice versa, anywhere in the world, whenever there was a possibility.

After 1989 the communist countries of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union itself collapsed and disbanded the Warsaw Pact. There was state fragmentation, acute economic crisis and revival of religious, ethnic and nationalist conflicts in regions such as the Balkans and the Caucasus. Resentments choked for the period of European empires appeared to have been resurrected.

It was in this environment that the unipolar hegemony of the United States was crystallised and the European Union, created (1993). The United Nations increased resolutions instituting multinational coalitions to enforce peace – usually led by North Americans and composed of NATO members. This alliance, along with the European Union was extended towards Eastern Europe, receiving many countries that were former members of the Warsaw Pact.

In 2003, the United States and the United Kingdom, citing the supposed possession of weapons of mass destruction by Iraq, and disregarding the United Nations and NATO views on this issue, invaded the country and overthrew its dictator, Saddam Hussein. They remained there until 2011.

However, the international system seems to be changing towards a situation of greater multipolarity. From 1989 to the current period, the economic situation in Russia has improved a lot due to oil and gas exports. China, meanwhile, grew at annual average rate close to 10%. Both countries are enhancing their military budgets. Other emerging countries also grew at higher rates than developed ones, which since 2008 have entered and still remain in financial and economic crisis. The global balance of power is shifting and spraying towards the Asia-Pacific.

This rebalancing of economic power, while at the same time promoting global chains, interdependence between countries and enhancing the political power of rising nations, might also, inevitably, augment rivalries, arms races and conflicts between them. At such a turning point, History could return to a period akin to that lived shortly before the First World War, – or not.

So, to discuss a *world politics of security for a world defined by stability*, peace and prosperity for all, demands the assessment of current geopolitical aspects and their future developments within the international system; the future of multipolarity, territorial conquest, control of the seas, control of airspace, outer space and cyberspace, geographic spill-over of wars and conflicts, their pervasiveness and motivations.

The International System

The current environment of shifting power could frame the international system in such a way as to provoke wars if circumstances turn into those of a multipolar world with abundant rivalry and weak multilateral organisations, unable to promote peaceful solutions to increasing conflicts.

Considering the current global context, there are a number of factors that could generate such a system, and for the same reason of shifting power, it is difficult to foresee a bipolar or a unipolar world in a few decades.

New economic powers are emerging: developing economies are growing faster because of the globalisation process. At the same time, many countries are excluded and suffer from starvation, lack of healthcare, education, social goods and security.

Global power is gradually fragmenting; the enrichment of former peripheral nations is reducing the asymmetries between periphery and centre that still exist in the US led international system.

These conditions may lead to increasing rivalries and disputes between those which did not previously have enough power to credibly engage in such endeavours. These nations will possess more money to buy weapons, which are in turn becoming more accessible and lethal due to modern technology.

Nationalisms, political ideologies and religious extremisms may be exacerbated by this new multipolarity.

Countries and/or populations excluded from the globalisation process exhibit trends to internal states conflicts in the frame of insurgency, organised crime and terrorism, as currently occurs in the Middle East, South Asia and Africa.

In such a multipolar international system, these low intensity conflicts, instead of being resolved through multilateral institutions, may be sponsored by regional or global powers in accordance with their interests.

On the other hand, global powers will probably not clash directly themselves, considering the deterrence effect exerted by nuclear arsenals and the possibility of substantial economic losses, given the integration of global markets.

Multipolarity

Multipolarity will prevail and spread. It is the natural consequence of economic growth. Developing and emerging countries become more attractive markets for investment as well as turning into significant global investors themselves, generating complementarity and interdependencies among developing and developed economies, leading to a win-win scenario of mutual enrichment. And this process is replicated regionally: in East and

Southeast Asia, where communist China, since 1978 followed Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan; and, nowadays, Vietnam, Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia are on the same path.

The 'poles' in this multipolar world should be the United States, the Europe Union, China, Russia, Japan, India, Indonesia, the Arabian Peninsula and Brazil, whose achievements, geopolitical positions or potential economic and/or military power provides them – or likely will do so in the near future – with the necessary political power to maintain or achieve such a status in the international arena.

The United States, the European Union, Japan, Brazil, Russia, India and China were/are noted for their military and/or economic status. Besides current economic and political troubles in Brazil and Russia, their geographic and economic dimensions can assure them such a position, disregarding military capabilities.

The Arabian Peninsula has already a significant and growing GDP; it has considerable investments in developed and emerging countries besides high and incremental military expenditures, particularly Saudi Arabia.

Indonesia has a large population (around 250 million people) and a sizable GDP, besides a strategic geographic position – all of which are favourable to take advantage of the globalisation process.

As regards the stability of the international system, multipolarity does not necessarily have to generate conflict. The current and increasingly interconnected economies worldwide will probably exert a role of stabilisation or, at least, of crisis de-escalation, considering that the gains from commercial exchanges clearly surpass the spoils of war.

On the other hand, the enormous asymmetry between the United States' military capacities and the other nuclear powers will remain the same, because any attempt to reduce it would probably result in an unaffordable arms race promoted by the enormous North American economic and technological complex.

However, it is possible that such an international system will not be able to stabilise poor and fragile states or regions excluded from the globalisation process and which are currently desolated by ethnic, nationalist, religious and/or political struggles.

To be successful, the 'poles' of multipolarity will need to act in a joint and coordinated manner; however this is not what is seen at present times.

Territorial Conquest

Wars of territorial conquest will always be a possibility, but with declining likelihood. The payoff from the acquisition of territory offers less value in the modern world than it did in earlier times.

Territorial conquests presuppose occupation, which has its costs. Invaders may face permanent insurrections that always demand plenty of troops, and provoke both military and civilian casualties. Financial and political costs are high. Rulers of democratic countries may see their popularity and support rapidly evaporate.

The international community could impose economic, political and even military sanctions in such situations, such as at the time of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1991 or in current days concerning Russia's seizure of Crimea. Furthermore, the more world economies integrate, the stronger will be this trend and the same is true for the advances of democracies.

Alongside economics, political and military levers, the media will also exert a crucial role in containing initiatives of territorial conquest. Moreover, world populations are now directly connected and share information through modern technologies. Large groups of people can be rapidly mobilised anywhere in the world to defend causes, protest, press leaderships and organise boycotts.

However, the likelihood of wars for territorial conquests could be greater in poorer regions, such as fragile states, where these tensions might be combined with struggles of ethnic, nationalist, religious and political natures. The evolution of such potential conflicts will depend on how intensely they damage the interests of the international system in general, or those of NATO, Russia and China, in particular, besides the political and logistical constraints to military interventions, generally.

Control of the Seas

Maritime transportation, due to its enormous shipment capacity, will probably remain the world's most important mode of trade. It is hard to envision some technological solution that could replace it.

On the other hand, global supply chains will develop much further, along with the growth of the world economy and interconnections between nations and firms will become increasingly interdependent.

In this sense, the freedom of maritime navigation is vital to the global economy. If it is compromised by unilateral attitudes, divergent to international laws, conflicts may be sparked.

Today, the most dangerous point of potential conflict is the South China Sea, encompassing an area from the Singapore and Malacca Straits to the Strait of Taiwan. The area's importance largely results from one-third of the world's shipping transiting through its waters, and that it is believed to hold huge oil and gas reserves beneath its seabed.

Several countries have made competing territorial claims over this maritime body; the People's Republic of China is building islands on reefs and, just as the Republic of China (Taiwan), they claim almost the entire body as their own, despite overlaps

with virtually every other country in the region. Competing claims include Indonesia, Philippines, Vietnam, Brunei, Cambodia and Malaysia.

The United States are also present in the region and have several defence agreements with most of the countries involved.

Control of Airspace, Outer Space and Cyberspace

The use of outer space, cyberspace and airspace is already a basis for both military engagements and civilian activities.

Technological development has expanded the domain of conflict, once restricted to land, sea and air. Currently five arenas must be considered: sea, land, air, space and cyberspace. Detection systems, imaging, global positioning and communications embedded in satellites and aircraft along with networked systems placed on land and sea surfaces allow full monitoring and control of activities. Information is processed, updated and disseminated immediately.

These technologies offer significant benefits to their owners. Since 1991, in Operation Desert Storm, it became evident that intensive and appropriate use of technology can result in the annihilation of powerful enemies in a matter of weeks.

In their passive state, such capabilities act as a deterrent, while in their active usage they ensure success, with few casualties, minor damage to the civilian population and little logistical effort. In most cases, technological capabilities allow a military force to impose its will on that of its opponent through selective attacks, with reduced or no ground troops and without the need for territorial occupation. This causes less psychological impact on a nation's troops and on public opinion, making wars less troublesome for political leaders.

Successful military operations depend on Command, Control, Communications and Intelligence (C3I). This means that the gathering, flow, reliability and opportunity of information are all as crucial as combat capabilities. Hence, a contender needs to assure his own freedom of communication and deny such liberty to his opponents. This means ensuring information superiority and demands the control of outer space, airspace and cyberspace domains.

Analysing the issue from the viewpoint of civilian activities, there is a large and incremental dependence on satellite services and computer nets. The data collection and transmission provided by these platforms support global communications; global positioning systems; environmental monitoring; and scientific research on subjects such as meteorology, climatology, geology, geography, hydrology, oceanography, hydrography, agriculture, fishing and urbanism.

Space orbits, especially the geostationary, are, however, finite and their usage by satellites is negotiated at the United Nations in its Office for Outer Space Affairs

(UNOOSA). The same criteria are used concerning the electromagnetic frequencies spectrum used for signals transmission. The current situation is that space segments, such as those used for communications, are already near saturation.

Therefore, outer space and cyber space could either be inducers of human development or militarily disputed domains since controlling them may provide significant power to the controllers.

Geographic Spill-over of Wars and Conflicts

Given the interconnected nature of the world economy, it is quite difficult for the effects of future wars to be restricted to a regional environment.

Global supply chains permeate the globe. Raw materials, plantations, industrial plants and markets are all linked, making nations interdependent, for good or ill.

Thus, anywhere a war sparks it will probably affect both producing and consuming nations as well as supply routes. This could spread losses outside conflict zones in the form of scarcity, inflation, unemployment, and market failure.

Meanwhile, wars which occur in very poor regions of underdeveloped and disconnected economies, although unlikely to result in economic collateral damage beyond its borders, could, in case of high populated areas, trigger the displacement of large human contingents as refugees. Difficulties of this kind occur right now in Syria and North Africa.

Wars and Conflicts: Pervasiveness

As noted above, the interconnections of the global economy tend to deter conventional conflicts. Their pervasiveness makes them counterproductive, thus undesirable to the international community. Unlike prior times, the huge financial and human costs far outweigh the profits; this cost is reflected politically upon the decision-makers.

On the other hand, in poor and fragile states, inequality and feelings of injustice will probably continue to fuel internal and external conflicts, facilitating the proliferation of safe havens for criminals, insurgents and terrorist organisations, which could establish parallel centres of power to states or even seize governmental control.

In this way, insurrections and terrorist activities could easily spread around the world, supported, funded and abetted by networks of transnational organised crime.

Wars and conflicts: motivation

Parodying Thucydides, honour, fear and interest will continue to fuel war and conflict. But the drivers will be a combination of nationalisms and ethnic rivalries, Islamic radicalism, inequality and poverty, natural resource scarcity and unstable leadership.

Nationalisms and ethnic Rivalries

The increasing multipolarity feeds state fragmentation and, since the colonial period, passing by World Wars I and II, the borders of the world have undergone a fair few shifts. Many of these border changes are still unrecognised by nationalist and ethnic groups and so, have the potential to turn into conflicts. Rivalry, hate and the desire for revenge are not gone from the world, sometimes surfacing in the form of genocide.

Increasing nationalist feelings are identifiable in great powers, like China, India, Japan and Russia, besides the hegemonic posture of United States.

China claims territories all around its borders and is occupying reefs in the South China Sea, disregarding the protests of neighbouring nations. Chinese resentment stemming from European and North American colonialist behaviour – in addition to historical wars with Japan – is latent.

India has always presented internal problems concerning ethnic and religious conflicts, as well as external ones related to Pakistan, Bangladesh and China.

In Russia, Vladimir Putin seized Crimea from the Ukraine and is supporting insurgents to seize another eastern part of the country. These movements seem to be part of a strategy to deter NATO and the Europe Union's supposed attempts towards an advance eastward and enjoy the support of the Russian people.

Japan, led by the nationalist premier Shinzo Abe reshaped its defence policy in order to allow the participation of its troops in conflicts *to defend its allies if the security of the nation is threatened*. The change means a departure from the pacifist position that characterised Japan since its defeat in World War II.

The United States understand they have a role as *leader of the world*; they are present and defend their interests worldwide, allied to NATO and Asian partners. This posture is understood by Russia and China as a threat and an attempt to consolidate the U.S.'s political and military hegemony.

Islamic Radicalism

Islamic radicalism is increasing and spreading, mainly in the Middle East, North and Central Africa. This radicalism is giving birth to terrorists groups capable of defying states and supporting or motivating proxy group attacks all around the world, such as the case of the French incident against the Charlie Hebdo magazine (2015).

Nowadays, the most significant example is the Islamic State that has seized parts of Syria and Iraq, but claims its domains as stretching from Morocco to Northwest China. In Nigeria the Boko Haram is defying national authorities and armed forces. Al Qaeda and the Taliban, despite the attempts to destroy them, still exist.

The violence practised by such groups in the name of God is shocking and growing. They have settled in oil producing areas and could compromise its supply chains; their intention to seize and control the entire Islamic World is clearly stated and shown. A more decisive reaction from western powers may well be but a question of time.

Inequality and Poverty

Globalisation has promoted economic development but has done so unequally within and across countries and regions; meanwhile, extreme poverty is still a challenge to be overcome. This situation will probably continue to fuel perceptions of injustice among those whose expectations are not met. Socioeconomic and opportunity disparities among individuals, groups, countries and regions could result in social and political instabilities expressed as insurgency, terrorism and incremental criminal activities.

However, due to economic and political constraints, it is not possible to envision a fast change in the international system in the sense of suddenly providing less developed countries greater access to the benefits of globalisation.

Natural Resource Scarcity

Global population is growing. Economic development is enabling more consumers' access to goods before unaffordable. However productive activities are not sustainable, worsening climate change capable of provoking environmental hazards. For this reason among others, the world could face a situation of scarcity, provoking generalised conflict around the world. However, this hypothetical situation would be conditioned to human capacity to develop and/or improve technologies and behaviours in order to avoid such a threat.

In recent decades, the world has seen significant economic development and population growth, but always at the expense of the environment. As a consequence, deforestation and greenhouse gas emissions have increased due to fossil fuel and vegetation burning, factors identified as the main cause of global warming. Countries' development took place at the expense of the environment.

On the other hand, there are more than one billion people living at extreme levels of poverty, an unacceptable reality, yet when they leave such a condition it will inevitably increase the demand for natural resources, especially food.

These trends, if consummated, will accelerate environmental degradation, which is already at a critical level and could provoke natural disasters around the world, reduce agricultural productivity, raise sea levels, spread tropical diseases, cause floods in some areas and drought in others.

In this context, and considering the technological capabilities available today, without factoring in the potential for technological advances, natural resource scarcity is foreseeable in the near future, especially that of food. Such a situation would cause

economic, political and social instability worldwide and could propel nations with a resource-deficit, but with surplus power, to coercive searches for supplies abroad. Weak and poor states could derail and develop into operational bases for criminal and terrorist organisations.

Unstable Leadership

The escalation or de-escalation of crises in general depends on leadership stability. Leaders may search for pacific solutions for conflicts and calm the population down, or, conversely, motivate them to support war.

As examples of unstable leadership – and sanguinary wars derived from the inconsistency of their actions – we can mention the invasion of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein (1990); the invasion of Iraq by George W. Bush (2003); the recent annexation of Crimea (2014) by Vladimir Putin and his support to the Ukrainian separatists – in the latter case it still cannot be glimpsed how far the Russian president is willing to go –; and the situation in North Korea, where president Kim Jong-un, who considers himself a form of deity, is systematically eliminating his collaborators and has nuclear weapons, making for a very unstable region.

As to the reason why any ruler would behave in such a manner, one may again recall Thucydides: honour, fear and interest. Such arguments have great appeal and are very current. They were used in all the examples cited above and will very likely continue to be so, by the same or other leaders in the future.

Conclusion

Globalisation promotes development and global economic integration but not in an all-inclusive way. It extends multipolarity, which can either be a factor for stability because of trade flows, or a cause of conflict, due to the greater political, economic and military capacity gained by emerging countries.

There will be many differing reasons for humanity to choose these opposing outcomes of multipolarity and the role of leadership will be crucial. Unfortunately, it seems that in many areas of the world today the worst option has been chosen. It is now up to the international community to respond to that in such a way as to return multipolarity to a path of positive and peaceful interconnectivity.