



Strategic Panorama 2021

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MINISTERIO DE DEFENSA





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Introduction

Felipe Sahagún

Cycle changes in history often coincide with major wars or revolutions. 2020 may have been an exception or, as many fear, just a foretaste of deeper tensions that will manifest themselves with greater or lesser force in the coming months and years.

The most destructive pandemic of the last century and Donald Trump's defeat in the US presidential election have provoked the most serious crisis in American democracy since the Civil War and the deepest recession on the planet since 1929; but by mid-April 2021, with more than 3 million dead and 140 million infected¹, few dared to anticipate its ultimate impact on open or potential conflicts in the international system in the short or medium term. Much depended on public investment and vaccination which, very unevenly and with huge question marks, was launched at the end of 2020.

¹ 'COVID-19 Dashboard by the Center for Systems Science and Engineering (CSSE) at Johns Hopkins University (JHU)', 16 April 2021. <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html> 'Coronavirus World Map: tracking the global outbreak'. The New York Times, 10 January 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/world/coronavirus-maps.html>. As of mid-April, the figure stood at about 3 million dead and more than 136 million infected, according to the John Hopkins Institute at the University of Maryland.

Proof of the exceptional circumstances in which we find ourselves is the European Commission's decision on 28 January to extend until the end of 2021 (already the second extension) the extraordinary mechanism approved in March 2020, which suspended the debt limits imposed by the Stability and Growth Pact in the EU and lifted the ban on aid to companies to prevent unfair competition². In early March 2021, the Commission left open the possibility of extending the suspension of debt ceilings until 2023³.

Acknowledging that Europeans have been so aware of the impact of our individual choices and those of our rulers on our lives since the Second World War, Timothy Garton Ash gave a bittersweet assessment of Europe's response to the pandemic.

"The big failure was the attempt to prove that only the EU could provide vaccines quickly and equitably to all member states," he said. "The big success was the seven-year budget agreement and the 1.8 trillion euro Next Generation EU (ACA) rescue fund"⁴.

Looking to the future, "the last thing Europe needs today is another orgy of introspection in the form of a conference on the future", he added. It would be much better if it could concentrate its efforts on concrete and effective responses to the most urgent problems, such as the 'green digital card' for the free movement of those already vaccinated, investing the recovery fund quickly, well and without bureaucracy, avoiding new debt crises in the countries of southern Europe and, politically, successfully passing "the test of the Dutch and German elections this year, the French presidential elections in 2022, the following Spanish, Italian and Polish elections, and the European elections in 2024".

Like most serious crises –war, economic, financial– the COVID-19 crisis has exposed the main strengths and weaknesses of international society and forced a change in dominant ideas about

² Gresillon Gabriel. 'Covid: Bruxelles prolonge l'autorisation des aides d'Etat'. Les Echos, 29 January 2021. <https://www.lesechos.fr/monde/europe/covid-bruxelles-prolonge-lautorisation-des-aides-detat-1285681#xtor=CS1-26>.

³ 'EU likely to waive borrowing limits again in 2022'. Euractiv. 1 March 2021. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/economy-jobs/news/eu-likely-to-waive-borrowing-limits-again-in-2022/>.

⁴ 'Will the EU emerge from the coronavirus crisis stronger or weaker?'. The Guardian, 9 March 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/mar/09/will-the-eu-emerge-from-the-coronavirus-crisis-stronger-or-weaker>.

what should and can be done. Perhaps the most important in the West is the state-market-citizen relationship.

With the emergency funds approved in the first fourteen months of the pandemic –some \$14 trillion, 13.5% of global GDP– more than four times the amount spent in the face of the last major financial crisis, the decades-long balance has been broken⁵. How long and how will this protective shield be maintained and what impact will it have on the welfare state and the social contract of the last seventy years?

Foreign Policy's predictions

Within nine months of each other –in March and December 2020– twelve internationalists (including John Allen, Richard Haass, K. Mashubani, Joseph Nye and Stephen Walt) gave a glimpse in *Foreign Policy* of the global changes⁶ that, in their eyes, the pandemic was already causing and would cause in the coming years. These were their forecasts two months after the first infections were reported:

- More state power and more nationalism, but, as in previous plagues, such as that of 1918, equal or more great power rivalry and less global cooperation when it was most needed.
- A world less open, less prosperous, less multilateral and less free, as many leaders, having reacted late and poorly to multiple warnings from intelligence services and leading epidemic researchers, were given or assumed emergency powers and some may be reluctant to give them back.
- More protectionism, the end of the economic globalisation that began in the 1980s, a greater estrangement and hostility between China and the US, and a multiplication and intensification of conflicts between actors trying to occupy power vacuums and compete for scarcer resources.
- In Kishore Mahbubani's words, "COVID-19 will not fundamentally alter the major global economic trends already underway", but it will "accelerate the shift from US-centric globalisation to a new and different, more China-centric globalisation".

⁵ 'Shelter from storm'. *The Economist*, 6-12 March 2021, p. 16.

⁶ 'The Future of the State'. *Foreign Policy*, 16 May 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/16/future-government-powers-coronavirus-pandemic/> Magazine, Summer 2020, pp. 7-11.

- Weakening transatlantic ties due to US renationalisation, although leading internationalists were banking on Democratic candidate Joe Biden's victory in the November presidential election, after a virtual campaign finish, to spur a new US global leadership in the style of Franklin D. Roosevelt's before and during World War II.
- Economically, there is widespread agreement on the vulnerability of the global manufacturing chains that have been spreading across the planet and on the desirability of moving production closer and safer for parent companies.
- However, as Joseph Nye warns, "transnational threats such as pathogens, artificial intelligence systems, cyber threats and radioactivity will continue to require more than ever global systems of information, control, contingency, standards and treaties that limit risks".

In the face of enemies such as the coronavirus and climate change, American (Japanese, Chinese or any other great power in isolation) power is not enough and all will have to adapt their national security strategies to this new reality. With Joe Biden in the White House, watching his first decisions, rightly or wrongly, they begin to do so.

- The coronavirus crisis, explained Haass, head of the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) and author of some of the best recent studies on the transformation of international society⁷, "will force most governments in the coming years to focus on their domestic problems".

It is therefore foreseeable that there will be a growing rejection of mass migration and a reduction in resources devoted to regional and global challenges, such as climate change, except in regions such as Europe, where the EU has made its massive bailout programme conditional upon projects linked, above all, with digital renewal and the fight against climate change.

Among the positive changes, Haass foresees "a strengthening, however modest, of global public health governance".

"The Trump administration's incompetence and lack of solidarity, had it been re-elected, would have further weakened US inter-

⁷ Those books are *A World in Disarray: American Foreign Policy and the Crisis of the Old Order* (2018) and *The World. A Brief Introduction* (2020) https://www.amazon.es/Libros-Richard-Haass/s?rh=n%3A599364031%2Cp_27%3ARichard+Haass.

national leadership,” said Kori Schake, deputy director of the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) in London. “But the global effects of the pandemic would have been significantly mitigated if there had been more and better information from international organisations”.

On 2 January, almost a year later, they clarified, specified and deepened their predictions⁸:

- “[...] COVID-19 represents a complex set of interconnected transnational problems that demand multilateral solutions and leadership... Science will eventually save us, but there will be no coordinated action against the disease – or recovery – without leadership.” (John Allen, President of Brookings)
- “The pandemic has clearly shown that the US government is not an indispensable actor in global affairs [...] What is most striking about the pandemic is the national and global disconnect between the economics of the rich and the economics of others.” (Anne-Marie Slaughter, CEO of New America)
- “More than a quarter of the Fortune 500 CEOs [*sic*] predict that their workforces will not return to their pre-pandemic size [...] Eight out of ten believe that nationalism will be the dominant force in the countries where they operate.” (Laurie Garrett, science writer and columnist for *Foreign Policy*)
- “Behind the figures, which do not lie, there is a much more important reality, the shift of competition from the West to the East [...] The second wave of the pandemic also confirms a governance problem in the West. What went wrong? One simple answer is its complacency [...] in the face of the assertiveness, vigilance and discipline of East and South Asian societies.” (KIschore Mahbubani, National University of Singapore)
- “Globalisation is regressing and international cooperation against the pandemic has, to put it mildly, been lacklustre. It has not prevented further clashes between China and India, nor has it stopped the bloodshed in Syria or Yemen, and the China-US rivalry continues to intensify [...] The good news is that the fear that potential authoritarians, populists and autocrats would use the emergency to consolidate their power has

⁸ “The World after the Coronavirus”. *Foreign Policy*, 2 January 2021. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/01/02/2021-coronavirus-predictions-global-thinkers-after-vaccine/>.

not been borne out. Populists have lost influence in Austria, Britain and Germany; Poland's Law and Justice party faces new opposition; and autocrats such as Vladimir Putin, Aleksander Lukashenko and Viktor Orban are under increased pressure due to their mismanagement of the pandemic. Most importantly, the ultra-populist Donald Trump is no longer president." (Stephen Walt, Harvard professor)

- Despite the severity of the pandemic, "other challenges –from climate change to nuclear proliferation to great power rivalry– are likely to be more decisive [...] The pandemic will not fundamentally change international relations. Most likely, over time, it will be seen as a singular event rather than a pivotal moment of transformation." (Richard Haass, President of the CFR)
- "[...] COVID-19 has changed more the form – less travel and more virtual meetings – than the scale of globalisation. Some aspects of economic globalisation, such as trade, have been weakened, but not others, such as finance [...] Walls and tariffs will not stop global ecological threats." (Joseph Nye)

It is clear that almost everyone – governments and organisations – has responded late and poorly to the coronavirus. As Bill Gates recalled on BBC Breakfast on 12 April 2020, few countries deserve an "A".

"I have been warning about it for five years in speeches and in an article published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*," he said. "If we had invested more in diagnostics, medicines and vaccines, we wouldn't be like this now. We (the Gates Foundation) created CEPI (Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations) to promote vaccine platforms, but we did not even achieve 5% of what could have been achieved. And then there is the period since COVID-19 was detected, when the necessary tests and ICU and ventilator capacity should have been prepared. Very few countries were prepared and here we are: with no simulation tests, no experience and health and economic policies in uncharted territory.

The world of Joe Biden

The Interim National Security Strategic Guidance (INSSG), published two months after his inauguration, contains the gist of

the new president's foreign policy and security plans and future trajectory⁹.

The most novel idea in President Biden's first foreign policy speech on 4 February was "rebuilding America's middle class [...] Every step we take [...] we must keep working families in mind".

This poses a dilemma. Supporting workers at home and, at the same time, asserting economic leadership, especially in Asia, will not always be compatible and can often be contradictory or irreconcilable¹⁰.

If a new US president's first telephone conversations with foreign leaders have any indicative value, Biden's first were with the leaders of Canada and Mexico on 22 January; with British Prime Minister Boris Johnson on 23 January; with French President Emmanuel Macron on 24 January; with Angela Merkel on 25 January; and with Vladimir Putin and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg on 26 January.

He informed Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador of his intention to grant \$4 billion for the development of Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala as a foretaste of a new strategy against the causes of emigration from these countries to the US via Mexico. On 6 February, the new Secretary of State announced the US withdrawal from the Trump Administration's agreements with three Central American countries that limited access to asylum in the US from those countries¹¹.

To Justin Trudeau, upset by the cancellation of the Keystone XL pipeline project from Alberta to Texas through six US states, he explained the environmental reasons for the decision and the possibilities for improved cooperation on the pandemic, China and vaccine distribution. China, vaccines and climate were also three of the priority issues in the conversation with Johnson¹².

⁹ Allen, John R. and Broschak, Corey. "The first 100 days: What does President Biden's approach to the world look like so far?". Brookings, 23 April 2021 <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2021/04/23/the-first-100-days-what-does-president-bidens-approach-to-the-world-look-like-so-far/>.

¹⁰ Crabtree, James. "Biden's Trade Plans Will Boost China's Power in Asia". Foreign Policy, 16 February 2021. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/02/16/biden-trade-deals-workers-middle-class-china-asia-alliances-globalization/>.

¹¹ "Biden ending deals with Central America restricting asylum". Associated Press. 06 February 2021. <https://wtop.com/government/2021/02/biden-ending-deals-with-central-america-restricting-asylum/>.

¹² "Biden Talks to Trudeau, Lopez Obrador, Johnson in First Calls to Foreign Leaders". AP story published by VOA. 23 January 2021. <https://www.voanews.com/usa/biden->

Macron and Biden, according to the White House and the Elysée, pledged to “work together for peace in the Near and Middle East, in particular on the Iranian nuclear issue”. Macron thanked him for the US return to the Paris Climate Agreement and both expressed willingness to closely coordinate their policies on climate change, COVID-19, China, Russia, Sahel and the global economy. Biden reiterated his desire to strengthen the transatlantic bond from both NATO and the US-EU partnership¹³.

In his call with Merkel, Biden advocated revitalising US relations with Germany and within NATO. Merkel thanked him for the return to the Paris Climate Agreement and the WHO but acknowledged the difficulty of overcoming differences on issues such as the Russian Nord Stream 2 pipeline¹⁴.

Putin congratulated Biden on his victory almost three months late. According to the Kremlin, they pledged to “normalise relations, a goal that is in everyone’s interest because of the responsibility of both countries for global security and stability”¹⁵.

According to Jen Psaki, Biden’s press secretary, the US president wished to convey directly to Putin his concern about threats to Ukraine’s sovereignty, the crackdown on demonstrations, interference in other countries’ elections and the intensification of cyber-attacks, such as those in 2020 against 18,000 public and private users of the SolarWinds’ Orion network by the Russian military intelligence Sandworm team (GRU), better known as Unit 74455, which is also blamed for attacks on Ukraine’s power plants, Macron’s 2017 French candidacy and the 2017 World Youth Games. South Korea’s 2018 Olympics and to the British

talks-trudeau-lopez-obrador-johnson-first-calls-foreign-leaders y Leonard, Ben. “Biden and Boris Johnson talk alliance, climate, Covid”. 23 January 2021. https://www.politico.com/news/2021/01/23/biden-boris-johnson-phone-call-461680?utm_medium=Social&utm_source=Twitter#Echobox=1611486094.

¹³ “Paris says Biden, Macron in agreement on Covid-19, climate change.” The Business Times, 25 January 2021. <https://www.businesstimes.com.sg/government-economy/paris-says-biden-macron-in-agreement-on-covid-19-climate-change>.

¹⁴ Madhani, Aamer. “Biden tells Merkel he wants to revitalize Germany Alliance”. Associated Press, 26 January 2021. <https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-donald-trump-europe-angela-merkel-germany-952a56d2c084564d92ef051729ea06d6>.

¹⁵ Liptak, Kevin. “Biden confronts Putin over several issues in first call, White House says”. CNN, 26 January 2021. <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/01/26/politics/biden-putin-russia-phone-call/index.html>.

investigation into the 2018 failed bombing in the UK of a former Russian agent¹⁶.

"From a software engineer's perspective, I can probably say that (the SolarWinds attack) was the longest and most complex attack the world has ever seen," Microsoft president Brad Smith acknowledged on CBS' *60 Minutes* on 14 February¹⁷.

On the evening of the 25th, a few hours before their telephone conversation – at the Kremlin's request, according to the White House – the foreign ministers of the two countries "exchanged diplomatic notes to extend the New START treaty", the last bilateral nuclear pact in force whose continuation Trump had conditioned, to no avail, on the inclusion of China's arsenal. START, which limits each country's nuclear warheads to 1550, was due to expire on 5 February¹⁸. Putin signed the extension on the 29th for validation in the Duma. As an agreement and not a treaty, it did not need the approval of the US Senate.

In his first two days as president, the Biden Administration demanded that China stop pressuring Taiwan by military, diplomatic and economic means¹⁹, defended Russians' right to peaceful protest and freedom of expression, and distributed a warning to Americans in Russia, advising them not to participate in that weekend's demonstrations, in which some 3,500 people were arrested. Chinese and Russian officials called the State Department's actions "interference in their internal affairs"²⁰.

On 19 January 2021, before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that was to confirm him as Secretary of State in the Biden Administration, Antony Blinken described a world "of rising

¹⁶ Borger, Julian. "Russian cyber-attack spree shows what unrestrained internet warfare looks like". The Guardian, 20 October 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/oct/19/russian-hackers-cyber-attack-sprees-tactics>.

¹⁷ "SolarWinds hack was 'largest and most sophisticated attack' ever: Microsoft president". Reuters, 15 February 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-cyber-solarwinds-microsoft/solarwinds-hack-was-largest-and-most-sophisticated-attack-ever-microsoft-president-idUSKBN2AF03R>.

¹⁸ Sanger, E., David and Troianovski, Anton. "Biden and Putin Agree to Extend Nuclear Treaty". The New York Times, 26 January 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/26/world/europe/biden-putin-nuclear-treaty.html>.

¹⁹ "US reaffirms support for Taiwan". DW, 21 January 2021. <https://www.dw.com/es/estados-unidos-reafirma-su-apoyo-a-taiwan%C3%A1n-a-pocos-d%C3%ADas-de-la-investidura-de-biden/a-56329542>.

²⁰ "Amid Protests, Russia Accuses US Of Interfering In Its "Domestic Affairs". NDTV, 24 January 2021. <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/russia-accuses-us-of-interfering-in-its-domestic-affairs-2357370>.

nationalisms and shrinking democracies, anger and rivalry from Russia, China and other authoritarian states, multiple threats to a free and open international system, and a technological revolution that is transforming every area of our lives, especially in cyberspace”²¹.

“Despite the changes, some things remain the same,” he added. “American leadership still matters, the world needs order and when we don’t participate, we don’t lead, other countries try to take our place on terms contrary to our interests and values, or nobody does anything and we find ourselves in chaos”.

Nine months earlier, coinciding with his victory in the Democratic primaries, Biden had outlined in *Foreign Affairs* his plan to win back allies and partners abandoned, or ignored by Trump, to redirect “ill-advised trade wars with friends and foes that do so much damage to our middle class”, to restore US leadership in mobilising collective action against new threats and, above all, to “return to the democratic values that give our country strength and our people unity”²².

More important, surely, than all the plans and commitments is the White House’s decision, known on 27 January, to suspend Trump-approved offensive arms sales to its two major Gulf allies, Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, to facilitate their recognition of Israel²³ and its first steps to repair relations with the Palestinians by restoring refugee aid withdrawn by Trump and with two regional powers such as Turkey and Iran²⁴.

The appointments have been more important than the pledges. The appointments of John Kerry as Special Climate Envoy and Robert Malley as Special Envoy for Iran are a strong statement of intent. Malley, who was part of the negotiating team at Camp

²¹ ‘Secretary of State Nominee Antony Blinken Testimony. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee’. 19 January 2021. <https://www.c-span.org/video/?507953-1/secretary-state-nominee-antony-blinken-testifies-confirmation-hearing>.

²² Biden, Joseph. ‘Why America Must Lead Again. Rescuing U.S. Foreign Policy After Trump’. *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2020. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again?utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter_posts&utm_campaign=tw_daily_soc.

²³ “Biden suspends arms sales to Saudi Arabia and UAE”. *Financial Times*, 27 January 2021. <https://www.ft.com/content/356df221-251f-4eba-a307-88e485ef1d45>.

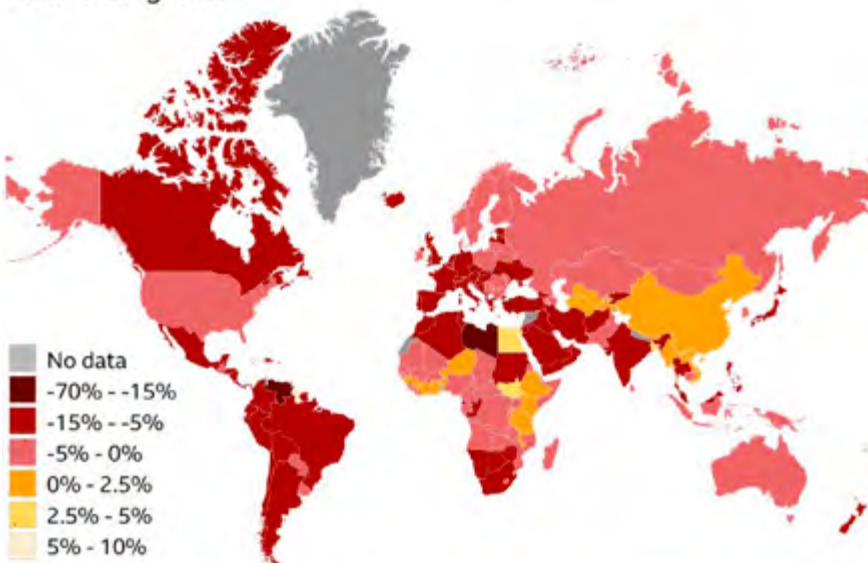
²⁴ “No quick fixes for Joe Biden in the Middle East”. *Financial Times*, editorial. 31 January 2021. <https://www.ft.com/content/98950dbd-edec-41e7-836f-d1622f2dfab3>.

David 2 and worked for years with Obama, is at odds with his predecessor, Elliott Abrams²⁵.

Two months before the storming of the Capitol by thousands of Trump supporters, the editor of the *Economist*, Zanny Minton Beddoes, moving away from the most pessimistic views, saw in Biden's victory the possibility of putting an end to "one of the most damaging and divisive presidencies in the history of the United States" and in the pandemic "the opportunity for an economic and *social reset* as dramatic as (the so-called) *progressive era* (from the late nineteenth to the crisis of '29)".²⁶ The big question in 2021, he added, is whether "politicians will have the guts to take advantage of it".

Majority of countries in recession

Real GDP growth



Source: International Monetary Fund

BBC

Fig. 1: Countries in recession according to the IMF. Source: BBC, 04 January 2021²⁷.

²⁵ Gardner, David. "New Iran envoy shows Biden is serious about reviving nuclear deal". *Financial Times*, 3 February 2021 <https://www.ft.com/content/eae24633-844a-4bb5-b5a9-28deead96ab7>.

²⁶ "After the crisis, opportunity". *The World in 2021*, *The Economist*, p. 13. <https://www.economist.com/the-world-ahead/2020/11/17/after-the-crisis-opportunity>

²⁷ <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-51706225>.

Adding up the collapse of global GDP in 2020 and the difference between expected global growth before the pandemic and after the first year, the *Economist* estimated on 9 January that the world's wealth (in goods and services) lost to the coronavirus would be about \$10.3 trillion. One fifth of these losses would be in the Eurozone, 1.7 trillion in the US, almost 1 trillion in India, etc.

COVID-19 has not only caused global GDP to plummet by more than 4% by 2020 (almost three times as much in Spain) according to the World Bank and the OECD²⁸. "It has changed the trajectory of the three most impactful forces in the world," added Minton Beddoes. It has truncated globalisation, radically acceler-



Fig. 2 OECD projections at the end of 2020. Source: OCDE, December 2020.

²⁸ Pandey, Ahutoah. "OECD: Global GDP to return to pre-pandemic levels in 2021". DW. 1 December 2020. <https://www.dw.com/en/covid-vaccine-coronavirus-glo->

ated the digital revolution and intensified the geopolitical rivalry between China and the US.

At the same time, it has exacerbated inequality, one of the most negative scourges of recent decades, and, by highlighting the lack of preparedness for low-probability, high-impact disasters such as the most destructive pandemic in a century, it has set off alarm bells about the danger of a disaster that many believe to be inevitable and of even greater impact, that of climate change.

The World Bank's forecast²⁹ for 2021 included four scenarios, in which the global growth rate ranged from ceilings of 5% to unspecified floors below 0% in the worst-case scenario. "The fundamental difference between these scenarios is the progress (and effectiveness) of vaccines," warned John Mauldin, co-founder of Mauldin Economics, in *Geopolitical Futures*. "If everything goes well (with vaccination), we will have a quick and intense recovery. If not, we will remain in recession"³⁰. That was the big question in the first months of 2021.

"Vaccines are very important, but it is much more important that a world once again led by the US seizes the opportunity opened up by the impact (geopolitical, technological, economic, social, etc.) of the pandemic and the change in the White House," the *Economist's* director explained on 13 January at the Chicago Council on Global Affairs.³¹

"What worries me most is that these challenges coincide in 2021 with the beginning of the post-liberal era," responded Professor Ivo Daalder. "We have lived – one can choose how long, going back even to the 17th century, certainly since the 19th century – in an international society dominated by liberal powers and I am concerned, above all, about the mismanagement of the pandemic, not only in the US but in almost all Western democracies, and the illiberalism in US politics that led to what happened in Washington on 6 January, which, although difficult to imagine, is

bal-economic-recovery-for-2021/a-55775341 "Turning hope into reality". OECD Economic Outlook, December 2020. <https://www.oecd.org/economic-outlook/>.

²⁹ "The World Economy in 2021". World Bank, 5 January 2021. <https://www.bancomundial.org/es/news/press-release/2021/01/05/global-economy-to-expand-by-4-percent-in-2021-vaccine-deployment-and-investment-key-to-sustaining-the-recovery>.

³⁰ Mauldin, John. "Year of the gripping hand", *Geopolitical Futures*, 8 January 2021. <https://www.mauldineconomics.com/frontlinethoughts/year-of-the-gripping-hand>.

³¹ "The World in 2021 – New Year, New Normal?", Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 13 January 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PM3QGii1ZDw>.

a logical corollary of the US policy that led to what happened on 6 January.

“Democracy is on the defensive, autocracy on the offensive. Nobody has had a better 2020 than Xi Jinping in China, nobody, and, if he needed anything else, he topped off the year by convincing the EU to conclude an investment deal without heeding the expressed wishes of Biden’s security team”³².

Will the new US administration succeed in reversing this pro-China trend? “Ideologically it can, but I’m afraid the US has lost the capacity to lead that process,” Daalder replied. “As long as the US, where a minority party (the Republicans) has prevented the majority from governing for fifty years, does not reduce its democratic deficit... I see it as very difficult”.

Far from improving the US position vis-à-vis China, Donald Trump’s policy of trade confrontation since 2017 and his dismal handling of the pandemic have clearly strengthened China and its president, Xi Jinping. “China will become the world’s largest economy by 2028, five years ahead of schedule,” announced the London-based Centre for Economics and Business Research (CEBR) on 26 December³³.

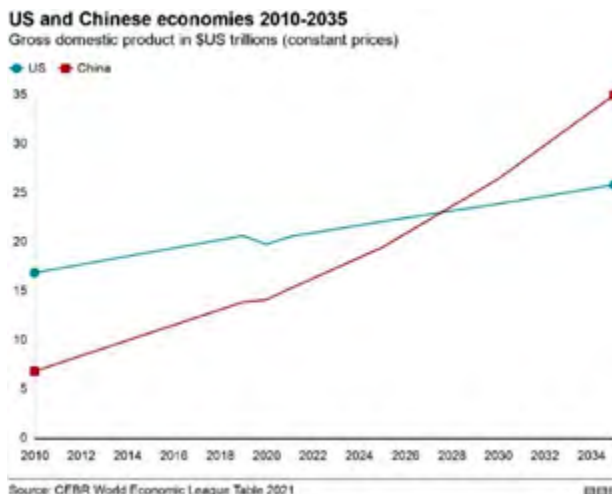


Fig. 3 The economies of the US and China, 2010-2035. Source: CEBR/BBC.

³² Daalder, Ivo, President of the Chicago Council on Global Affairs. “The World in 2021...”, op. cit. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PM3QGii1ZDw>.

³³ “World Economic League Table (WELT) 2021. Macroeconomic Forecasting”. CEBR <https://cebr.com/service/macroeconomic-forecasting/>.

In its latest annual report, the CEBR predicted 'a strong US recovery in 2021, with annual growth of about 1.9% between 2022 and 2024, compared to China's annual growth of 5.7% until 2025 and 4.5% between 2026 and 2030'³⁴. China's GDP grew by 18.3% in the first quarter of 2021 from a year earlier, a record acceleration for the Asian giant's economy since the COVID pandemic began³⁵.

As José Pardo de Santayana explains in detail in his chapter on China in this Strategic Panorama, the pandemic has tilted and accelerated the economic, technological and soft-power rivalry between the US and China in favour of the Chinese³⁶.

"Because of the state of his economy, the management of the coronavirus, the vaccination campaign and his five-year plan, which is focused on more autarky, more self-sufficiency and less dependence on other countries, especially Western ones, Xi started 2021 stronger and China feels more confident," Ian Bremmer, president and founder of the Eurasia Group, stressed in mid-January³⁷.

"Unfortunately, the Chinese leadership likes the *G-Zero* [every country for itself] *world* (driven by Trump)," he added. "This has been acknowledged to me by several Chinese leaders with whom I have spoken in recent weeks. It is a world in which the US loses its influence and its exceptionalism, ceases to be the indispensable, global power, and no one can bring order to the system. In such a world, should Biden's bid to reverse it fail over the next four years, the lowest common denominator in governance, human rights and standards would continue to prevail. The erosion of the international institutions, values and norms that led the West to victory in the Cold War would continue.

"Most worryingly", Bremmer concludes, "while allies like Germany, Japan and Canada keep their democratic institutions largely intact, the US has let theirs erode for a generation and it will take another generation, possibly another generation,

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Expansión, 16 April 2021 <https://www.expansion.com/economia/2021/04/16/60793628e-5fdea697b8b4638.html>.

³⁶ "Chinese economy to overtake US 'by 2028' due to Covid", BBC, 26 December 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-55454146?xtor=AL-72-%5Bpartner%5D-%5Binfo%5D-%5Bheadline%5D-%5Bnews%5D-%5Bbizdev%5D-%5Bisapi%5D>.

³⁷ "The World in 2021...", op. cit., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PM3QGii1ZDw>.

to rebuild or repair them, which does not mean going back to square one”.

If Trump had been re-elected or had prevented Biden’s victory in the courts (he tried for two months) or by force (he tried on 6 January), Daalder and Bremmer’s pessimism would be more than justified. After his double defeat against the institutions, Minton Beddoes’ moderate optimism makes more sense.

The world will continue, as Bremmer points out, to be a *G-Zero*, but, with the US back in the main international forums (Paris Agreement, WHO, WTO, UN Human Rights Council, etc.) cooperating against climate change, rearmament, dictatorships, protectionism and unilateralism, it will be a different and predictably better world than what four more years of Trump in the White House would have brought us.

On 15 January, UN Secretary-General António Guterres acknowledged that the virus had now reached 191 countries around the world. “Vaccines are rapidly reaching high-income countries,” he added. “The poorest, on the other hand, are not being reached and some countries are seeking separate agreements, even over and above their needs. All governments have a responsibility to protect their citizens, but *vaccinationalism* is self-defeating and will delay global recovery. The world needs to act with more solidarity”³⁸.

It did not do so in the early months of the pandemic and still did not do so a year after the first cases were detected in China. It took the same time, twelve months, for the Beijing authorities to allow limited access for World Health Organization inspectors to investigate the possible origins of the first cases in Wuhan.

“We have so far collectively failed to control community and household infections,” said World Health Organization Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus at a press conference in Geneva in the face of accelerating infections in Europe, the Americas and Africa. “We need to change this trend in order to reduce the pressure on hospitals and health care providers [...] The only way out of this crisis is to share the available means”³⁹.

³⁸ “As COVID deaths pass two million worldwide, Guterres warns against self-defeating ‘vaccinationalism’”. UN News, 15 January 2021. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/01/1082272>.

³⁹ Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus. Press briefing. WHO. 15 January 2021. <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019?gclid=CjwKCAiAuoqA->

On 25 January, at the Davos Virtual Forum, Guterres summed up in one word – fragility – the state of the planet at the end of 2020. “We continue to fear,” he added, “a great split of the world in two, with the two largest economies on Earth heading zones with different dominant currencies, different trade and financial rules, each with its own internet and zero-sum geopolitical and military strategies.”⁴⁰.

2020

The *Washington Post* invited its readers at the end of December to describe the year in one word or phrase. Some of them, teachers and professors, asked their students to help them. More than 2,000 people responded and the three words with the most followers were ‘exhausting’, ‘lost’ and ‘chaotic’.

‘Tireless’, ‘surreal’, ‘paralysis’, ‘limbo’, ‘heartbreaking’, ‘nightmarish’, ‘broken dreams’, ‘suffocating’, ‘unbreathable’, ‘loss’, ‘pain’, ‘sadness’, ‘perseverance’, ‘patience’ and ‘improvisation’ also received many supporters⁴¹.

The lexicographers of the Oxford English Dictionary, who in 2018 chose ‘toxic’ and in 2019 ‘climate emergency’ as the most representative words of the previous two years, in 2020 did not dare to choose just one because of the shake-up caused in the first twelve months of COVID-19, race riots and natural disasters. Instead of one term or expression, as usual, they opted for dozens, including ‘Black lives matter’, ‘coronavirus’, ‘lockdown’, ‘social distance’, ‘superspreader’, ‘community broadcasting’, ‘covidiotic’, ‘stay-home’, ‘shutdown’, ‘reopening’ and ‘systemic racism’⁴².

BhAsEiwAdSkVVKPNFfnZh6-3bTdSMIUAYMaFebd1-KAWH55AuG6cqDwHmj6lp5zfjho-C9WoQAvD_BwE.

⁴⁰ “Secretary-General’s special address at Davos Agenda”, 25 January 2021. <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2021-01-25/secretary-generals-special-address-davos-agenda-delivered>.

⁴¹ “The Washington Post asked readers to describe 2020 in one word or phrase. Here’s what they said”. The Washington Post. 18 December 2020. https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/lifestyle/2020-in-one-word/?itid=lb_2020-in-opinions_enhanced-template_8.

⁴² “Oxford’s defining words of 2020...”, NPR. 23 November 2020. <https://www.npr.org/2020/11/23/938187229/oxfords-defining-words-of-2020-blursday-systemic-racism-and-yes-pandemic#:~:text=The%20pandemic%2C%20racial%20unrest%20and,%22%20and%20%22systemic%20racism.%22>.

Unity and democracy were the terms most repeated in his inaugural address as the 46th president of the United States on 20 January by Joe Biden, the second Catholic president and the oldest to enter the White House. It neatly sums up the two main challenges that, compounded by the most devastating pandemic in a century and four destructive years of the Trump Administration, conditioned the new president's chances of healing deep domestic wounds and repairing external alliances, his two priority objectives⁴³.

*Current History*⁴⁴, the oldest publication (since 1914) devoted exclusively to international relations in the US, with nine annual issues – seven of them devoted to each of the world's major regions and two to the most important global challenges and trends of each year – has always included, with a two-month delay at the end of each issue, a chronology of the most important international events of the month.

The January 2020 timeline, published in the March edition, ended with the Brexit agreement reached on 31 January by the EU and the UK, which gave way to another eleven-month period to conclude a trade deal and reduce the inevitable damage caused by Britain's forty-seven-year departure from the Union.

On 30 January, barely two months after the first case of coronavirus was detected in Wuhan (China), the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a global health emergency. By then, 213 deaths and some 9,800 infections had been confirmed, almost all of them in China.

On 26 January, in the legislative elections, Peru entered a period of great uncertainty as nine parties won seats, all of them with less than 10 percent of the vote.

On 23 January, Mexican authorities detained 800 Central American migrants at the border with Guatemala, tear-gassed some 4,000 and deported hundreds following Trump's threats of reprisals if they were not radically cut off.

On 15 January Trump and Chinese Vice Premier Liu He signed a so-called 'phase one' agreement at the White House to halt the

⁴³ Blake, Aaron and Scott, Eugene. "Joe Biden's inauguration speech transcript, annotated". The Washington Post. 20 January 2021. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/interactive/2021/01/20/biden-inauguration-speech/>.

⁴⁴ Current History. <https://online.ucpress.edu/currenthistory/article/119/815/120/110419/January-2020>.

trade war of the previous three years, reducing some of the sanctions, maintaining most of the tariffs and committing China to a \$200 billion increase in US purchases.

On the same day, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced the replacement of the prime minister and constitutional amendments, following a referendum, to limit presidential terms to two, strengthen the Council of State and ensure his continuity at the head of the country when his current term ends in 2024.

In the first fortnight of the year, *Current History* also highlighted the election by Nicolás Maduro of his lackey Luis Parra as head of the Venezuelan National Assembly in place of the opposition Juan Guaidó, the re-election of the sovereigntist Tsai Ing-wen as president of Taiwan, the election in Spain of the first coalition government since the end of the dictatorship, the deployment of the first Turkish troops in Libya in support of the Government of National Accord in Tripoli, the return of Sebastian Kurz to the Austrian chancellorship with another coalition government (this time with the Greens instead of the far right), the reinforcement of the 4,500-strong French military mission in the Sahel with an additional 220 troops, and the umpteenth confrontation between the US and Iran with the assassination of Iranian General Kassem Soleimani, head of Al Quds, the elite force of Iran's Revolutionary Guard, near Baghdad airport with missiles launched from a drone⁴⁵.

The February news opened with an assessment of the pandemic, which in one month had already infected more than 83,000 people and killed some 3,000 in dozens of countries, from Italy to Brazil, South Africa, Japan and the US, with mass lockdowns, the economic collapse in China and the first school closures in some US states.

In the first impeachment proceedings against Trump on 6 February 2020, the US Senate – by 52 votes to 48 – acquitted the president of the charge of abuse of power and – by 53 votes to 47 – of the charge of obstruction of Congress after he tried to use Ukraine to destroy Joe Biden's candidacy.

A year later, a renewed Senate, with an equal number of seats between the two parties, decided to open the second impeachment process requested by the House of Representatives against

⁴⁵ News published in *Current History*, vol. 119, issue 815. March 2020. <https://online.ucpress.edu/currenthistory/issue/119/815>.

Trump on 8 February 2021⁴⁶. Would seventeen Republicans dare join the Democrats to reach the necessary two-thirds majority and disqualify the former president from any political office? Highly unlikely. However, Trump is already the only US president to be impeached twice. None of the previous four, including that from 2020 against Trump, resulted in the conviction and removal of a president from the White House. Nixon left before he was kicked out.

All the other news in February – the re-election of Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and the Taliban-US agreement in Doha, the military occupation of the Salvadoran Assembly by President Bukele, the resignation of German CDU President Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, the strengthening of the most hard-line wing in the Iranian parliamentary elections, the appointment of a new prime minister in Iraq, the victory of Sinn Fein in the Irish parliamentary elections, the Constitutional Court's annulment of the May 2019 presidential elections in Malawi, the triumph of the anti-corruption party in Slovakia's parliamentary elections and the Turkish army's increasing difficulties in controlling the north of Syria occupied at the end of the previous year – were beginning to be overshadowed by the unchecked advance of the coronavirus.

Within a few days, in mid-March, that shadow had become a total eclipse. With almost a million infections and more than 40 000 dead, by 31 March, with China beginning to get a grip on the national disaster while full or partial lockdowns multiplied and the economies of major Western countries came to a standstill, any news not related to the most destructive pandemic in a hundred years received little or no attention. The third Israeli elections in a year, the clash between Russia and Saudi Arabia at OPEC on 7 March "which, with the fall in demand, plunged the price of crude oil for months", the resignation of the Iraqi prime minister, the inauguration of the new Uruguayan president Luis Lacalle, the Turkish counteroffensive against the Syrian army and the ceasefire agreed with Russia on 5 March went almost unnoticed.

In April, elections and forums began to be cancelled or postponed – those held, as in South Korea, under strict health security measures – Labour replaced Jeremy Corbin with Keir Starmer as party leader, UN calls for a ceasefire in major regional conflicts

⁴⁶ "Trump impeachment: Senate trial delayed until next month". BBC World. 23 January 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-55761044>.

had little impact and, ignoring his top scientists, Trump assumed the worst of the pandemic in the US was over.

By the time he boarded the presidential helicopter for the last time nine months later on his way to his new home in Florida, more than 400,000 Americans had died, and the numbers were growing. As a result, ten of the first fifteen executive orders signed by Biden on his first day as president, 20 January, were urgent measures against the pandemic⁴⁷.

Number of daily reported cases and deaths in the US

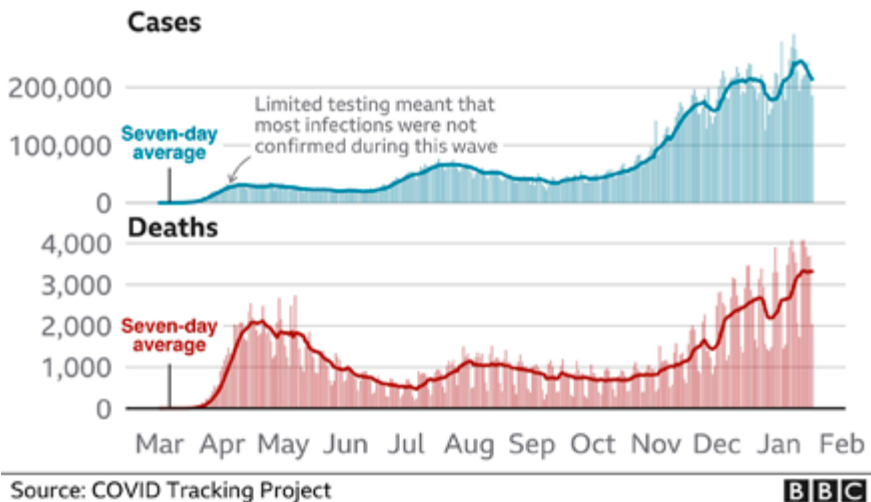


Fig. 4 Deaths and infections per day in the US from March 2020 to January 2021. Source: BBC.

Apart from the health challenge, Biden was dealing with “an economy with ten million jobs lost in 10 months, two out of three children out of school [...] deep divisions over racial justice and a festering resentment poisoning faith in its democracy”⁴⁸.

While the UN Security Council remained inoperative due to the confrontation between the US, China and Russia, the EU, with

⁴⁷ “Biden signs 10 executive orders as part of ‘wartime’ Covid plan”. BBC World. 20 January 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-55750884>.

⁴⁸ “After the chaos of the Trump era, what can Joe Biden hope to achieve?”. The Economist. 23 January 2021. <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2021/01/23/after-the-chaos-of-the-trump-era-what-can-joe-biden-hope-to-achieve>.

hardly any sanitary competences, and the G-20, spurred on by the main international financial organisations (IMF and World Bank), began to react in April to the global catastrophe.

With months of delay, the EU responded with a roadmap⁴⁹ which, overcoming the vetoes of the illiberals of the East at the December summit, the last one co-chaired by Angela Merkel, resulted in the most ambitious and supportive recovery plan in the history of the Union⁵⁰. The G20 gave the green light to a 2021 action plan⁵¹ and an initiative to support the most indebted countries⁵², but both were held back from day one by the Trump Administration's blockade and China's preference for bilateral pacts⁵³.

The Institute of International Finance (IIF) warned in November that the global economy faced the threat of a 'debt tsunami' from obligations of more than \$15 trillion incurred by governments and private companies in the previous ten months. In developing countries, debt at that time had increased by 26%, while tax revenues had plummeted. The IMF recognised the risk of bankruptcy of at least 35 countries if rapid intervention was not taken⁵⁴. "The debt of the 30 largest emerging economies increased by 30 percent of their gross domestic product between January and September, reaching almost 250 percent of GDP," warned the IIF⁵⁵.

⁴⁹ Syrett, Keith. "The Commission Roadmap on Covid-19: is the EU Finding the Route or Continuing to Lose the Way?" Bridge. 07 May 2020. <https://bridgenetwork.eu/2020/05/07/1358/>.

⁵⁰ "Recovery Plan for Europe". European Commission. https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/recovery-plan-europe_es.

⁵¹ "The pandemic crisis response is a long-term marathon..." VOX EU. 14 December 2020. <https://voxeu.org/article/some-key-principles-drive-g20-economic-policy-response-2021>.

⁵² "G20 nations close in on debt deal for poor countries". Financial Times, 12 April 2020. <https://www.ft.com/content/30321fc4-e77c-4688-8d87-ef344108ed6b>. "G20 agrees debt relief for low income nations". Financial Times, 15 April 2020. <https://www.ft.com/content/5f296d54-d29e-4e87-ae7d-95ca6c0598d5>.

⁵³ "Let them eat debt: The G20's disappointing response..." Atlantic Council. 22 October 2020. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/let-them-eat-debt-the-g20s-disappointing-response-to-the-pandemic-in-developing-countries/>.

⁵⁴ Garver, Rob. "As Pandemic Rages, Debt Burden on Developing Nations Grows". VOA. 12 December 2020. <https://www.voanews.com/covid-19-pandemic/pandemic-rages-debt-burden-developing-nations-grows>.

⁵⁵ Wheatley, Jonathan. "Debt dilemma: how to avoid a crisis in emerging nations". Financial Times, 20 December 2020. <https://www.ft.com/content/de43248e-e8eb-4381-9d2f-a539d1f1662c>.

Financial Times' forecasts

After acknowledging the failure of almost all observers (political, economic and journalistic) to anticipate the tsunami of the pandemic that, by January 2020, had already spread from Wuhan, China, to dozens of countries, the *Financial Times* answered twenty questions about 2021.

1. Will the WHO announce in the new year the end of the global public health emergency it declared on 30 January 2020, when fewer than 100 infections had been confirmed in China and no deaths had yet occurred outside China? No, it replied, even if a substantial reduction in the number of infections is achieved in the next twelve months.
2. Will most of the world's 5 billion adults be vaccinated? Also no, it replied, and the results in the first weeks of the year seemed to prove it right.
3. Will Boris Johnson's Conservative majority be consolidated against Labour in the UK? "No", but "neither will the opposition have an easy time of it, unless citizens are convinced that both the negative effects of Brexit and the pandemic are the fault of the government". This will be tested in the local elections in May.
4. Will there be a new independence referendum in Scotland? "Not in 2021, but a constitutional crisis if, as is likely, the Scottish National Party (in favour of returning to the EU) wins a majority in the Scottish parliamentary elections", scheduled for 6 May.
5. Will the Green Party be in the next German coalition government? "Yes, no coalition seems plausible without them after the elections called for 26 September".
6. Will the European Commission dare to accuse any member of violating the rules on the use of EU funds? "No [...] as long as the European Court of Justice does not rule on its legality".
7. Will Joe Biden be a *lame duck* in the White House? "No," said the newspaper's chief correspondent in Washington D.C. "But it won't be easy for him to push through major reforms in the Senate," he added before learning of the Georgia result which, on 5 January, gave the Democrats the two seats they needed to regain, by the vice-president's casting vote, the minimum majority. Thanks to that razor-thin victory, in

early March the new Congress approved Biden's \$1.9 trillion *bailout plan*⁵⁶.

8. Will the US and China sign a trade deal? "No. We will see a much more conciliatory tone between the new Biden Administration and Beijing, but it is unlikely that any of the major bilateral disputes – from violations of WTO labour standards to regulatory standards for big tech and the digital economy – will be resolved. Biden cannot appear soft on the *Middle Kingdom* lest he lose support in the mid-term elections in 2022".

It will be the most important security and foreign policy challenge for Biden, catapulted to victory by a Democratic coalition utterly divided on how to deal with China.

9. Will mass demonstrations continue in Hong Kong? "No". Mass roundups of dissidents following the imposition of the new national security law on 30 June 2020⁵⁷, which criminalised protests and criticism as "acts of secession, subversion, terrorism and collusion", and penalised them with sentences of up to life imprisonment, is a powerful deterrent.

The following forecasts concern India, Venezuela, Iran, Ethiopia, racism, electric cars, markets, stock markets, employment, global carbon emissions and oil prices.

The price of oil, predicts Europe's most influential daily, will remain above 50 dollars per barrel if vaccination progresses quickly and the producers' latest pacts are not broken, as happened between Saudi Arabia and Russia in the spring of 2020. From 42 dollars in September 2020, a relief for importers such as Spain, in early March 2021 Brent crude was already close to 70 dollars a barrel.

The Iran nuclear deal will be difficult to restore in its original form, even if Biden has returned to the group that approved it in 2015, Nicolás Maduro is not in a weaker position in 2021 than in 2020, on the contrary, and India, in the *FT's* calculations, can grow by up to 10 percent this year after losing 9 percent of its GDP in 2020.

⁵⁶ "Senate passes Biden's \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief bill after voting overnight on amendments...". The Washington Post, 7 March 2021. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/us-policy/2021/03/06/biden-stimulus-covid-relief/>.

⁵⁷ "Hong Kong security law: What is it and is it worrying?". BBC World. 30 June 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-52765838>.

If the stock market value of the top five US tech companies exceeded \$8 trillion and the S&P rose 15% in 2020 despite all the calamities and partly because of them, it is unlikely that in 2021, however badly things continue to go in many countries, the AMA-FA quintet (Apple, Microsoft, Amazon, Facebook and Alphabet) and the S&P will suffer seriously, unless there is an escalation in inflation or serious regulatory measures on technology are approved by the major powers, as many in China, Europe and North America have been demanding in order to maintain the welfare state and reverse the growing inequality in international society⁵⁸.

Inequality

As 2015 Nobel economics laureate Angus Deaton points out, rising inequality, accelerated by the pandemic, "has a lot to do with employment"⁵⁹. From day one, the economic and labour restrictions imposed to curb contagion hit the poorest workers hardest – some 2 billion employed in the informal sector of the economy – and the 600 million who work, according to the International Labour Organization, in the so-called hospitality sector, mostly dependent on tourism, travel and hospitality. In the chapter on Latin America in this overview, Professor and Ambassador Jorge Heine explains it very well in the context of that region.

According to the IMF, inequality between and within nations has increased much more in the first year of the pandemic than in previous economic and financial crises. A decade of progress has been lost in many countries.

Unlike the Black Death that ravaged Europe in the 14th century, wiping out half of its inhabitants and drastically reducing income and wealth inequalities by multiplying the demand for labour and making it cheaper for pandemic-stricken noble families to access property, COVID-19 has, for now, had the opposite effect. All studies indicate that "differences between generations, regions, countries and workers according to gender, education, access to new technologies and ethnicity are increasing"⁶⁰.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Romei, Valentina. "How the pandemic is worsening inequality". Financial Times. 31 December 2020. <https://www.ft.com/content/cd075d91-fafa-47c8-a295-85bbd7a36b50>.

⁶⁰ Strauss, Delphine. "Pandemic hits poor hardest as inequality rises". Financial Times, 03 November 2020. <https://www.ft.com/content/750eb552-639e-4fa0-941b-4f3f57f1a8d4>.

Most countries are facing the pandemic in inadequate health, labour and infrastructure conditions, but the elephant in the room that makes it all worse is extreme income inequality, which, according to *Time* and Rand Corp. research, has meant that in the US alone since 1975 'some \$50 trillion has been diverted' from the middle and lower-middle class to the upper middle class⁶¹.

The world's ten richest billionaires increased their wealth by \$319 billion in 2020, according to Bloomberg, and most of these gains went to the owners of the technology companies that, in oligopoly or near-monopoly, dominate the market⁶². If, as we noted at the beginning of this introduction on the basis of OECD and *Economist* calculations, global GDP has plummeted and the profits of the richest have multiplied, inequality has increased in the same proportion.

"Six hundred and sixty US billionaires today control \$4.1 trillion – two-thirds of what 50 per cent of the US population has," tweeted Ian Bremmer, professor, president and founder of the Eurasia Group, on 27 January with figures from the Institute for Policy Studies & Americans for Tax Fairness.

Pandemics, climate and democracy

We are at a crossroads and the profound changes of the past year can either remain a very serious but short-lived tragedy or "be the beginning of something new", noted a leading US internationalist, Fareed Zakaria, in October. 'We can continue business as usual and risk a cascade of crises – from climate change to new pandemics – or get serious about the challenge of a sustainable growth strategy [...] based on global action and cooperation'⁶³.

⁶¹ Hanauer, Nick and Rolf David M. "The Top 1% of Americans Have Taken \$50 Trillion From the Bottom 90%—And That's Made the U.S. Less Secure". *Time*. 14 September 2020. <https://time.com/5888024/50-trillion-income-inequality-america/> Price, Carter C. and Edwards Kathryn A. "Trends in Income From 1975 to 2018". RAND Corp Working Paper. 2020. https://www.rand.org/pubs/working_papers/WRA516-1.html.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Zakaria, Fareed. "The pandemic upended the present. But it's given us a chance to remake the future". *The Washington Post*. 06 October 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/10/06/fareed-zakaria-lessons-post-pandemic-world/?arc404=true>. Text from his book *Ten lessons for a Pandemic world*, W. W. Norton & Company. 2020. https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0393542130/ref=as_li_qf_asin_il_tl?ie=UTF8&tag=washpohgg2020-20&creative=9325&linkCode=as2&creativeASIN=0393542130&linkId=a060526ee69cede7e9acab2e2c2da5d5.

For leading virologists, the exact origin of the coronavirus (bat, pangolin, snake, laboratory, etc.), which at the beginning of 2021 remained a mystery, is of secondary importance to the cause that has multiplied the transmission of pathogens from wild animals (HSV, Ebola, Zika, SARS, H5N1, etc.) to humans since the middle of the 20th century and which has no prospect of stopping without a radical change in the behaviour of humans, who continue to destroy the habitat that has separated us from these pathogens for many centuries. “Uncontrolled deforestation, urbanisation and industrialisation have given these microbes the means to reach the human body and adapt,” warns Sonia Shah, author of some of the most comprehensive studies on pandemics⁶⁴.

Epidemiologists such as Javier Sampedro believe that these theories have “a very fragile foundation” for two reasons: “The pandemics of the last hundred years are a consequence of the enormous increase in human mobility” and, secondly, “they are older than the river bank”, as evidenced by all the pandemics that claimed hundreds of millions long before climate change and other causes had made themselves felt⁶⁵.

Biden’s arrival in the White House and the executive orders he signed in the first days⁶⁶ are a change in the right direction, but a drop in the ocean without the short, medium and long-term local, national, regional and global actions that scientists have been advocating since the end of the last century with little or no results.

“We have wasted too much time already and we can’t waste any more,” Biden declared after the signing. “But by 2020, G20 members spent 50 percent more of their bailout plans on fossil fuel production and consumption than on low-carbon energy,” warned UN Secretary-General António Guterres two days earlier at the virtual Davos Forum⁶⁷.

⁶⁴ Shah, Sonia. “D’où viennent les coronavirus? Contre les pandémies, l’écologie”. *Le Monde Diplomatique*, March 2020. pp. 1 and 21. Author of *Pandemic: Tracking Contagions, from Cholera to Ebola and beyond*. Sarah Crichton Books, New York, 2016.

⁶⁵ Sampedro, Javier. “Hijos de supervivientes”. *El País*, 6 March 2021. <https://elpais.com/ciencia/2021-03-05/hijos-de-supervivientes.html>.

⁶⁶ “Biden to sign series of orders to tackle climate change”. *The Hill*. 27 January 2021. <https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/536041-biden-to-sign-climate-executive-actions>.

⁶⁷ “Secretary-General’s special address at Davos Agenda”. UN Secretary-General, 25 January 2021. <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2021-01-25/secretary-generals-special-address-davos-agenda-delivered>.

In one of his first executive orders, Biden directed the Secretary of Defense and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to include climate risk forecasts in the new National Defence Strategy in 2022, in the next defence planning directive and in “other relevant strategy, planning and programming documents and processes”⁶⁸. Spain includes them in its main national security strategies (the third was expected to be approved in 2021) and in its first Foreign Action Strategy, which the Council of Ministers submitted to Parliament on 26 January⁶⁹.

Biden’s victory was welcomed in many countries as an important incentive to make up for lost time in the fight against climate change, which, according to the NGO Charity Aid, intensified the most destructive weather events in 2020. “Floods in China and India caused thousands of deaths and damages of more than \$40 billion, hurricanes and fires in the US for about \$60 billion, Cyclone Amphan in the Bay of Bengal for \$13 billion and locust infestations in Africa for about \$8.5 billion”⁷⁰.

After a 2020 lost to the pandemic, health conditions permitting, 2021 should accelerate the work committed to in Paris in 2015 with a first session in June in Bonn, another in September in Italy, an international summit convened by Biden in the first 100 days of his term, negotiations at the G7 summits in the UK and the G20 in Italy, and the postponed 26th World Climate Conference (COP26) in November in Scotland.

“It will be the year of truth for the climate,” former French foreign minister and COP21 president Laurent Fabius told *Le Monde*. “The deadlines and obligations are clear for the first time: states have to set a long-term goal – carbon neutrality by 2050 – but also multiply their efforts in the medium term, in 2030, and in the short term”⁷¹.

⁶⁸ Mcleary, Paul. “Biden Orders Pentagon To Include Climate Change In New Strategy & War Games”. Breaking Defense. 27 January 2021. file:///C:/Users/Felipe/Desktop/Biden%20Orders%20Pentagon%20To%20Include%20Climate%20Change%20In%20New%20Strategy%20&%20War%20Games%20C2%AB%20Breaking%20Defense%20-%20Defense%20industry%20news,%20analysis%20and%20commentary.html.

⁶⁹ “Estrategia de Acción Exterior”. February 2021. <http://www.exteriores.gob.es/portal/es/saladeprensa/multimedia/publicaciones/documents/estrategia%20de%20accion%20exterior%20castellano.pdf>.

⁷⁰ Mcgrath, Matt. “Climate change: Extreme weather causes huge losses in 2020”. BBC World, 27 December 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-55416013>

⁷¹ Garric, Audrey. “2021, une année cruciale pour accélérer la lutte contre le dérèglement climatique”. *Le Monde*. 05 January 2021. <https://www.lemonde.fr/planete/>

Biden's virtual summit on 22-23 April was attended by some forty international leaders, including the world's top leaders, and representatives of major international organisations.

Biden and his top advisors pledged to reduce 2005 US emissions by 52% over the next decade, which would require closing almost all coal plants (some 200), multiplying electric car production (currently 2%) and substantially increasing electricity production from renewable sources (currently 20%).

The limits of the new Administration's effort were seen in the lack of concrete new commitments by Australia, India, Indonesia, Mexico and Russia, and by reactions such as China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi warning that his country's cooperation will depend on the US response to Beijing's actions in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Xinjiang⁷².

The most important news for climate change in 2020, because it was unexpected, was probably Chinese President Xi Jinping's announcement at the UN General Assembly in September that China, which accounts for 28% of global emissions, aims to achieve carbon neutrality by 2060 no matter what other countries do. The UK led the way in June 2019, followed by the EU in March last year. Japan, South Korea and, according to the UN, more than 110 countries have joined the zero emissions target by mid-century. They account for more than 65% of global emissions and more than 70% of the world economy⁷³.

Although the temporary shutdown of many economies and transport reduced emissions last year, "its impact on long-term temperatures is negligible," warned the executive director of the UN Environment Programme, Inger Andersen⁷⁴. We are reaching a point of no return.

According to a new study, signed by nine scientists and published on 25 January, ice loss on Earth has increased from about 760 bil-

article/2021/01/05/2021-une-annee-cruciale-pour-accelerer-la-lutte-contre-le-dereglement-climatique_6065210_3244.html.

⁷² Sengupta, Somini. "Biden's Climate Summit Sets Up a Bigger Test of American Power". The New York Times, 23 April 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/23/climate/biden-climate-summit.html?action=click&module=Top%20Stories&pgtype=Homepage>.

⁷³ Rowlatt, Justin. "Why 2021 could be turning point for tackling climate change". BBC World. 01 January 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-55498657>.

⁷⁴ Andersen, Inger. "Opinion: We are close to the point of no return". DW. 04 January 2021. <https://www.dw.com/en/opinion-we-are-close-to-the-point-of-no-return/a-56122609>.

lion tonnes per year in the 1990s to more than 1.2 trillion tonnes per year in the last decade, an increase of more than 60%. The latest NASA studies on Greenland indicate that this trend will continue to accelerate⁷⁵. Given the scant attention paid by leaders in the past to the growing problem of inequality and equally or more alarming reports on climate change, French economist Thomas Piketty and his team at the School of Paris propose to “revise the notions of economic progress and growth”, and how they are calculated⁷⁶.

“For the first time in the 21st century”, warns Oxford historian Timothy Garton Ash in his latest book, “there are fewer democracies than non-democratic regimes in countries with more than 1 million inhabitants”.

After interviewing some 400 journalists, human rights activists and governance and democracy scholars, Freedom House concluded that “since the pandemic began, democracy and human rights have deteriorated in 80 countries’ and provided dozens of examples of governments that have taken advantage of COVID-19 to ‘persecute and detain opponents, marginalise minorities and control information’”⁷⁷.

Freedom House’s 2020 global report, released in early March this year, concludes that, for the fifteenth consecutive year, democratic freedoms – measured by ten political rights and fifteen civil rights variables – have continued to deteriorate. “Nearly 75% of the world’s population (7840 million) live in countries that regressed again last year,” a trend the report’s authors attribute to China’s negative influence, pandemic-justified emergency measures, the diminished presence of Western democracies in the Trump years, increased repression of protests and the deterioration of India, which has been downgraded to semi-free status for the first time⁷⁸.

⁷⁵ “Earth is now losing 1.2 trillion tons of ice each year. And it’s going to get worse”. The Washington Post, 25 January 2021. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2021/01/25/ice-melt-quickens-greenland-glaciers/>.

⁷⁶ Piketty, Thomas “The current economic system is not working when it comes to solving inequality” LSE, 21 February 2020. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2020/02/21/thomas-piketty-the-current-economic-system-is-not-working-when-it-comes-to-solving-inequality/>.

⁷⁷ Democracy under Lockdown. Freedom House, October 2020. https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/COVID-19_Special_Report_Final_.pdf.

⁷⁸ Democracy under siege. Freedom in the World 2021. Freedom House. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2021/democracy-under-siege>.

According to the latest *democracy index* of the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), only 8.4% of the world's population now live in full democracies according to five variables: electoral process and pluralism, governance, political participation, democratic culture and civil liberties. More than one third live under authoritarian regimes⁷⁹ (see Figure 5).



Fig. 5 Democracy index 2020. Source: EIU, 03 February 2021.

This democratic regression cannot be understood without connecting politics and economics, as Harvard professor Branko Milanovic, who specialises in inequality, does in his latest book, *Capitalism Alone*⁸⁰.

While Biden's victory represents an opportunity for liberal renewal, he adds, democracy and its liberal foundations will not regain the initiative without effective and credible responses to the more

⁷⁹ Democracy Index 2020. EIU. https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2020/?utm_source=economist-daily-chart&utm_medium=anchor&utm_campaign=democracy-index-2020&utm_content=anchor-1.

⁸⁰ Wolf, Martin. "The fading light of liberal democracy". Financial Times. 22 December 2020. <https://www.ft.com/content/47144c85-519a-4e25-9035-c5f8977cf6fd>.

than 74 million Americans who voted for Trump, the populist conservative government in the UK, the serious threat of Marine Le Pen in Emmanuel Macron's France, the growing influence of illiberals from the East in the EU, the strengthening of the Chinese authoritarian model and the likely acceleration of unemployment, inequality, insecurity, debt and perhaps pandemic inflation.

A return to multilateralism, a summit or league of democracies, and a foreign policy that promotes human rights and the rule of law are important steps (Javier Solana does not share the enthusiasm for a league of democracies), but "they will have little chance if they are not accompanied by measures against the profound flaws in our own democracy", warns Ivo Daalder, former ambassador to NATO and president of the Chicago Council on Global Affairs⁸¹.

Hence the importance of Biden's order⁸², on 22 January, to the FBI, the Department of Homeland Security and the new director of national intelligence, Avril Haines, to thoroughly investigate the threat of violent extremism inside the US. "White supremacist groups were responsible for 41 of the 61 attacks and plots (67 percent) in the first eight months of 2020," concludes Washington's Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)⁸³.

The project for a league of democracies may have to be delayed after the 6 January insurrection on Capitol Hill and, to be credible as an ideological alternative to China and Russia, much fine-tuning will have to be done in the selection of members of the new club and enormous efforts will have to be devoted from day one to the triple challenge – disinformation, cyber-attacks and control of citizens by the most powerful technocracies – that in recent years have disfigured the most robust democracies⁸⁴.

⁸¹ Daalder, Ivo. "Will the world still look to America as a champion of democracy?" Chicago Tribune. 14 June 2020. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/opinion/commentary/ct-opinion-trump-democracy-capitol-daalder-20210114-f6qegheqkfnfpzkbkhes-2a632hu-story.html>.

⁸² "White House Orders Assessment on Violent Extremism in U.S.". The New York Times. 22 January 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/22/us/politics/capitol-riot-domestic-extremism.html>.

⁸³ Gross Jenny. "Far-Right Groups Are Behind Most U.S. Terrorist Attacks, Report Finds". The New York Times. 24 October 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/24/us/domestic-terrorist-groups.html>.

⁸⁴ Ortega, Andrés. "The alliance for democracy must start at home". Real Instituto Elcano. 12 January 2021. <https://blog.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/the-alliance-for-democracy-must-start-at-home/>.

In one of the most comprehensive investigations of protests and demonstrations worldwide between 2009 and 2019, CSIS found an annual increase of 11.5%. If we take into account that connectivity (more than half of the world's 8 billion people are already connected), unemployment, perceptions of inequality, injustice and corruption, repression, climate change and the deterioration of democracy, and that all these factors are worsening with the pandemic, the inevitable conclusion is that the pressure on the streets will continue to grow in the coming months⁸⁵.

"What is at stake?" asked IMF executive director Kristalina Georgieva on 5 February. "More social tensions. You could call it a lost decade, maybe a lost generation"⁸⁶. If developed countries do not provide more resources to lower-income countries, there will be a 'great divergence' in global growth that could threaten stability and spark social unrest for years to come.

As was the case in plague-stricken England, in different waves from 1348 and 1666, plagues go hand in hand with protests and the current one is no different. This is indicated by the main reports published on the most important racial, supremacist and denialist (science, pandemic, climate change, etc.) protests of the last year in Europe and the US⁸⁷.

On 20 January, in his inaugural speech, Biden said that 'democracy has prevailed' and promised to restore truth to its rightful place in a democratic society. However, warns Harvard professor Shoshana Zuboff, a pioneer in research on so-called *surveillance capitalism* as represented by the major tech companies, "democracy and truth will remain under serious threat until we defeat the other (epistemic she calls it) blow of surveillance capitalism".

⁸⁵ Brannen, Samuel. "The Age of Mass Protests: Understanding an Escalating Global Trend". CSIS. 02 March 2020. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/age-mass-protests-understanding-escalating-global-trend>. See also the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace's global protest tracker. https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/interactive/protest-tracker?gclid=CjwKCAiApNSABhAlEiwANuR9YO4EAFiv0Ti_jjd9GD-4YH3zgGbmz3ssBhtMkpbhTLDmGDqt_IDY0HxoCYrgQAvD_BwE.

⁸⁶ Shalal, Andrea. "IMF chief warns of 'lost generation' if low-income countries don't get more help", Reuters, 5 February 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/article/imf-economy-int-idUSKBN2A52KB>.

⁸⁷ Alonso, Ana. "Global anger against lockdown". El Independiente. 31 January 2021. https://www.elindependiente.com/internacional/2021/01/31/la-ira-global-contra-el-confinamiento/?utm_source=share_buttons&utm_medium=twitter&utm_campaign=social_share2.

As the Council on Foreign Relations warned in early March, “from the assassination of George Floyd in 2020 to the attack on the Capitol in 2021, the power of the US example and the credibility of its ability to facilitate and advance the spread of democracy around the world have deteriorated”⁸⁸.

Conflicts, risks and threats

If it was difficult in mid-April, as this introduction went to press, to find anything positive in the first year of the pandemic, exacerbated by the growing impact of climate change and Trump’s scorched earth policy in the last months of his term, 2021 was full of uncertainties.

Each year ACLED, a non-governmental organisation specialised in collecting data on major conflicts, identified the following ten conflicts for 2021 – based on their patterns of violence and increasing risk⁸⁹:

- ETHIOPIA: At risk of multiplying conflicts stretching the capacity of the state.
- INDIA AND PAKISTAN: At risk of increased cross-border violence in Kashmir.
- MYANMAR: At risk of dormant conflicts reigniting.
- HAITI: High risk of increased gang violence amid rising authoritarianism.
- BELARUS: High risk of destabilization as regime, demonstrator, and Russian interests clash.
- COLOMBIA: High risk of rising violence targeting social leaders and vulnerable groups.
- ARMENIA AND AZERBAIJAN: High risk of cross-border violence in Nagorno-Karabakh despite ceasefire.

⁸⁸ “Transforming International Affairs Education...” CFR, 8 March 2021 https://www.cfr.org/report/transforming-international-affairs-education-address-diversity-equity-and-inclusion?utm_source=twtw&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=TWTW%202021March12&utm_content=Final&utm_term=TWTW%20and%20All%20Staff%20as%20of%207-9-20.

⁸⁹ “Ten Conflicts to worry about in 2021”. ACLED, February 2021. https://acleddata.com/acleddatanew/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/ACLED_10Conflicts_2021_Web_Final.pdf.

- YEMEN: High risk of humanitarian fallout amidst the offensive on Marib.
- MOZAMBIQUE: No end in sight for the Cabo Delgado insurgency.
- THE SAHEL: Insurgency and fragile politics at the center of an unabated crisis.

"It remains to be seen whether COVID-19 seriously influences the trajectory of major wars in Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, Yemen and elsewhere," said Robert Malley, former chairman of the International Crisis Group⁹⁰ and Biden's new special envoy for Iran.

"The long-term ramifications are another matter," he added. "The pandemic has precipitated a global economic crisis unprecedented since the Second World War and condemned another 150 million people to extreme poverty. Although the level of income and conflict are not directly related, violence is more likely to increase during periods of economic volatility."

Afghanistan, Ethiopia, the Sahel, Yemen, Venezuela, Somalia, Libya, Iran-US, Russia-Turkey and climate change are, in that order, the ten main hotspots of tension chosen by Malley's team for this year.

The selection was based on humanitarian impact (Yemen and Venezuela), risk of escalation (Ethiopia and Sahel), geopolitical importance (Iran-US, China-India and Russia-Turkey), lack of international interest (Somalia) and the potential for diplomatic solutions. Some conflicts, such as Afghanistan, meet several of these criteria.

"It is difficult to pinpoint climate change-related violence in any given year, but without urgent action, the danger [...] will only increase," he warned. Some of the best studies on this point conclude that 'an increase of 0.5 degrees Celsius raises the risk of lethal conflict by 10 to 20 percent'⁹¹.

2020 was the deadliest year in the Sahel crisis since 2012, when Islamist militants seized control of northern Mali. Intensified French counterterrorism operations and jihadist infighting reduced the number of major attacks against security forces, but

⁹⁰ "10 Conflicts to Watch in 2021". International Crisis Group. 30 December 2020. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/10-conflicts-watch-2021>.

⁹¹ Ibid.

in addition to the 30 proposed contingencies, they added other contingencies of equal or greater importance. Its projections for 2021, prepared at the end of 2020, repeated 22 of the 30 conflicts from 2020 and reduced the level of tension in five of them: The US-China South Sea conflict, Russia-Ukraine, the situation in Central America, violence in Mexico and the conflicts between Turkey and the Kurds. The reality on the ground in the first quarter of the year in almost all of them pointed rather to a worsening in almost all of them, in particular in the first two.

Using these criteria, they described as the most serious contingency in terms of impact and probability, as in 2019, the risk of a resumption of North Korean nuclear and missile tests that would precipitate new military tensions on the Korean peninsula. On 25 March, North Korea defied the new Biden Administration by launching two ballistic missiles⁹⁴.

In the same category, with high probability and moderate impact, are an increase in violence and political instability in Afghanistan that would derail the peace process, the intensification of fighting in Syria and a worsening of the situation in Venezuela. After consulting with allies, Congress, the Pentagon, the secret services and the Afghan government, ignoring the opinion of military commanders and intelligence officials, almost three months after taking office, Biden announced on 14 April the withdrawal of the more than 2,500 US troops still in Afghanistan between 1 May and 11 September this year⁹⁵. In early May, coinciding with the beginning of the US withdrawal, the Taliban intensified their attacks in many provinces. According to General Mark Milley, Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, between 80 and 120 attacks per day against Afghan government targets⁹⁶. To reduce the risks of withdrawal, the Biden Administration could bring forward the final date of withdrawal from 11 September to 4 July⁹⁷.

⁹⁴ "North Korea claims 'new tactical guided' missiles launched". 26 March 2021 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-56533260>.

⁹⁵ "Biden's risky Afghanistan withdrawal". Financial Times, 18 April 2021. <https://www.ft.com/content/afdf0907-cf92-4327-b85a-e38a722db37a>.

⁹⁶ "US sends warplanes to protect Afghan withdrawal". BBC World, 7 May 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-57017782>.

⁹⁷ "Le retrait américain d'Afghanistan avancé au 4 juillet pour sauver le processus de paix". Le Monde, 6 May 2021. https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2021/05/06/le-retrait-americain-d-afghanistan-avance-au-4-juillet-pour-sauver-le-processus-de-paix_6079338_3210.html.

The rest of the nearly 10 000 NATO troops deployed in the country, including 20 Spaniards, will do the same. "Bringing the troops home is not a strategy, but a dream", wrote John Bolton in *Foreign Policy* five days later. "Total withdrawal is a costly mistake and a failure of leadership"⁹⁸. In congressional testimony, the head of US Central Command (Middle East), General Frank McKenzie, warned that the fight against terrorism and the insurgency in Afghanistan "will be more difficult, if not impossible"⁹⁹.

With severe impact and moderate probability in the short term, the CFR pointed to new political and economic pressures from China on Taiwan, which could lead to a serious crisis with the US; an armed confrontation between Iran and the US or one



Figure 7. The most serious conflict hotspots, by impact and likelihood in 2021.
Source: CFR, Preventive Priorities Survey 2021.

⁹⁸ See article at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/04/19/biden-afghanistan-troop-withdrawal-taliban-al-qaeda-war-on-terror-pakistan-iran-nato/> Bolton was Trump's National Security chief between April 2018 and September 2019.

⁹⁹ "Afghan withdrawal will make terrorism fight harder, says top US general in the Mideast". AP, published by Military Times on 21 April 2021. https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2021/04/20/afghan-withdrawal-will-make-terrorism-fight-harder-says-top-us-general-in-the-mideast/?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=EBB%2004.21.21&utm_term=Editorial%20-%20Military%20-%20Early%20Bird%20Brief.

of its allies (Israel); a highly destructive cyber-attack on critical infrastructure; increased military tension between Russia and NATO due to Russian interference or intimidation of a NATO member; and the possibility of another massive terrorist attack on the US or an ally (see Figure 7).

“I am concerned that [China] is accelerating its ambitions to replace the US and our leadership in the international system [...] by 2050,” Admiral Philip Davidson, the Pentagon’s Asia-Pacific officer, told the Senate Armed Services Committee in early March. “Taiwan is clearly one of their previous targets and I believe that the threat will be realised in this decade, specifically in the next six years”¹⁰⁰.

In the second category, with high probability but low impact, the CFR mentioned only two cases in 2021: the intensification of inter-communal and ethno-nationalist conflicts in Ethiopia and the deterioration of the military and humanitarian crisis in Yemen. At the same level of risk, but with moderate impact and probability, it chose ten conflicts: Russia-Ukraine, Israelis-Palestinians, Turkey-Kurds, China-India, India-Pakistan over Kashmir, Lebanon, Greece-Turkey, Mexico over organised crime, Central America if conditions do not improve in the so-called Northern Triangle (El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras) and Belarus.

With a low probability, but a very serious impact if it occurs, only one source of tension appeared in 2021: the South China Sea.

In the third category or threat level, with moderate likelihood and low impact, eight conflicts or conflict zones were highlighted: Sudan if the political transition fails; an escalation of tension if negotiations between Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan over the Grand Nile Renaissance Dam break down; an increase in Al-Shabab attacks and advances in Somalia; worsening conflicts in the delta and with Boko Haram in Nigeria; the collapse of ceasefire agreements and negotiations in Libya; the breakdown of the Armenia-Azerbaijan pact that ended the 2020 fighting; growing political instability and violence in the Sahel; and more violence against the Rohingya in Burma¹⁰¹, a risk exacerbated by the 1 February military coup and the arrest of its top civilian leaders, including Nobel peace laureate San Suu Kyi.

¹⁰⁰ “China could invade Taiwan in next six years, top US admiral warns”. The Guardian. 10 March 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/mar/10/china-could-invade-taiwan-in-next-six-years-top-us-admiral-warns>.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

The experts added other conflicts¹⁰². The most cited were an increase in Chinese repression in Hong Kong, the growing danger of confrontation between the US and Russia in the Arctic, the possibility of more serious clashes between China and Japan in the East China Sea over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, tensions in the EU stemming from populism, new uncontrolled inflows of migrants or post-Brexit difficulties, social unrest in Brazil that may provoke a military coup, the destabilisation of Saudi Arabia in a new succession to the throne without agreement, and an increase in violence and political instability in Mozambique.

Health, environmental, economic and social threat forecasts, such as those published by the World Economic Forum in Davos at the beginning of each year since 2006, are proving far more useful than those limited to traditional wars and conflicts. Just read what it said fifteen years ago, in its first edition, about the risk and consequences of 'lethal influenza' and pandemics¹⁰³.



Figure 8 Main risks in 2021. Source: 16th Global Risks Report, World Economic Forum.

¹⁰² "Myanmar military seizes control and detains de-facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi". BBC World. 01 February 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-55882489>.

¹⁰³ Schwab, Klaus and Zahidi, Saadia. "Preface". The Global Risks Report 2021. 16th Edition. <https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-global-risks-report-2021>.

As every year, the latest report presents the top ten risks by likelihood and impact and, as has been the case since 2017, environmental risks remain in the lead, although infectious diseases, in impact, this year appear ahead and weapons of mass destruction in third place, after 'failure of climate responses' (see Figure 8)¹⁰⁴.

A novel contribution of the latest edition is, as Raquel Jorge-Ricart writes for the Elcano Royal Institute, "the new instruments and methodologies that address the urgency of a solid and continuous foresight exercise that looks beyond 2021 and focuses on the scenarios of 2030 and 2050"¹⁰⁵.

The nuclear threat

When some of the scientists of the Manhattan Project, the birthplace of the first nuclear bomb, devised the *doomsday clock* from the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* in 1947 to represent the risk of nuclear catastrophe on the planet (since 2007 also the threat of climate change), they placed its hands at 7 minutes to 12 o'clock. In January 2021, their last update, they were set at 100 seconds to 12 o'clock. They had never been so close to midnight.

"It is a sign of how ill-prepared they are and of the unwillingness of countries and the international system to deal with global emergencies," the publishing group explained. "Nuclear calamity is still the number one biggest threat," said its spokesman¹⁰⁶.

The extension of New START, which regulates and subjects Russian and US arsenals to controlled verification, is a positive step, although it does not include China or limit the heavy investments of recent years in modernisation via artificial intelligence and state-of-the-art cybernetics. But, as US Brigadier General Peter Zwack warns, "it is one of the few opportunities to anchor the new Putin-Biden relationship on positive foundations"¹⁰⁷.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ "Global risks and future scenarios: getting down to the ground". Elcano Blog. 27 January 2021. <https://blog.realinstitutoelcano.org/riesgos-globales-y-escenarios-de-futuro-bajando-al-terreno/>.

¹⁰⁶ Oneill, Natalie. "Doomsday Clock says humanity reminds dangerously close to apocalypse". The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists. 27 January 2021.

¹⁰⁷ Zwack, Peter. "Urgent: Extend New START treaty with Russia now". The Hill 24 January 2021. <https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/535570-urgent-extend-new-start-treaty-with-russia-now>.

The new treaty banning nuclear weapons, in force since 22 January after being signed by 86 countries, looks like another step forward, but, as *The Economist* points out in a cover report, “apart from channelling the frustration of non-nuclear countries (at the non-compliance of the nuclear powers with Article 6 of the Non-Proliferation Treaty), it will do little good”¹⁰⁸.

China, India, North Korea and Pakistan continue to build up and modernise their nuclear forces, the deterrent leverage (through sanctions and military force) that the US and some of its allies exercised over the years against proliferation has weakened, and the US promise of retaliation that has sustained the denuclearisation of countries such as Japan and South Korea, if already fragile, has been further weakened under Donald Trump.

With 90% of the world’s atomic warheads, what Russia and the US do remains of decisive importance and, in the five years of time gained by the extension of New START, they should push for a new treaty that includes other weapons, such as hypersonic vehicles and less powerful bombs, which have continued to proliferate in major arsenals.

“By renouncing land-based missiles, the US would demonstrate real progress towards disarmament without eroding its deterrent,” suggest the *Economist’s* experts, and would facilitate a different attitude from China which, in turn, is essential to reduce India’s and Pakistan’s perceptions of nuclear weapons.

Of the 31 countries – from Brazil to Sweden to Franco’s Spain – that at some point flirted with nuclear weapons, 17 initiated programmes to acquire them, only 10 actually produced them and only 9 have them today. It may be considered one of the major international security successes of the past 75 years, but the heavyweights now seeking to join the club, the regional impact of Iranian and North Korean nuclearisation, and the hegemonic tug of war that China and the US have begun to wage threaten to undo the hard-won gains made before and after the NPT’s entry into force in 1970¹⁰⁹.

¹⁰⁸ “Whowillgonuclearnext?”. *The Economist*. 30 January 2021. <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2021/01/30/the-world-is-facing-an-upturn-of-nuclear-proliferation>.

¹⁰⁹ “La no proliferación y el control de armamentos nucleares en la encrucijada”. Strategy Paper 205. IEEE, Madrid, 2020. http://www.ieee.es/en/Galerias/fichero/cuadernos/CE_205_NoProliferacionControlArmasNucleares.pdf.

Ahmad Amirabadi Farahani, a prominent member of the Iranian parliament, declared on 9 January that Iran would expel IAEA inspectors and intensify its uranium enrichment programme beyond the limit set in the 2015 agreement if the Biden Administration did not lift the sanctions imposed by Trump by 21 February¹¹⁰.

The Iranian legislature passed such a law in November and the Revolutionary Guards Council ratified it on 2 December, but Tehran did not wait until the ultimatum date to carry out the second of its threats. On 4 January it acknowledged the resumption of 20% uranium enrichment.

North Korea did not wait for Biden's inauguration to raise the pressure either. Describing the US as "the main enemy of his country and the most serious obstacle to its development", Kim Jong Un confirmed before an extraordinary party congress in Pyongyang "the expansion of our nuclear arsenal [...] with pre-emptive and retaliatory capabilities, and with atomic bombs of different sizes".¹¹¹

Kim stressed to party and military leaders the need to develop hypersonic weapons, solid-fuel intercontinental missiles, drones and spy satellites. "It may be a foretaste of the resumption of its nuclear tests, which it gave up in April 2018," says Ankit Panda, a Korea expert at Carnegie¹¹².

Strategic Panorama 2021

Since its first edition in 1996, *Panorama* has been one of the annual publications of the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies (IEEE) that aims to shed – from the events of the past year and the most relevant historical background, the essence of the best predictions in the words of Winston Churchill – some light on a rapidly changing society.

Under the direction of General Francisco José Dacova Cerviño since 2018, this year's edition, shaken by the most serious health crisis to hit the world in a century, has included six major themes

¹¹⁰ "Iran will expel U.N. nuclear inspectors unless sanctions are lifted: lawmaker". Reuters, 09 January 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-usa-nuclear-idUSKBN29E0FQ>.

¹¹¹ "North Korea's Kim calls U.S. 'our biggest enemy' in challenge to Biden". Reuters, 08 January 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-politics-idUSKBN29D2YA>.

¹¹² Ibid.

in accordance with the IIEEE's lines of work and priorities: The EU at the end of the Merkel era, the China-US disengagement, the growing deterioration of the situation in Latin America, the changes in the Middle East, accelerated by Biden's victory, and the change of direction at the helm of the US, with serious difficulties in overcoming the degrading populist hangover of Trumpism.

This year we are honoured to have the signatures of Ambassadors Jorge Heine (Latin America) and José María Ferré (Middle East and North Africa), journalists and professors Pilar Requena (EU and Germany) and Pedro Rodríguez (USA), and Colonel José María Pardo de Santayana, author of the chapter on Asia, as well as editor and coordinator of the group.

In a special issue of *Foreign Policy* last winter (2020-2021), marking the fiftieth anniversary of its founding by Samuel P. Huntington and Warren D. Manshel, Harvard professor Graham Allison, one of the survivors of the first issue, highlights ten "fundamental factors [...] that are likely to shape international life in the coming decades"¹¹³.

The first of these factors is internal cohesion or unity. The second, economic solvency, and then values, adversaries, military strength, the strategic pulse, technological competition, the new deterrence needed to survive in the face of threats such as nuclear weapons and climate change, alliances old and new, and globalisation.

Directly or indirectly, nine of these ten factors include China or the multiple structural changes and challenges that the Chinese miracle has introduced into the post-Cold War international system.

Europe without Merkel

In her chapter on Germany and Europe at the end of the Merkel era, journalist and professor of international relations Pilar Requena analyses the main challenges facing the EU in the second year of COVID-19, the first after Brexit, the West's growing tensions with Russia and China, and the change of president in the US.

¹¹³ Allison, Graham. "Grave new world". *Foreign Policy*, 50th anniversary special issue. Winter 2020-2021 pp. 14-17. <https://foreignpolicy.com/the-magazine-50th-anniversary/>.

After sixteen years in the chancellorship, she notes, “Merkel’s rating and acceptance remain high, although those of her party have fallen [...] She will be the first person in the history of the Federal Republic to leave the chancellorship voluntarily. She is retiring from politics, will not run for parliament either and has ruled out any post in an international organisation, but will certainly be available, if needed in a crisis”.

The election of Armin Laschet, the current minister-president of the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, as head of the CDU “represents a continuation of Merkel’s centrist and consensus-based approach”, she adds. “With Laschet, moreover, a possible coalition with the Greens, who would be the second most voted party, is more feasible, although no one can rule out a surprise victory if the CDU continues to fall”.

After the EU’s fractures and lack of solidarity in the first weeks of the pandemic, the EU, unlike in the euro crisis, responded this time. The Franco-German proposal of 18 May 2020 for a fund of 500 billion euros in grant loans “was a paradigm shift, especially for Germany”, which accepted for the first time what seemed impossible: the granting of non-repayable aid to the countries hardest hit by the pandemic.

“The chancellor acted and changed her paradigm probably because of a mixture of moral pressure and defence of German interests, and because of the seriousness of the crisis,” writes Requena, former TVE correspondent in Germany and author of one of the main books on Germany published in Spain¹¹⁴. However, Merkel reminded those who already consider debt mutualisation irreversible that “it is a specific and time-limited plan”.

Merkel and Macron’s May proposal finally came to fruition at the July European summit in the form of the 750 billion recovery plan, 390 billion of which in aid and the rest in loans, with repayment not to begin until 2028 and to last for thirty years.

“The relevance of the solution to the pandemic crisis seals the legacy of the long-lived chancellor to be on a par with her great predecessors,” adds the author. “It was a big step towards saving their European legacy”.

¹¹⁴ La potencia reticente: la nueva Alemania vista de cerca. Editorial Debate. Madrid, 2017.

This legacy is contingent on challenges such as the implementation of the minimum agreement with the UK, the management of vaccines, the new CAP, and the economic and social reconstruction that is essential to be able to compete in the new global system with allies such as the US, adversaries such as Russia and strategic competitors such as China.

In view of the Conference on the Future, which opened on 9 May a year late, Requena wonders whether it will serve to give the impetus needed for European integration or whether it will be just another forum for citizen consultation.

After a brief analysis of encounters and disagreements with the US, he considers it necessary to take advantage of Biden's outstretched hand to repair transatlantic ties, acknowledges the many common challenges and underlines Laschet's Euro-Atlantism without abandoning the commitment to "the EU's strategic sovereignty".

Although he describes the December EU-China Comprehensive Investment Agreement as an example of pragmatic cooperation, he warns that its entry into force "could take until 2020 or fail [...] The winner (if it goes ahead) is China, because it strengthens its geopolitical position".

As for relations with Russia, after the failed visit to Moscow by the High Representative, José Borrell, he states that 'they have hit rock bottom' and, between the pragmatism defended by France and Germany, and the intransigence favoured by Poland and the Baltics, Requena advocates "a consensual position [...] between Germany's economic strategy, France's geopolitical idea [...] and the historical experience of the Baltics and Poland".

After a detailed analysis of the different positions on the dream of strategic autonomy –an illusion for some, an imperative for others – the author underlines the risks of passive neutrality or lack of definition if Europe does not respond clearly and quickly to the big question of where it wants to be.

China-US disengagement and the year of Asia

In his chapter, José Pardo de Santayana updates the keys to this strategic revolution: the crisis of the US hegemonic order; the shift of the centre of gravity towards Asia; the West's failed strategic calculation of the evolution of the Chinese model since Deng

Xiaoping's revolution; the historical, ideological, strategic and geopolitical bases of this model; and the impact that this challenge is having on its neighbourhood, on the Indo-Pacific region and, above all, on its relations with the US, which many are calling a 'new cold war' and others a 'hot peace'.

"The profound coronavirus crisis, which is affecting Western societies much more than Asian ones, is accentuating these trends and has brought forward the timeline for the *sorpasso* of both China and Asia", he says. Further proof: on 15 February, the European statistics agency (Eurostat) announced that in 2020, for the first time, China had overtaken the United States as the EU's main trading partner¹¹⁵.

The growing rivalry between the new China and the US is shifting the global economy, warns Pardo de Santayana, towards 'strategic capitalism' and, through repeated recourse to geo-economic measures, is transforming and reversing important aspects of globalisation.

To untie this knot, he believes that "the great American power has to rethink and design a new strategy that prevents Beijing from dictating the rules of the game, allows it to preserve maximum influence and all this without reaching a suicidal confrontation".

After looking at each of the three previous *waves of economic development* in Asia since World War II – led by Japan in the 1950s and 1960s, by the *Asian tigers* in the 1960s and 1970s, and by China since then – the author argues that the fourth, in South and Southeast Asia, coincides with the fourth industrial revolution and "may have an even greater impact than the previous one".

Its corollary, he explains, is "the end of the Western era" and a "universalism [...] that will have to coexist with other worldviews with different civilisational roots". He describes the role of the US in Asia as still decisive because of its military strength, but acknowledges that, in order to maintain its influence, it will have to take into account that "regional powers prefer to dissociate strategic considerations from economic ones", as they do not want to be dragged into a confrontation with China.

The author clearly explains the weight of China's history, its current ideology – a unique combination of Confucianism and Len-

¹¹⁵ "China supera por primera vez a Estados Unidos como principal socio comercial de la UE". DW. 15 February 2021. <https://www.dw.com/es/china-supera-por-primeravez-a-estados-unidos-como-principal-socio-comercial-de-la-ue/a-56575954>.

inism – its strategic tradition of gradual conquest of positions, its capabilities, limitations and objectives, many of which, starting with the annexation of Taiwan and the withdrawal of US forces from the region, clash with the interests of other states.

“Sino-Indian tensions, the recurring Kashmir conflict, the close Sino-Pakistani alliance, the aggressive conventional attitude of India and Pakistan following the Pulwama incident (February 2019), and the asymmetric nature of their nuclear doctrines paint a picture fraught with rising risks”, he writes.

Trump’s departure from the White House, he notes, “represents an impasse and an opportunity” to review the dangerous drift represented by the accumulation of military, economic, commercial and ideological tensions.

“The basic choice is between a strategy that opposes the transformation of the international order, especially the rise of China, or one that aims to position itself as well as possible in the face of an inevitable global mutation”, he concludes.

Bad times for Latin America

The victory of centre-right candidate Guillermo Lasso in Ecuador’s presidential elections and the defeat suffered by most of the radical left candidates in Bolivia’s recent regional elections and in the first round of Peru’s presidential elections point, according to some observers, to another political shift in Latin America in 2021-2022.

Others, such as Moisés Naím, are less optimistic. “Leaders with anti-democratic tendencies now lead not only Brazil and Mexico, but also Argentina, Bolivia and soon Peru”, warned *El País* on 18 April. “In Colombia, more than a year before the elections, a far-left candidate is leading in the polls. Thus, the United States’ staunchest ally in the region could cease to be so¹¹⁶.”

Why did the pandemic hit this region so much harder than other regions of the world, asks ambassador and professor Jorge Heine in his reflections for *Panorama*. Firstly, he responds, because of “an outdated view of national security, obsessed with the old threats of tanks crossing borders”.

¹¹⁶ “Joe Biden y el fracaso de América Latina”, 18 April 2021 <https://elpais.com/opinion/2021-04-18/joe-biden-y-el-fracaso-de-america-latina.html>.

He then describes some of the most tragic scenes of its aftermath, rejects the impossibility of foresight to justify it as inevitable, and recalls the very serious policy mistakes in countries such as Brazil and Mexico that compounded the disaster.

Using the Chilean example, which he knows so well, he explains “the sensitive moment”, after “a golden decade” and “a five-year period of slow growth [...] half a lost decade”, when the Latin American region was hit by the coronavirus.

Their economies were already in a vulnerable situation at the beginning of 2020, he adds with ECLAC data, and the pandemic has impoverished them through internal and external constraints, falling commodity prices, disruption of global value chains and deteriorating financial conditions.

“The fact that the US has not helped Latin America in this crisis – on the contrary, it has contributed to exacerbating it – reflects Donald Trump’s policy towards the region” since 2017: belittling, insults, walls, aid cuts, more sanctions on Venezuela and Cuba, and a resurrection of the Monroe Doctrine against China’s presence in the region. “How to overcome this situation, he warns, is one of Latin America’s main strategic and foreign policy challenges in 2021 and in the years to come.

Few news stories in the last year better reflect this deterioration than the Trump Administration’s imposition, breaking a sixty-year precedent, of a Cuban-American from Miami without merit to chair the IDB. Most serious, he adds, was the deep division of Latin American governments, “unable to agree on a common candidate”.

An excellent connoisseur of China and its commercial, technological and diplomatic relations, in the second part of his chapter he analyses the deterioration of these ties due to the China-US confrontation, which “leaves Latin America between a rock and a hard place”.

In contrast to those who already denounce the region’s dangerous dependence on China, Heine, after a detailed review of the endemic internal ills of its main countries, sees China as “a third alternative” which, thanks to diversification, makes it possible to reduce, not increase, dependence on one or two foreign markets and sources of capital.

After an update on the deep division and fragmentation in governments and regional institutions, he proposes, as the best solu-

tion for the future, 'an active non-alignment' of Latin America from "large regional entities that allow for dialogue with the rest of the world".

Conflicts in and around the Middle East

If 2020 was a tragic year for the pandemic, in and around the Middle East it was even worse. Washington's shift in strategic priorities, accelerated by Biden's victory, has forced immediate adjustments in the region in 2021, as evidenced by the embryonic dialogue between Iran and its main Arab neighbours since January¹¹⁷, and diplomatic efforts in Vienna to salvage the 2015 Iran nuclear deal.

In his analysis of the main regional conflicts, Ambassador José María Ferré analyses, in this order, Turkey's growing military activism, the worsening of the situation in the West Bank and Gaza after the Trump Plan, the Israeli/US pressure on Iran and the new scenarios opened up by the election of Biden, the Pyrrhic victory of Ba'athist Syria after ten years of war, the political, social and economic fragility of Iraq, the strength still retained by the terrorist network of ISIS and Al Qaeda, and the renewed conflict in Lebanon, according to Ferré "difficult to understand without looking at Hezbollah".

The last part of the chapter looks at the major conflicts in recent months – Nagorno-Karabakh, Western Sahara, Libya, Afghanistan, Yemen, Ethiopia and Somalia – and the plight of the millions of refugees and displaced persons caused by these conflicts and aggravated by the pandemic.

On the changes that many expect from the new US president, he warns that "it is difficult to pronounce, but foreign policy is often more constant than is sometimes thought, and big changes take a long time".

On Iran, he adds, "the US will most likely take what it has done so far and propose changes as long as Iran complies with the JCPOA [...] A return to the JCPOA and good management of relations with Arabia and Israel could open doors for regional dialogue, but in June 2021 a new hardline Iranian president may be elected".

¹¹⁷ Parsi Trita. "Why Mohammed bin Salman Suddenly Wants to Talk to Iran". Foreign Policy. 29 April 2021. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/04/29/saudi-arabia-iran-uae-mohammed-bin-salman-secret-talks-biden-withdrawal-pivot-middle-east/>.

In relation to Israel and the so-called Abraham Accords, the ambassador considers it possible that Biden will change or nuance some issues, “but he will not oppose Israel’s new agreements with Arab states”.

Quoting Daniel Kurtzer, Ferré warns that, after twenty years of failed attempts to transform the Middle East, it is clear that “most of the region’s major challenges – such as poor governance, lack of transparency and accountability, corruption and sectarian tensions – are beyond the capacity of the US”.

Without a commitment from those who live and govern the region, “real change will be difficult” and the very serious economic situation will condition the possibilities for change. “The US is likely to continue to reduce human and financial costs in the region, and to justify this by a decline in its strategic importance,” he concludes.

The populist degradation of the United States

In the last chapter of *Panorama*, journalist and professor of international relations Pedro Rodríguez analyses the impact of Trumpism inside and outside the US from Donald Trump’s presidential landing in 2016, with a campaign based entirely on the tone and form of reality TV, to the assault on Capitol Hill on 6 January in an explosion of political violence symbolised by the degradation of the political system due to “an overdose of lies, alternative facts, disinformation, conspiracy theories and post-truth”.

“All this machinery of falsehoods, unprecedented in US politics due to its technological amplification, has managed to raise the traditional political polarisation of the American giant to levels of tension and sectarianism that are incompatible with a democratic system of reference for the rest of the world,” writes the author.

Drawing on Richard Rovere’s analysis, Rodríguez makes it clear that this radicalisation “is not a phenomenon that begins and ends with Trump”.

Following the research of A. M. Schelesinger, he adds, “the nineteenth-century American populist tradition goes back to the seventh president, Andrew Jackson, and, with different outbreaks, usually associated with deep economic crises, up to Senator Joseph McCarthy’ in the 1950s.”

In his detailed analysis of the revolution in political communication that has allowed Trump to hijack the Republican Party and, with him, this deep-rooted movement, Rodriguez concludes that Trump multiplied the distance between ideals and reality, giving rise to “three Americas beyond the historical American tradition of binary polarisation”.

On the big question that has dominated the debate before and after his defeat in 2020, which Trump and his millions of supporters continue to deny – whether Trumpism has been a parenthesis or the main symptom of an existential threat to democracy – the author clearly opts for the existential threat, not so much because of the Trump phenomenon as because of what it represents.

Chapter One

Europe at the end of the Merkel era

Pilar Requena

Abstract

The European Union faces major challenges in 2021. Not only must it continue to manage the pandemic caused by the coronavirus and the aid decided last year to alleviate its effects, especially in the most affected countries, but it must also seek its new place in the world, amidst the United States, Russia and China and the debate amongst its members on the Union's strategic autonomy or sovereignty. But someone will be missing among its leaders from the end of the year. German Chancellor Angela Merkel leaves office after 16 years and the EU is left without the person who has been, with her lights and shadows, a factor of stability in the moments of crisis and challenges of these first decades of the 21st century, undoubtedly marked by her leadership.

Keywords

EU, Angela Merkel, United States, Russia, China, pandemic, COVID, strategic autonomy or sovereignty, Conference on the Future of Europe

Introduction

The European Union is now entering the final stretch of the era of leadership that has marked its almost two decades. German Chancellor Angela Merkel will leave politics after the elections on 26 September, leaving the EU without the person who has been a pillar of stability to hold on to in times of turmoil. But the EU-27, with Brexit already a reality, are also seeking their place in the world, their geostrategic space between the United States, China and Russia, with the debate over autonomy or strategic sovereignty as a backdrop. And it remains to be seen how it emerges at the end of the coronavirus crisis that has determined its daily life since March 2020.

Her successful handling of the Covid-19 pandemic during the first wave brought the German chancellor back to the forefront. Europe, too, turned its gaze towards it, and Angela Merkel stood up for solidarity. Together with French President Emmanuel Macron, he proposed in May 2020 a €500 billion Recovery Fund to help the member states most affected by the consequences of the crisis. Their European legacy was at stake.

The EU is once again at a critical juncture, the umpteenth in its history, at a crossroads, but not dead. It is well known that Europe thrives in crises. It faces many challenges amidst multiple uncertainties and big questions. Challenges related to the health, socio-economic, political and geostrategic crises. Their resolution may be decisive for their future. The management of the pandemic has brought out the best and the worst in the organisation and also in many of its members.

Adding to the uncertainties is the question of what will happen and who will take over the leadership when Merkel's career comes to an end at the end of 2021. If we look at the family photos of the summits since the end of 2005, heads of government and state appear and disappear while she remains. An important part of this chapter will be devoted to Chancellor Merkel and Germany.

We will also look at the complicated and decisive tasks facing the EU that will determine its future. Challenges that have to do with the management of the pandemic, with its functioning after Brexit, with Biden's presidency and transatlantic relations and multilateralism, relations with China and Russia or the growing instability in the EU's neighbourhood. The 27 also have to make a decision on strategic autonomy or sovereignty, which many coun-

tries want to make a reality. Not forgetting key objectives such as green Europe, digitalisation, migration, social and financial union, the Conference on the Future of Europe or the disagreement with some member states on the EU's constitutional values of democracy and the rule of law. Another important issue is to address the differences between countries and their societies that have become more evident than ever during the pandemic with the aim of achieving a social and resilient Europe.

The answers to these challenges will shape the lives of European citizens and the EU's role in the world in the years to come. The European organisation has managed to overcome one crisis after another throughout its history. Since the beginning of the century alone there have been several: the constitutional crisis, the global financial and Eurozone crisis, the refugee crisis and the challenge of migration, Brexit and now the pandemic.

The end of the Merkel era

Before the pandemic, the German chancellor seemed absent and apathetic, she was at her lowest ebb. She was considered to have been written off after announcing in October 2018 that she would not stand for re-election and resigning from the leadership of her party, the CDU. But in her management of the pandemic, she has not been shaken and has been at her best. She will always be remembered as a true crisis manager whom everyone looks to in times of distress and insecurity as a lifeline.

With no re-election in sight, Merkel only needed to worry about her legacy without looking at the polls. Her interventions and speeches have given calm and confidence. Even her explanation of the contagion curve went viral. For Manfred Güllner, director of the prestigious Forsa polling institute, "Merkel, who, contrary to the assumptions of political observers and academic political scientists, has consistently enjoyed a great deal of sympathy among the vast majority of citizens, with the exception of supporters of the Alternative for Germany (AfD), has been able to stabilise and increase her popularity thanks to her fully accepted leadership role in the coronavirus crisis¹".

¹ Manfred Güllner is a sociologist and founder and director of the German polling institute Forsa. Response to the author's questionnaire by email on 10 July 2020.

Her serenity and scientific training have undoubtedly been key to transmitting the security that is so necessary in times of uncertainty. In 2015, her handling of the refugee crisis and his defence of multilateralism in the face of Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin already earned him the title of leader of the free world. But she was also the manager of the euro crisis, the one hated and vilified by many in the countries of the South that she punished and demanded for them to do their duties: savings, austerity, spending cuts and deep reforms. But her personality and performance have been central to his successful management of the pandemic. This has helped her regain her international voice and credibility at a crucial time².

Angela Merkel will retire from the chancellorship after sixteen years in power. Many in Germany and Europe are wondering what will happen when she leaves. To be sure, there are black spots during her long tenure, but she has provided stability in the midst of uncertainties. "Her nimbus is also fuelled by the assumption that she has almost superhuman powers of reserve. When her negotiating colleagues go to sleep after hours of rounds, Merkel is still fully present. When the others are still asleep, she is awake again. This reputation has shaped her long chancellorship³. And there is no shortage of jokes that she gets the deals because she knocks out her opponent through fatigue thanks to her physical endurance.

Her ratings and voter acceptance remain high, although those of her party have fallen, due, among other things, to a lack of leadership and failures in the handling of the pandemic by CDU heads of government in some of the *Bundesländer*. Even so, the indicators on the virus and on the economic and financial situation are better than those of other major European countries. But the new wave is taking its toll. Merkel's dismay was clearly visible in her speech in parliament in December 2020: "If we have too many contacts now, before Christmas, and then it turns out that it is our last Christmas with our grandparents, we will have lost

² For a more detailed analysis of Merkel and the management of the pandemic, see Requena, Pilar. "Angela Merkel and how her management of the pandemic crisis may mark her legacy". IEEE Opinion Paper 104/2020. Available at: http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2020/DIEEEO104_2020PILREQ_Merkel.pdf.

³ Ghatmann, Florian. "Corona ist ihr Finale". Der Spiegel, 26/12/2020. Available at: <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/angela-merkel-in-den-letzten-monaten-ihrer-kanzlerschaft-corona-ist-ihr-finale-a-6101397b-c0b9-4b99-ac35-7a7510b222f1>.

something!” Her voice sounded more brittle than ever⁴. She is also aware that, if the spread of infection does not stop, she will need to put more aid in place to keep the economy afloat, and this will have an impact on the state’s finances, which were very healthy before the pandemic.

In recent months, the chancellor has also had to recognise how little influence she can have. With each meeting of the Conference of Presidential Ministers in recent months, it has become clearer and clearer how much weight the heads of government of the *Länder* have in crisis management. But in mid-April she decided to take the reins and propose a change in the law on protection against infection in order to be able to make decisions about the whole territory.

Due to the federal system, in Germany, decisions such as closing schools, banning contacts or ordering lockdown are the responsibility of the *Bundesländer*. But the chancellor immediately took on a leading role, coordinating regular exchanges between the heads of government of the *Länder*. She promoted equal regulation throughout the country and brought together the best scientists.

Sociologist Armin Nassehi explains her actions: “As chancellor, Angela Merkel managed, especially at the beginning of the crisis, to synchronise the measures of the *Länder* as a moderator and with a certain authority. When it came to the relaxation measures and the partial lifting of contact restrictions, etc., the chancellor was to some extent no longer able to impose herself. However, she managed to continue to appear as a moderator of the process. The high pass rates obviously have to do with this capacity”⁵.

“Merkel once again explained in simple and clear words the measures she believed necessary and appropriate for the population and achieved a consensus that the citizens reward”, adds Manfred Güllner. The chancellor’s thoroughness in gathering information, her honesty in acknowledging what she did not know and her composure gave the population calm and security, with firm and sensible leadership. “Merkel gave people the feeling –as she did during the banking and financial or euro crisis – that she is dealing with what really worries them, and in the coronavirus cri-

⁴ Ibid. Ghatmann, Florian.

⁵ Armin Nassehi is a sociologist and professor at the Ludwig-Maximilians-University in Munich. Response to questionnaire sent by the author by e-mail on 10 July 2020.

sis this was and is precisely the fear of the virus and the negative consequences for the economy⁶,” says Güllner.

Her dedication to the management of the pandemic and because she wanted it that way has meant that her authority in the party has been reduced. This is leading to a decline of the CDU in the polls, with the Greens close on its heels. A comfortable victory in the September elections that would be guaranteed with Merkel at the helm may be very close with Armin Laschet as the CDU/CSU candidate for chancellor. Merkel will be the first person in the history of the Federal Republic to leave the chancellorship voluntarily. She is retiring from politics, will not run for parliament either and has ruled out any post in an international organisation, but will certainly be available if needed in a crisis.

The election of Armin Laschet, the current minister-president of the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, as head of the CDU is a continuation of Merkel’s centrist and consensus-based approach. With Laschet, a possible coalition with the Greens as the second most voted party is also more feasible, although no one can rule out a surprise victory if the CDU continues to fall. Everyone is aware that nothing will be the same after Merkel, who has imbued this first part of the 21st century with pragmatism, stability, but without risking major transformations or reforms that might have been necessary and that would have definitively marked her legacy.

Germany and the EU during the pandemic

In her speeches and statements throughout the pandemic, it can be seen how Merkel’s content has shifted from being primarily citizen-driven and focused at the beginning of the pandemic to increasingly mentioning the European Union and the need to fight together.

The Union’s initial and immediate crisis management was characterised by a lack of solidarity. Everyone took refuge in selfishness, especially the richer ones such as Germany and France, preserving their medical equipment, protective gear and respirators, while other countries such as Spain and Italy, where the death toll was rising alarmingly, lacked them. And the borders were closing. This attitude, contrary to basic community princi-

⁶ Ibid. Manfred Güllner.

ples such as solidarity and freedom of movement, put the organisation at risk⁷. After these initial missteps, regional solidarity was activated. German hospitals took in Italian and French patients and Romanian doctors and nurses were deployed in Italy, for example. The European Commission provided further institutional assistance and coordination with regard to mechanical ventilators, tests, masks and medical personnel⁸.

Merkel warned that Europe must remain united. But the fracture of previous crises between a rich north and a poor south was soon reproduced. On 6 April 2020, the German Chancellor stated that “we must show that we are ready to defend and strengthen Europe”. It concerned in particular the production of personal protective equipment and face masks, as the pandemic had shown that the market for these products was mainly in Asia.

The agreement of finance ministers on various European Investment Bank and European Stability Mechanism (ESM) assistance programmes was very important. Merkel said on 25 April 2020 that an economic stimulus package was needed, and that Germany would have to commit much more to the European budget in order to invest in climate protection and digitalisation. If the Franco-German engine did not work during the euro crisis, it was going to work this time. If then Germany, in the absence of France, was forced to reluctantly exercise a leadership⁹ that it did not want and that brought the EU to the brink of the precipice, now it was back to the classic axis, although this time the emergence of various groups, such as the Visegrad or the frugal¹⁰, complicated the negotiations more than was traditionally customary in the Union.

Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron were aware that, without helping those most in need, the EU could be shipwrecked.

⁷ Requena, Pilar. “Angela Merkel and how her management of the pandemic crisis may mark her legacy”. IEEE Opinion Paper 104/2020. Available at: http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2020/DIEEEO104_2020PILREQ_Merkel.pdf.

⁸ Varma, Tara. “La solidaridad europea en tiempos de la Covid-19”. Anuario Internacional CIDOB. Barcelona, June 2020. <http://anuariocidob.org/la-solidaridad-europea-en-tiempos-de-la-covid-19/>.

⁹ The author of this chapter develops the reasons for Germany’s reluctance to exercise leadership in her book *La potencia reticente. La nueva Alemania vista de cerca*, published by Debate in 2017.

¹⁰ The Visegrad Group is made up of Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, and the frugal or austere group is made up of Austria, the Netherlands, Sweden and Denmark.

On 18 May 2020, following a video conference, they present a joint proposal for the creation of a €500 billion fund consisting of money lent to the European Union as a whole and earmarked for subsidies. This was a paradigm shift, especially for Germany. This recovery plan was the first glimpse of light. Merkel accepted what seemed impossible: the issuance of considerable amounts of European debt in order to provide non-repayable resources to the countries hardest hit by the pandemic. Some wanted to see in this fund the seed of Eurobonds and the embryo of a future European treasury. But the pact includes safeguards to reassure Berlin.

"I believe that this is a very profound transformation and that it is what the European Union and the single market need to maintain coherence," Macron said. Merkel, who had always been against debt sharing, said the European Commission would raise money for the fund by borrowing on the markets. They would then be reimbursed from the general EU budget. The frugals showed their displeasure and scepticism from the outset.

The ambitious economic recovery fund for solidarity and growth also seeks to promote sustainable economic recovery and is temporary. It will provide budgetary expenditure to the most affected sectors and regions in line with European priorities. It will increase the convergence and competitiveness of European economies, boost investment, in particular in digital and environmental change, and strengthen research and innovation. Germany was separating itself from the frugal and breaking one of the great taboos of German politics, the mutualisation of debt. It is an unprecedented plan for an unprecedented crisis.

The Paris-Berlin agreement strengthened the position of European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, who, on 27 May 2020, presented a proposal for 500 billion euros in non-repayable grants and 250 billion euros in loans. The negotiation of a final agreement was going to require concessions from all sides.

The Recovery Fund should help ensure that all countries can respond adequately. It complemented other aid already approved such as an ESM line of 240 billion for the health sector, a Commission line (SURE) of 100 billion to finance employment support programmes (ERTE-type), and the European Stability Mechanism and the resources made available by the European Investment Bank.

The Commission's plan, called Next Generation EU, needed the backing of all 27 member states. For Ursula von der Leyen, it was "an urgent and exceptional need for an urgent and exceptional crisis". "This is Europe's moment," said the Commission President. The 19 June summit of the European Council was held by videoconference and focused on the recovery plan and the EU budget, but rather than entering into negotiations it was more a matter of testing different positions.

"The bridges we still have to build are great, we are facing the greatest economic challenge in the history of the European Union," said the German Chancellor. Merkel and Macron met in Meseberg, Germany, at the end of June 2020. They reminded the frugal that they were net beneficiaries of the internal market and that they had an interest in a financing arrangement that would allow the hardest hit countries to overcome the crisis. "Expectations are very high," Merkel acknowledged. "The moment of truth has come for Europe. We can turn the moment of truth into a success," Macron added. The aim was and is for Europe to emerge from this crisis stronger, more cohesive and united, greener, more social and more digital. In addition to the recovery fund, the Franco-German initiative foresees other measures¹¹.

The chancellor acted and changed her paradigm probably due to a mixture of moral pressure and defence of German interests and the severity of the crisis. Her country's economy is export-dependent and oriented towards the European internal market. And if its partners do not emerge from the crisis, it will suffer greatly because it benefits more than any other member from the common market. But it is clear from her actions and statements that the time for European solidarity had also come for her.

On 18 June 2020, in her government statement to the Bundestag¹², she acknowledged the errors of the beginning of the pandemic: 'The pandemic has revealed how fragile the European project remains. The first reflections, including our own, were

¹¹ For more details on these measures, see: <https://www.bundestkanzlerin.de/bkin-de/aktuelles/deutsch-franzoesische-initiative-zur-wirtschaftlichen-erholung-europas-nach-der-coronakrise-1753760>. Also covered in Requena, Pilar. "Angela Merkel and how her management of the pandemic crisis may mark her legacy". IEEE Opinion Paper 104/2020. http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2020/DIEEO104_2020PILREQ_Merkel.pdf.

¹² See: <https://www.bundestkanzlerin.de/bkin-de/aktuelles/regierungserklaerung-von-bundestkanzlerin-merkel-1762594>.

rather national and not entirely European. That, however good some of the reasons may have been, was above all unreasonable. Because a global pandemic requires joint international action and mutual support. The pandemic has also highlighted Europe's dependence on third countries for the production of medicines or protective equipment. Deficits were revealed in the procurement, storage and distribution of medical equipment. And yes, differences in the economic and budgetary situation of EU member states were also exacerbated by the pandemic. The pandemic shows us that our Europe is vulnerable. And that is why I say with total conviction: Cohesion and solidarity in Europe have never been as important as they are today".

But Merkel also reminded those who thought that Germany had changed and accepted the mutualisation of debts that "the European recovery plan is explicitly pandemic-related, specific and time-limited". The German presidency of the EU in the last six months of 2020 included in the document *Together for Europe's recovery. Programme of the German Presidency of the Council of the European Union* its priorities:

- lasting recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and economic recovery,
- a stronger and more innovative Europe,
- a just Europe,
- a sustainable Europe,
- a Europe of security and common values,
- a strong Europe in the world.

These goals were also set out by Merkel before the European Parliament on 8 July 2020. It was her first trip abroad since the outbreak of the pandemic. She made an impassioned plea for European cooperation and cohesion and defended her Europeanism: "I carry out this task with respect, but also with great passion because I believe in Europe. I am convinced that Europe is not only a legacy of the past, but also a hope and a vision for the future. Europe is not just something handed over to us, something with a destiny that binds us, but Europe is a living thing that we can shape and change. Europe will only remain Europe if it provides innovative responses to the challenges of climate change and digitalisation and faces up to its responsibilities in the world. This must be supported and complemented by

the second defining principle of Europe: our cohesion. We are all vulnerable. European solidarity is not just a human gesture, but a sustainable investment. We must show that a return to nationalism means less, not more, control and that only joint action as Europe protects and strengthens us¹³”.

The frugal or austerity camp had lost Germany, its most powerful ally, by the time the decisive summit on the recovery plan begins in Brussels on 17 July 2020. For the first time since February, it was held in person. The Franco-German proposal had marked the turning point. It was not just a question of cheaper lending, but of sharing out aid that would be repaid jointly. There were diverging interests on issues such as the reconstruction fund or the multi-annual financing framework, as well as expectations and hopes for Germany and its leading role¹⁴.

The frugal did not like the fact that the EU wanted to fight the crisis with European debt, they wanted the money to be given in the form of loans and under strict conditions and not as grants. In addition, the EU budget also contained problems such as the reduction of the German contribution or the proposal that regional funding should only be paid in the future if recipient countries, such as Hungary and Poland, adhere to the rule of law. And they could refuse the agreement if the conditionality was not lifted. The president of the European Council, Charles Michel, had to bring together countries from north and south, east and west, right and left, austere and less austere. And he succeeded. It took four days and four nights to change Europe, 92 hours of negotiations. It was one of the longest summits in history and a historic moment for Europe.

The 27 reached an agreement on the budget and the €750 billion European recovery plan: 390 billion in aid and 360 billion in loans. It was decided that the modalities of implementing conditionality linked to respect for the rule of law would be discussed at a later stage. Repayment of the loan will start in 2028: 17 billion per year for thirty years. To finance it, it is agreed to create new ‘clean resources’: a border carbon tax, a tax on financial transactions and a tax on digital giants. It is a joint debt to be

¹³ Available at: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/mediathek/kanzlerin-ep-ganze-rede-1767850>.

¹⁴ Demesmay, Claire et al. Deutschlands corona-Präsidentschaft. DGAP, 01/07/2020. Available at: <https://dgap.org/de/forschung/publikationen/deutschlands-corona-praesidentschaft>.

repaid through joint income. This is what leads some to speak of Europe's "Hamiltonian moment"¹⁵. Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said it was a very special moment, not necessarily a Hamiltonian moment, but a European moment.

For Daniela Schwarzer, director of the German Society for Foreign Policy, we are facing a potentially existential moment and economic stabilisation must go hand in hand with transformation. "With the decision to launch the four pillars of a comprehensive economic support plan, especially the Recovery Fund, the EU is taking a great leap forward. Putting some €750 billion on the table is unparalleled in the history of Europe," she says, but also warns that "despite the crisis around us, we have to invent our socio-economic and competitive model for the future. In an age of systemic competition, Europeans must not be tempted to compromise democracy and the rule of law, which have been the pillars of peaceful European unification since the Second World War. Both are being questioned by some EU governments, such as those of Hungary and Poland. They are also being deliberately undermined by external actors such as Russia and, increasingly, China. Both encourage authoritarian leaders and intervene in the public sphere in the EU and beyond"¹⁶. The pandemic has exposed many national shortcomings and the shortcomings of all of us as a whole. The transformation requires an irremediable greening of politics and the economy, which must also advance in the process of digitisation¹⁷.

Merkel and Germany understood that without solidarity the idea of Europe is meaningless and that it was necessary to inject resources into the economies most affected by the effects of the pandemic. If they do not emerge from the crisis soon, the internal market will suffer, the crisis will be greater and the European

¹⁵ In 1792, the United States was a confederation. A very young Treasury Secretary named Alexander Hamilton proposed creating joint loans. But also to assume the debts incurred by the states to finance the War of Independence. He succeeded in imposing it, turning the United States from a confederation into a federation. And by Hamiltonian moment referring to the recovery plan of the 27 they mean that the EU would move from a confederation to a federation.

¹⁶ Schwarzer, Daniela. "Five Points to make the EU stronger". *Internationale Politik*. 30/06/2020. Available at: <https://internationalepolitik.de/en/five-points-make-eu-stronger>.

¹⁷ Carbajosa, Ana and De Miguel, Bernardo. "Alemania asume el timón de la UE en pleno desafío existencial para Europa". *El País*, 01/07/2020. Available at: <https://el-pais.com/internacional/2020-06-30/alemania-asume-el-timon-de-la-ue-en-pleno-desafio-existencial-para-europa.html>.

construction could collapse. But the countries of the South must also be aware of the opportunity presented by this recovery fund and take advantage of it to modernise their economies and make them more efficient and sustainable.

"She has always advocated stability. For a long time she blocked the economic recovery plans that other countries, especially in the south, wanted to put forward. Economically, she played the German card and not the European one. Fortunately, she was able to redeem it at the end of her mandate by bringing about the recovery plan. But until now she has played the German card, a bit out of line with European solidarity"¹⁸, says Pascal Boniface, director of the French *think tank* IRIS.

Roderick Parkes, director of research at DGAP, confesses that he does not like Merkel's management style. "It has gone from one European crisis to another (eurozone, annexation of Crimea and Arab winter, migration crisis, Brexit, COVID)," he says. 'She has mastered the art of reactive crisis management, but has failed to make positive strategic decisions, preferring to take them only when all but one option was disqualified. Crises beget crises and this reactive approach has laid the seeds for the next crisis: reactive management of the eurozone crisis destabilised the EU's eastern and southern neighbours, leading to the migration crisis, and so on. Surprisingly, most commentators seem to believe that these crises came out of nowhere and were well managed by the Germans. It has emerged from this decade with its reputation intact: It is the only one that can handle the crises that its policies have helped to create"¹⁹.

Merkel's European legacy

The relevance of the solution to the crisis created by the pandemic seals the legacy of the long-lived German chancellor to place her on a par with her great predecessors, such as Konrad Adenauer, the chancellor of reconciliation with France; Willy Brandt, of the opening to the East; Helmut Schmidt, of the pro-European drive to create the monetary system and the European Council; and Helmut Kohl, the father of German unification and godfather

¹⁸ Pascal Boniface is Director of IRIS, the French Institute for International and Strategic Relations. Telephone interview conducted, 21/1/2021.

¹⁹ Roderick Parkes is research director at the German think tank DGAP ('German Society for Foreign Policy'). Interview conducted by email, 28/1/2021.

of the euro. In recent times, Merkel has been displaying a fiery Europeanism and an emotionalism that is unusual for her.

In an interview²⁰ with a group of journalists from various European media, Merkel recalled her first EU presidency in 2007: "The European constitutional treaty had just been rejected in France and the Netherlands and we had set ourselves the task of shaping a new treaty. We succeeded. Then came the international financial crisis, the euro turbulence and the refugee issue, so difficult times are nothing new. And time and again it has been shown that Europe is not yet sufficiently resilient to crises. In the euro crisis, we lacked the tools for an adequate response. Refugee movements in 2015 showed the shortcomings of the EU asylum system. Now the coronavirus pandemic confronts us with a challenge of unprecedented dimensions. It has hit us all indiscriminately. On the one hand, it has taken us away from a period of positive economic development in all EU member states. On the other hand, it has coincided with the two great phenomena of our time, climate change and the digital revolution, which are changing our lives and our economies regardless of the virus. I am very focused on all of this".

Many are still wondering why Merkel's change. Perhaps the reasons are as obvious as the fact that Europe without aid would crumble or simply because it can now do so without fear of losing power and enjoys the freedom from the polls. And it is her last chance to make up for their previous failures or shortcomings. At the height of the euro crisis, Chancellor Merkel rejected a grand act of European solidarity, neither presented a plan nor had a bold vision. In the refugee crisis, she did not reach a compromise with her partners on her decision. The pattern could have been repeated on this occasion, but it was not. Previous European crises caused 'bitter conflicts', 'wounds', 'misunderstandings' and 'misjudgements', Merkel recently admitted in a government statement²¹.

Merkel is not a leader who lets a train pass her by. It is not only a question of showing greater generosity than in the past by boost-

²⁰ Oltermann, Philip. "For Europe to survive, its economy needs to survive: Angela Merkel interview in full". The Guardian, 26/6/2020. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/26/for-europe-survive-economy-needs-survive-angela-merkel-interview-in-full>.

²¹ Müller, Henrik. "Merkels letzte Chance". Der Spiegel, 28/06/2020. Available at: <https://www.spiegel.de/wirtschaft/soziales/eu-ratspraesidentschaft-merkels-letzte-chance-a-0a1cc4f1-7dbe-4877-93a0-2f943d82952f>.

ing the recovery and reconstruction fund, but also of pushing for greater European integration. It was a big step towards saving her European legacy. "Every generation has the task of reforming Europe", Merkel said, "this is not a historical burden, but a democratic gift".

Merkel exercises leadership without being dazzled by power. Her scientific academic background and her popularisation of the arts have enthralled many during this pandemic. Sociologist Armin Nassehi describes it as follows: "Merkel's pragmatism and lack of emotion are a challenge for many. The chancellor is to be appreciated for having a moderating leadership style that is less directive than other leadership styles, but very persistent. Perhaps more explanations and programmatic phrases would have been desired more often, but perhaps that is the only way the moderator style works"²².

Her supporters credit the chancellor with saving the euro and the unity of Europe and defending fundamental values. Her critics accuse it of having accentuated division and mistrust during the economic and migration crisis and contributed to the rise of the far right. Her leadership will be irrevocably linked to an era in which Europe has overcome existential crises, suffered its greatest recession, Brexit, the rise of populism of all stripes and now a pandemic. But her pragmatism, rationality, moderation, together with the firmness of her convictions, humanism and a certain dose of emotion are proving decisive at this crucial moment in the EU's history. The July 2020 agreement was a litmus test for Germany's leadership and that of the chancellor herself. Merkel was aware that if the negotiations failed, the EU would face a deep crisis that could jeopardise the European project in the long term. Germany has learned the lessons of the past and does not want to snub its partners with threats and inflexible positions. The Franco-German tandem is back on track, but must be careful not to offend the sensitivities of the other partners if consensus is to be achieved²³.

"Ms Merkel has always played the stability and caution card. It is conceivable that her successor will follow the same policy. There will be no radical changes. Although the trend could change, for the moment the polls do not foresee alternation in power. Therefore, we could think that, given that Germany's fundamentals are

²² Interview with Armin Nassehi.

²³ Demasmay, Claire et al. Op. cit.

not going to change, German policy and Germany's European policy are unlikely to change," says Pascal Boniface²⁴.

For Ulrike Guérot, Merkel has somehow kept Europe stable so far and led Germany out of the euro crisis and welcomed refugees in 2015. "But it can also be said that it basically twisted the foundations of German European policy. And she has misrepresented the fact that under Kohl we were still looking at the Parliament and the Commission, while under Merkel we are looking at the Council and Germany's dominant position in the Council. In other words, she simply twisted it institutionally. And that has decisively changed the DNA or architecture of Europe. It has not had any kind of grand design for Europe. And I also blame her for having made institutional changes to the European architecture from which Europe suffers most in my view. In a way, they are just German decisions. And in this sense I would say that Merkel's European legacy does not look so good to me,"²⁵ says Ulrike Guérot in a highly critical tone.

For Ambrose Evans-Pritchard, International Business Editor of *The Daily Telegraph*, Angela Merkel's legacy is disastrous: "She is largely responsible for the 'Japanisation' and austerity bias of the monetary union. She exalts German mercantilist trade surpluses that make the whole euro project unviable in the end. The German economy only looks good in Europe's regional beauty contest. The necessary move to fiscal union was resisted throughout. When the pandemic struck, it agreed to a single recovery fund that would return to the *status quo* ante over time, avoiding permanent mutualisation of debt. In short, she has spent sixteen years refusing to rebuild the euro on a viable basis. Her idea of fiscal union is that of fiscal surveillance. She bequeaths a broken system to her successor. This mismanagement of the monetary union altered British perceptions of the EU before the Brexit referendum. She also triggered the migration of several hundred thousand economic refugees from southern Europe and displaced flows from Eastern Europe to the UK. All this combined in a perfect storm with Merkel's rash decision to go it alone in 2015 and open the floodgates from the Middle East, ignoring David Cameron's advice that the Syrian refugee crisis was best managed in

²⁴ Interview with Pascal Boniface.

²⁵ Ulrike Guérot is professor at the Danube University Krems where she heads the department of European Politics and founder of the European Democracy Lab in Berlin, a think tank dedicated to the future of European democracy. Interview conducted by videoconference, 19/1/21.

the Levant. By then, of course, the chancellor had already sown the seeds of British exasperation. Mutti is an admirable person and a skilful and tactical politician, but she will leave behind an unstable set of balances"²⁶.

"Part of Merkel's *modus operandi* has been to allow Macron to politicise issues and bring them to a head at European Council summits – often with the French threat of excluding member states that do not adopt his ideas – before she steps in with a conciliatory proposal that includes all member states. Macron is a creature of the European Council, Merkel of the Commission. This is a toxic relationship and serves to pervert the work of the Commission. It has led to strong centralisation of affairs, deadlock and anger in peripheral member states. Macron remains and will now be the main partner in the Franco-German relationship"²⁷, explains Roderick Parkes.

The EU has important tasks ahead of it, but it will already carry them out without Merkel at the helm. Armin Laschet could be her successor; he is the candidate of the CDU and the CSU, the Bavarian sister party, for the chancellorship. He is a continuation of Merkel's policies, including on the EU, but lacks her leadership skills. The Greens, with their candidate Annalena Baerbock, are close behind the CDU in the polls and it is not out of the question that in the end they will win the election. What does seem clear is that the next coalition government is likely to be a Green-black one, for the first time in the country's history. The question is: who will be the new chancellor? The European commitment of both is beyond doubt. "We want to build a European Germany and defend Europe," Laschet said. For Baerbock it is "a Germany at the heart of Europe".

The Greens' deep commitment to Europe will make them very active players in achieving the goals set by the EU in the field of environment or digitalisation. But they oppose Russia's Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline and the EU's investment agreement with China. And they are strong advocates of human rights and in favour of Germany's NATO membership and a strong alliance with

²⁶ Evans-Pritchard, Ambrose. "Angela Merkel's disastrous legacy is Brexit and a broken EU". The Telegraph, 19/1/2021. Available at: https://www.telegraph.co.uk/business/2021/01/19/angela-merkels-disastrous-legacy-brexit-broken-eu/?utm_content=telegraph&utm_medium=Social%E2%80%A6.

²⁷ Interview with Roderick Parkes.

the United States. They are the only party that would rock the boat somewhat, especially when it comes to China and Russia.

The EU's future challenges

A hard Brexit

There are many challenges facing the EU in the post-Merkel era. Brexit has been concluded with a hard Brexit deal, a free trade agreement with restrictions on the mobility of people, and leaves many open questions that will cause new problems in EU-UK relations. They have already surfaced during the management of vaccines. "Sentiments have been heightened in Europe by the perception that the UK, which has disposed of vaccines much faster than the EU, did so in part by hoarding doses from its domestic manufacturers. French President Emmanuel Macron has questioned the efficacy of a vaccine developed by AstraZeneca and Oxford University in people over the age of 65. This nationalist message may have resonated with its political base, but critics pointed out that the World Health Organization and the European Union had recommended the vaccine for all adults. In the UK, some politicians have seized on the vaccine gap as a rallying cry for the Brexit vote"²⁸.

There has already been unrest in Northern Ireland over Brexit and the Northern Ireland Protocol could blow up if there is not a timely reaction. This is the complex agreement with Brussels that allows Northern Ireland to retain an open border with EU member Ireland. "The protocol has already been criticised by both sides: The European Union threatened to challenge it during the dispute over vaccine supplies, while the Johnson administration warned last autumn that it would abandon it if a trade deal with Brussels was not reached"²⁹.

It was the way to avoid the imposition of a new border that would split Ireland and resuscitate quarrels. Unionists feel betrayed by London and their discourse stirs up a sense of frustration and abandonment among the Protestant community. On the other hand, "Northern Ireland and Scotland will seek to engage the EU

²⁸ Landler, Mark. "The Ugly Divorce Between Britain and Brussels is Just Getting Started". The New York Times, 28/02/2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/28/world/europe/brexit-uk-brussels.html>.

²⁹ Ibid. Landler, Mark.

in disputes over the definition of their status in the post-Brexit UK by seeking political support for their claims”³⁰.

“What we have is a minimum agreement that avoids chaos in the short term,” says Federico Steinberg, senior researcher at the Elcano Royal Institute, “and also maintains the trust on which to build a more intense economic relationship in the future, while facilitating the maintenance of cooperation on security and defence, which is essential given that on major geopolitical issues the UK’s values and interests will continue to coincide with those of the EU. The EU and the UK are doomed to understand each other, so avoiding divorce by force can be considered a success. The 27 have remained united in the negotiations. Finally, if there is one good thing about Brexit, it is that it has made it possible to approve the European recovery plan, an unprecedented exercise in solidarity that the British would surely have vetoed”³¹.

Other challenges

The management of the joint procurement of vaccines, which has been a milestone in the history of the EU, has not turned out as expected. It is true that the slow pace of vaccination in each of the EU countries is not the fault of the European Commission, but it is the fault of the poor organisation of procurement, reflecting the bureaucracy and lack of rapid reaction on the part of the European machinery. But also because of the failure of some companies to deliver. The plan had loopholes, in particular the lack of enforcement mechanisms in case pharmaceutical companies failed to deliver on their promises. And initial problems in the manufacturing chains led to delays and shortages of vaccines.

With the ambitious post-pandemic recovery fund approved, something unthinkable before the COVID crisis, the purchase of

³⁰ Pirozzi, Nicoletta, Tekin, Funda and Toygür, Ilke. “La Presidencia portuguesa: encontrando el equilibrio entre atender asuntos pendientes y dejar su propia huella”. Elcano Comment 1/2021. Real Instituto Elcano, 4/1/2021. Available at: http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/rielcano_es/contenido?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano_es/zonas_es/comentario-toygur-pirozzi-tekin-presidencia-portuguesa-encontrando-equilibrio-entre-atender-asuntos-pendientes-y-dejar-propia-huella

³¹ Steinberg, Federico. “La Unión Europea pasa la página del Brexit”. Elcano Comment 4/2021. Real Instituto Elcano, 08/01/2021. Available at: <http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/wcm/connect/4ebfe876-696f-4370-b13b-92c84e-5a6fbd/Comentario-Steinberg-La-Union-Europea-pasa-la-pagina-del-Brexit.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CACHEID=4ebfe876-696f-4370-b13b-92c84e5a6fbd>.

the joint vaccines became a priority for the Commission, as did checking how the €1.8 billion included in the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), the Recovery Plan and the New Generation EU are used. Moreover, the deep divergences between the Mediterranean countries and the so-called frugal countries must be closed.

The creation of a strong European identity or the more efficient functioning of the institutions and better communication with citizens have been pending for far too long. Analyst Begoña Ochoa argues that the EU could take advantage of this new opportunity to carry out a reform to streamline or simplify its governance mechanisms, do more to communicate with European citizens to foster a sense of identity and a greater understanding of the EU and its mechanisms, be a pioneer in cybersecurity issues and, in international relations, it could take advantage of its real power to become the third major player and act as a counterweight between the United States and China³².

For Pascal Boniface, "the EU's challenges go beyond Merkel's departure. A policy towards the United States needs to be defined. Relations between European and American allies must be rebuilt. And there is the Chinese challenge. The European Union has signed an investment agreement pending ratification. And then there are always the difficulties with Russia. Europe is divided in its attitude towards Russia"³³. Ulrike Guérot adds that "the United States, China, digitalisation, climate and our independence will be the most important topics. And also, of course, geostrategically, our relationship with Africa"³⁴.

Roderick Parkes recalls that "the EU has been at the centre of every global crisis in the last ten years and has become increasingly peripheral to the solution. And it has no choice but to compete in some way with the policies of the great powers for whose deactivation it was created"³⁵.

The chapter on the European Green Deal will also have profound geopolitical implications and will profoundly transform the economy. "It will have a major impact on the EU's energy balance

³² Ochoa De Olza Amat, Begoña. "¿Quo vadis Europa? Framework Document". IEEE 1/2021. http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_marco/2021/DIEEEM01_2021_BE-GOCH_Quovadis.pdf.

³³ Interview with Pascal Boniface.

³⁴ Interview with Ulrike Guérot.

³⁵ Interview with Roderick Parkes.

and on world markets, on oil and gas producing countries in the EU's neighbourhood, on European energy security and on world trade patterns"³⁶. Brussels will have to manage all the geopolitical aspects of this agreement, an ambitious package of policies to make the EU economy environmentally sustainable.

The bloc must engage with oil and gas exporting countries to encourage their economic diversification, including into renewable energy and green hydrogen. The EU must improve security of supply of critical raw materials and limit its dependence on other countries for these materials. It should work with the US and other partners to establish a climate club whose members apply similar carbon border adjustment measures. The EU must become a world leader in the energy transition and promote global coalitions for climate change mitigation, such as one to protect permafrost³⁷. It will set a legally binding target of so-called climate neutrality for the EU by 2050.

In short, Brussels has to rebuild the multilateral order after the UK's exit, while economic and social reconstruction is its priority. "The EU is freed from Brexit, which had been stuck in its shoes since 2016, with the success of having kept all partners together. Brussels now faces a year to see how its geo-strategic character is realised"³⁸, argues former European Commission vice-president Joaquín Almunia. It also does not want to lose its global leadership in the battle against climate change and wants to join the digital battle.

Other challenges include regulating online platforms and establishing new rules for a common European asylum and migration policy. The Future of Europe Conference, an initiative to analyse how the EU should face the challenges of the future with greater and more direct involvement of citizens, has kicked off. Negotiations on the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) for the period 2022-2027 must be concluded and aligned with the European Green Pact and environmental objectives.

³⁶ European Council On Foreign Relations. "The geopolitics of the European Green Deal". <https://crm.ecfr.eu/civicrm/mailling/view?reset=1&id=11834>.

³⁷ Leonard, Mark et al. "The Geopolitics of the European Green Deal". European Council on Foreign Relations, 3/2/2021. <https://ecfr.eu/publication/the-geopolitics-of-the-european-green-deal/>.

³⁸ Pellicer, Lluís. "La UE pasa página tras el Brexit". El País, 01/01/2021. <https://el-pais.com/internacional/2021-01-01/la-ue-pasa-pagina-tras-el-brexit.html>.

This is coupled with the European objective of achieving a secure supply of raw materials for the industrial sector. As IEEE analyst Mar Hidalgo García recalls, “the coronavirus crisis has led to a reinforcement of this concept within the EU, especially as it affects the supply of certain mineral materials that are key to three strategic sectors: renewable energies, e-mobility [*sic*] and defence/aerospace. The European Commission has presented an Action Plan for critical raw materials that aims to move towards greater strategic autonomy in certain minerals that are essential for the technologies needed to make the long-awaited green and digital transition. All this is aggravated by climate change which is forcing us to move towards decarbonised economic models. The EU needs to reduce its dependence on certain technologically necessary raw materials. A more resilient economy needs a more secure and sustainable supply of these materials. The European Union needs more than ever to address the security of supply of certain raw materials if it is to continue to commit to green and digital growth for its ambitious recovery plan from the pandemic.”

The Future of Europe Conference

On 9 May 2021, coinciding with Europe Day, the work of the Conference on the Future of Europe begins. It should have started a year earlier, but the pandemic and the lack of consensus among European institutions led to its delay. The Parliament and the European Commission have advocated that this should be a process that leads to concrete recommendations that can be transformed into action and that the results of the conference should be transformed into legislative initiatives or treaty amendments. However, there has been no willingness from the Council, made up of the leaders of the 27 member states, to move towards treaty change. The debate over the leadership of the conference has also been one of the factors preventing the Council from reaching agreement on a definitive position.

The idea for this mechanism came from French President Emmanuel Macron, but the project was presented to the European Parliament in July 2019 by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen. The idea is to provide an opportunity to reflect in depth on the direction of the EU and its institutional structure. It is jointly organised by the Parliament, the Council and the Commission. Its aim is to see in the medium and long term what reforms need to be made to its policies and institutions. One of

the most important points is to involve citizens, including young people. It will be a two-year process of open, inclusive and transparent debates at national, regional and local level, allowing EU citizens to put forward their ideas and thus contribute to shaping the future of Europe. The ultimate aim is to give a new impetus to European integration.

The President of the Parliament, David Sassoli, the Portuguese Prime Minister António Costa, holding the rotating Presidency of the Council, and the President of the Commission, Ursula Von der Leyen, signed the Declaration on the Future of Europe Conference on 10 March 2021 under the title "Working with citizens for democracy: building a more resilient Europe". For Sassoli, it represents a new beginning for the European Union and for all European citizens. "The Conference on the Future of Europe will be a unique opportunity for all European citizens and our civil society to shape the future of Europe, a common project for the functioning of European democracy. We call on everyone to make their voice heard in building what will be the Europe of tomorrow, the Europe of all," he said. "It is a message of confidence and hope for the future that is sent to Europeans in the hope of building together a fair, green and digital Europe," Costa added. President Von der Leyen said: "Today we invite all Europeans to make their voices heard to say what Europe they want to live in, to shape it and to join forces to help us build it. Citizens' expectations are clear: they want to have a say on the future of Europe in matters that affect their lives. So is our promise today: we will listen and then we will act".

The document recognises that, in the wake of the pandemic, Europe can and must learn lessons from these crises. They highlight the achievement of the ecological and digital transition along with strengthening Europe's resilience, its social contract and the competitiveness of its industry as the defining tasks of this generation. The EU must also seek to redress inequalities and ensure an equitable, sustainable, innovative and competitive economy that leaves no one behind. Another key issue is the need for Europe to be more assertive and take a global leadership role in promoting its values and standards in an increasingly turbulent world in order to meet the geopolitical challenges in the global environment³⁹.

³⁹ The full statement is available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/es_-_declaracion_conjunta_relativa_a_la_conferencia_sobre_el_futuro_de_europa.pdf.

There are high hopes for the conference, especially with regard to citizen participation and the increase in the European spirit, which has been severely damaged in most countries. The question is whether it will only be a forum for citizen consultation or whether it will end up being the beginning of a new and necessary institutional reform of the EU. "There seems to be a consensus that citizens should play a greater role in the debates than hitherto. With the rise of populism, growing scepticism of elites and complaints that the EU population is under-represented, there is an urgent need"⁴⁰.

The conference will focus on how to develop EU policies in the medium and long term to address the challenges more effectively. Participation of citizens and stakeholders will be ensured through various debates and fora and through multilingual internet platforms where ideas can be submitted online and citizens' panels in Member States and at European level. On governance, the Council wants to ensure an equal role for the three EU institutions, respect for the prerogatives of each institution and the close association of national parliaments. On 19 April 2021, the conference's multilingual digital platform was launched. All EU citizens are invited to help shape their own future and that of Europe as a whole. It is available in 24 languages.

The conference focuses on issues such as health, climate change, social justice, digital transformation, the EU's role in the world and how to strengthen the democratic processes that govern the EU. It is about engaging in dialogue with citizens to make Europe more resilient, also with the aim of strengthening European solidarity.

According to the Eurobarometer on the Future of Europe conducted at the end of 2020, three quarters of Europeans believe that the Conference on the Future of Europe will have a positive effect on democracy within the EU. Europeans are overwhelmingly in favour of the participation of ordinary citizens, young people, national governments and academics/experts in the conference. Europeans who express their willingness to participate would prefer to do so through local meetings, surveys, by submitting proposals to national and EU politicians, and through online consultations⁴¹.

⁴⁰ Hierlemann, Dominik. "¿Cómo hacer que la Conferencia sobre el Futuro de Europa salga bien?" Esglobal, 21/9/2020.<https://www.esglobal.org/como-hacer-que-la-conferencia-sobre-el-futuro-de-europa-salga-bien/>.

⁴¹ Fieldwork was conducted in October and November 2020. This Eurobarometer is available at: [file:///C:/Users/prequ/Downloads/ebs_500_fir_en%20\(1\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/prequ/Downloads/ebs_500_fir_en%20(1).pdf).

The EU and the major powers

With Brexit now a reality, the EU can focus on the future and find its place in the world amidst three giants: The United States, China and Russia. It also has the opportunity to reinforce its autonomy or strategic sovereignty in crucial sectors. The EU finally seems determined to take steps towards strategic autonomy, i.e. the ability to make its own decisions, after having “slept for a long time under the protective umbrella of the United States”⁴², says Josep Borrell, the EU’s High Representative for Foreign Affairs.

United States

With the arrival of Joe Biden in the White House, the US has returned to a certain multilateralism with the partial unblocking of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), a return to the World Health Organization (WHO) and improved relations with its allies and partners in NATO and other organisations.

Professor Ulrike Guérot believes that a strong transatlantic relationship is a good thing, but she believes that even if Joe Biden is now President of the United States, it will not bring back *the good old America* because Europeans are obliged to find their own geo-economic and geo-strategic answers in all areas, including the military, climate and digitalisation. “We should have a serious talk with the Americans about this whole Google industry and about servers and about our independence. Macron always says that we must Europeanise digitalisation, strengthen Nokia as a company, make a European Google. That would be an answer to geo-strategy and independence. The price, of course, would have to be that we tax Starbucks, that we tax Amazon and that we don’t allow Amazon to take over all of our parcel trade in this pandemic and that our businesses are left with nothing”⁴³.

It is true that during Donald Trump’s presidency the EU has been forced to build an autonomous position and act in its own interests. But transatlantic ties need to be mended after these years

⁴² Pellicer, Lluís. Josep Borrell: “La UE durmió durante mucho tiempo bajo el paraguas protector de Estados Unidos”. El País, 11/11/2020. Available at: <https://elpais.com/internacional/2020-11-11/josep-borrell-la-ue-durmio-durante-mucho-tiempo-bajo-el-paraguas-protector-de-estados-unidos.html>.

⁴³ Interview with Ulrike Guérot.

of friction and even outright hostility. The question is what each side wants the transatlantic link to look like from now on and what to do to make it work for both sides.

For Sven Biscop, professor at Ghent University, "Europeans want NATO to be more effective in defence; Americans want to make it more effective on everything from the rise of China to climate change. China's place in the world and the future of the world order require transatlantic coordination. If the US agrees to work with the EU as an equal, and more importantly, if the Europeans assume that they will only have an effective grand strategy through the EU, the transatlantic relationship can flourish"⁴⁴.

"However, the EU already concluded a deal with China on its own at the end of December, without its American ally. All in all, it seems that Europeans do not quite trust the traditional transatlantic alliance. Their fear is that the new Democratic administration's approach is temporary and that in four years it will change again"⁴⁵, says Cristina Crespo, Director of External Relations at the Franklin Institute. He adds that "Biden's multilateralism will not necessarily prioritise the Europeans in his idea of creating an international alliance of aligned democracies to combat common threats".

"But there are potential areas for improvement and progress, such as the establishment of trade rules and environmental standards; digital taxation and 5G; initiatives to regulate *big tech*; and the development of common strategies to deal with China"⁴⁶, according to Carlota G. Encina, Senior Researcher at the Elcano Institute.

The challenges facing the United States and Europe that threaten their societies and way of life are common. For Bruce Stokes of the German Marshall Fund of the United States, "these problems transcend national borders. They cannot be tackled successfully on their own. They can only be resolved through concerted and cooperative international action"⁴⁷. Biden can usher in a new era

⁴⁴ Política Exterior. "Agenda Exterior: relación transatlántica". 20/01/2020. Available at: <https://www.politicaexterior.com/agenda-exterior-relacion-transatlantica/>.

⁴⁵ Idem. Foreign policy.

⁴⁶ Idem. Política Exterior.

⁴⁷ Stokes, Bruce. "A Transatlantic Agenda for the Biden Era". The German Marshall Fund of the United States, 14/1/2021. Available at: <https://www.gmfus.org/blog/2021/01/14/transatlantic-agenda-biden-era>.

of transatlantic cooperation to create a transatlantic medical supply pool, jointly prepare for the next pandemic, boost the transatlantic digital marketplace, revive the World Trade Organisation, curb climate change, reinforce Paris Agreement commitments, deal with China, emphasise defence modernisation, develop a joint approach to Russia and re-engage with Iran or jointly combat cyber-attacks⁴⁸.

The Commission has also produced a paper – *A New EU-US Agenda. for Global Change* – which argues that the relationship between the two countries requires “maintenance and renewal” if the democratic world is to stand up to “authoritarian powers” and “closed economies that exploit the openness on which our societies depend”⁴⁹. The EU and the US must cooperate in every conceivable way and reaffirm their alliance and thus face together the “strategic challenge” that China represents.

Germany’s potential next chancellor, Armin Laschet, advocates good transatlantic relations, but alongside a strengthening of the EU’s strategic sovereignty. “As Europeans, we must be able to act, not as a counterweight to the US, but as a worthy partner and independent actor. We Europeans need to make better use of all fora for transatlantic exchange with values, interests and capacity to act. We should see the COVID-19 crisis as a wake-up call and use it as an incentive to strengthen the EU’s strategic sovereignty. I am not talking about the Union turning in on itself; on the contrary, strategic sovereignty is a guarantee of the Union’s ability to act and assert itself, not least in the digital field. The budget crisis should encourage us to push for the goal of a true defence union and pool our limited resources”⁵⁰.

China

Europe must face competition with China, but it will only be able to do so as a political community, as an economic and technological region willing and able to assert itself in a new digital age.

⁴⁸ Idem. Stokes, Bruce.

⁴⁹ González Ferriz, Ramón. “Europe’s optimism over Biden’s victory may be a costly mistake”. *El Confidencial*, 3/12/2020. Available at: https://blogs.elconfidencial.com/mundo/tribuna-internacional/2020-12-03/optimismo-europa-triunfo-biden-error-caro_2857475/.

⁵⁰ Laschet, Armin. “Relaciones transatlánticas y poder difuso”. *Foreign Policy*, issue 199, 1/1/2021. Available at: <https://www.politicaexterior.com/articulo/relaciones-transatlanticas-y-poder-difuso/>.

The rise of China, which is above all a competitor and systemic rival, will force Europe to cooperate. China threatens to take the EU to task with its soaring economic power, technological ambitions and growing geopolitical aspirations. In order to protect its sovereignty and maintain its competitiveness internationally, the Union has to find a common response.

With the EU-China Comprehensive Investment Agreement, the European Union and China have established a pragmatic axis of cooperation in trade, investment and climate policy. The draft investment agreement was finalised in December 2020 and opens avenues for future cooperation and levels the playing field for trade competition without a conditionality, beyond the provision that China will fulfil its obligations as a member of the International Labour Organization. In other words, there is hardly any reference to concerns about forced labour.

It had been under negotiation for years and Europe agreed to it without waiting for Biden to take office when this pact could make relations and cooperation with Washington more difficult. It is an agreement in principle, and he does not yet know what his future will be because it has to be ratified and problems can arise there. But it could also be a turning point after all that happened in 2020 when the 45th anniversary of diplomatic ties was to be celebrated jointly. The pandemic prevented this, but Beijing's growing diplomatic belligerence also makes it clear that one cannot be naïve vis-à-vis China. Economic relations between the two sides have grown despite the pandemic and China was the EU's largest trading partner in 2020. The cumulative investment flow is €140 billion in the case of the EU and 120 billion euros from China over the last twenty years⁵¹.

Beijing was keener than ever to demonstrate its position in the global economy, hence the last-minute concessions to clinch the deal. The Commission says it has improved conditions in sectors such as finance and health and has achieved greater transparency from China on subsidies to state-owned enterprises. The pact addresses forced technology transfers, a growing practice whereby many foreign companies are forced to hand over technology

⁵¹ De Esperanza, Cristina. "En el acuerdo entre la UE y China hay un claro ganador: Pekín". EOM, 3/3/2021. Available at: <https://elordenmundial.com/acuerdo-entre-union-europea-china-ganador-pekín-economía/>Gouveia, Teresa. "Where Portugal can lead Europe in 2021". ECFR, 20/01/2021. Available at: <https://ecfr.eu/article/where-portugal-can-lead-europe-in-2021/>.

in exchange for access to the Chinese market, and improves conditions for European companies' access to the Chinese market. Beijing is also committed to sustainable development and labour rights issues⁵². But the winner is China because it strengthens its geopolitical position amid a wave of international criticism over the pandemic and without making concessions on the human rights situation or respect for international norms in China.

It is not clear that the agreement will eventually enter into force, as it must be approved by the Council and the Parliament. The process could drag on until 2022 or fail. The main driving force behind the agreement in principle is Germany, the EU's largest exporter to China and one of the economies most dependent on the Asian giant. It had to be achieved before the end of the year because it fulfilled one of the key objectives of Germany's rotating presidency of the European Council in the second half of 2020. But we will see what happens when Merkel, the European champion of the pact, leaves the chancellorship.

China is much more than a huge export market. For the EU, good relations with the Asian country are essential, but bearing in mind that China is not a partner but a strategic rival, as Ursula von der Leyen said. The pandemic has also exposed the EU's vulnerability to Chinese investment in sectors such as technology and infrastructure. And the deficiencies in materials for the health sector were clearly visible. China has used the sale or transfer of commodities that were needed during the pandemic to expand its influence in various areas of the world.

In a speech at the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in Berlin, the German Chancellor recalled what must not be forgotten in relations with China: "We must never forget that Europe is not neutral. It is part of the political West. In view of Sino-American tensions, a critical and constructive dialogue with China is particularly important. As a key player in this century, the People's Republic occupies a central place on the world stage. Europe must confidently assert its values such as the rule of law, freedom, democracy and human rights in its cooperation with China"⁵³.

⁵² De Esperanza, C. Op. cit.

⁵³ The full speech can be read at the following link: <https://www.bundestkanzlerin.de/bkin-de/aktuelles/rede-von-bundestkanzlerin-merkel-im-rahmen-der-veranstaltung-aussen-und-sicherheitspolitik-in-der-deutschen-eu-ratspraesidentschaft-der-konrad-adenauer-stiftung-am-27-mai-2020-1755884>.

But it should not be forgotten that China's influence on the continent is growing, adding partners to its New Silk Road initiative and with a growing presence in European strategic sectors. This policy is also being pursued by the Asian giant in Africa and Latin America, which will eventually lead to a loss of Europe's influence in these continents if Brussels does not make a clear, firm and effective commitment to them.

Russia

Josep Borrell's failed visit to Moscow, the Navalny case⁵⁴ or Gazprom are the latest important events that have marked EU-Russia relations. The High Representative's mission will always be remembered as a fiasco. He spoke about human rights and abuses and democracy and the Navalny case, who had been convicted a few days earlier. But to no avail and, in the end, he ended up dancing to the music his hosts played for him. He was unable to react or counter-attack when Foreign Minister Lavrov, the wily Sergei Lavrov, attacked the EU, Spain or him directly, and when minutes earlier Russia had announced the expulsion of several diplomats.

During that visit it became clear that relations between Europe and Russia had hit rock bottom. The sanctions imposed by Brussels on Moscow and Lavrov's question as to whether there was anything left to do with the EU describe the scenario well. Europeans do not forget the annexation of Crimea or the war in eastern Ukraine, but it is in the EU's interest to resume and improve relations. But if Russia also wants to engage in dialogue and cooperation with the EU, it must abide by the basic rules of the Council of Europe, including in the Navalny case.

In the wake of the tension with Russia over the Navalny case, Borrell's decision to go to Moscow divided EU members. It had been eight years since the EU's High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy had visited Russia, an example of their fragile relations. The head of European diplomacy defended his trip by saying that precisely because it was a very delicate moment it

⁵⁴ Alexei Navalny is a Russian lawyer and politician and one of the most prominent opponents of President Vladimir Putin. On 20 August 2020 he was hospitalised in a very serious condition with symptoms of having been poisoned and a couple of days later he was transferred to Germany, where he was treated. On his return to Moscow on 17 January 2021, he was arrested and imprisoned.

was essential to make this visit, Borrell defends a pragmatic line with Russia and the need to restructure relations. This is also the vision of Germany or France⁵⁵. Poland and the Baltic countries take a more uncompromising line. The 27 should adopt a consensual position and not let the political interests or economic benefits of one or the other prevail over the general interest. "It seems unquestionable that the EU needs to think strategically about its relations with Russia. In order to do so, the 27 have to agree on the type of relations they want to establish: cooperative or confrontational. Russia, however much some may insist, will continue to be on Europe's border, and therefore a position cannot be avoided in relation to it. One of the EU's main mistakes has been to underestimate its neighbour"⁵⁶.

Germany's role in these relations is also crucial. As Professor Guérot explains, "Russia has been a very complicated issue in Germany because of Gazprom for years". And he warns that this is a completely misguided German policy that causes friction with other member states. Whenever Germany gets too close to Russia, the Poles have a problem. "We are pursuing a policy with Russia in which we want to be very close to Russia economically, but we oppose Putin politically and militarily. And as far as society is concerned, it is not a free society. I believe that Russian society needs to liberalise. Putin has to go, of course. Maybe one day Navalny will be the Russian president. And then we will be able to think about cooperation with Russia in a completely different way, social, geostrategic and economic cooperation. And this cannot be a German task, it must be a European task. Because it is completely different to look at Russia from Spain or France or Italy than it is to look at Russia from Germany"⁵⁷.

The construction of the pipeline linking Russia to Germany is already well underway, but countries critical of Moscow have denounced the project, even more so after what happened to Navalny. In the EU, there is a dispute between those countries that want a realistic relationship with Russia and those that advocate strong action to reduce their energy dependence on Moscow. On

⁵⁵ Alarcón, Nacho. "Borrell va a Moscú: división en la UE sobre una visita en un momento delicado". *El Confidencial*, 05/02/2021. Available at: https://www.elconfidencial.com/mundo/europa/2021-02-05/borrell-en-moscu-division-y-desacuerdo-sobre-una-visita-en-un-momento-delicado_2936752.

⁵⁶ Política Exterior. "Agenda Exterior: Rusia y la UE". Available at: <https://www.politicaexterior.com/agenda-exterior-rusia-y-la-ue/>.

⁵⁷ Interview with Ulrike Guérot.

22 February 2021 in Brussels, EU foreign ministers met to adopt draft sanctions against Russian officials involved in the arrest and imprisonment of the Russian opposition politician. German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas reminded his European partners that some 150 German, French, Austrian and Dutch companies were involved in the project. Nord Stream 2 will allow the Russian giant Gazprom to transport 55 billion cubic metres of gas to Europe every year. The project has a total cost of 9.5 billion euro, financed by Gazprom and five European groups: France's Engie, Germany's Uniper and Wintershall, Austria's OMV and Anglo-Dutch Shell⁵⁸.

The division causes Russia to prefer bilateral relations with the most important countries: Germany, France, Italy, Hungary. The EU has to reconcile Germany's economic strategy, France's geopolitical idea that we need Russia as a counterweight to China, and the historical experience of the Baltic states and Poland. Sooner rather than later, the EU will have to rethink its approach to Russia, which is an indispensable actor on many fronts – from Syria to the Arctic to the nuclear arena.

Autonomy or strategic sovereignty

Against the backdrop of the pandemic, two opposing positions have emerged within the Union over the past year. On the one side are those who argue that strategic autonomy means acquiring more *military muscle* so that Europe can operate more independently. Europe boasts *soft power*, but no *hard power*. Thus, its capacity for autonomous action is severely constrained. This vision would be complemented by the development of industrial clusters to secure supply chains for strategic goods and services, as well as to compete on the global chessboard with Chinese or US companies⁵⁹.

French President Emmanuel Macron has been the driving force behind this position. It should be recalled that France launched the European Intervention Initiative in 2018, in which twelve oth-

⁵⁸ Stroobants, Jean-Pierre et al. "Nord Stream 2, le gazoduc russe qui sème la zizanie en Europe". *Le Monde*, 26/02/2021. Available at: https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2021/02/26/nord-stream-2-le-gazoduc-russe-qui-seme-la-zizanie-en-europe_6071337_3210.html.

⁵⁹ Laborie Iglesias, Mario. "Unión Europea: ¿hacia una autonomía estratégica y nuevas relaciones transatlánticas?". *Esglobal*, 9/4/21. Available at: <https://www.esglobal.org/union-europea-hacia-una-autonomia-estrategica-y-nuevas-relaciones-transatlanticas/>.

er European countries are currently participating, despite being seen in some European capitals as an attempt by Paris to promote its own vision of European autonomy. In contrast, the more Atlanticist European countries, led by Germany, have described the French position as dangerous and unrealistic. Even German Defence Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer went so far as to point out that ‘the illusions of strategic autonomy must end’. This group, which also includes countries such as Poland, the Baltics, the Czech Republic and Hungary, has advocated strengthening ties with the US as President Joe Biden’s arrival in the White House offers a window of opportunity for a return to transatlantic cooperation after the tumultuous period of the Trump presidency⁶⁰.

Colonel Mario Laborie Iglesias points out that, in their speeches at the Munich Security Conference in 2021, President Macron and Chancellor Merkel agreed, with nuances, on three crucial aspects. “First, the EU must strengthen its defence and take greater responsibility for its own security. Second, this strengthening should be intended to balance and complement the Atlantic Alliance, not compete with it. And third, a stronger EU brings added value to the relationship with the US.”⁶¹. A few days later, the heads of state and government of the 27 EU states expressed their readiness to increase defence investment in order to increase their capacity to act autonomously, while maintaining a commitment to cooperate with the new US administration within the NATO framework. “The EU aims to strengthen its resilience and preparedness to face security threats and challenges, for which it needs to intensify the development of the necessary capabilities. In this way, the EU will increase its strategic autonomy and its ability to cooperate with its partners to defend its values and interests”⁶², explains General Federico Yaniz.

On 13 September 2017, then Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker already said in a speech in the European Parliament that “by 2025 we need a fully developed European Defence Union². The goal is a Europe stronger on the world stage, further developing existing partnerships, building new ones and promoting stability and prosperity in its immediate neighbourhood to the East and South and also in the Middle East, Africa and the world,

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Yaniz Velasco, Federico. “La Política Común de Seguridad y Defensa de la UE avanza”. Opinion Paper. IEEE 151/2020. Available at: http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2020/DIEEE0151_2020FEDYAN_PCSD.pdf.

ready to take on more responsibilities and to assist in the creation of a more competitive and integrated defence industry, committed to strengthening its common security and defence, including in cooperation and complementarity with the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, taking into account national circumstances and legal commitments; a Union active in the United Nations and advocating a multilateral system, free and fair trade and a positive global climate policy⁶³.

French IRIS director Pascal Boniface argues that “having strategic sovereignty does not mean breaking with the Americans. It simply means not being dependent on them and having a more balanced relationship with them, which would be normal, since the EU has a GDP equivalent to the US GDP. It is a question of will, but the weight of history, the habits of dependence on the United States still prevent us from doing so. But slow but steady progress is being made in this direction”⁶⁴.

The debate on ‘European strategic autonomy’ is highly controversial. Some see strategic autonomy as an illusion best abandoned. Others see it as a political imperative that must be pursued more than ever to regain political space vis-à-vis the United States. In between, however, there are those who suggest that we should avoid old theological disputes and give practical content to these words. How can one be strategically autonomous? Strategic autonomy was born in the defence industry. Since then, it has expanded into new areas of an economic and technological nature, as the pandemic has shown. However, the security dimension remains predominant and sensitive. And, as Josep Borrell says, “strategic autonomy is more important than ever because the world has changed”. It is difficult to claim to be a ‘political union’, capable of acting as a “global actor” and a “geopolitical commission”, without being “autonomous”. Europe’s weight in the world is diminishing. Strategic autonomy is, from this perspective, a process of political survival. If we want to remain credible in the world, if we want to develop our industrial base, we must necessarily develop a European defence industry that is part of the European industrial base. Another issue where strategic autonomy is at stake is data. “Indeed, in a world where data will be the oil of the 21st century, Europe cannot leave its data exclusively in the hands of market players or allow it to be confiscated by states

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Interview with Pascal Boniface.

whose protection of freedoms is not an absolute priority. Strategic autonomy is not a magic wand, but a long-term process for Europeans to increasingly assume their own responsibilities⁶⁵, explains the High Representative.

To achieve strategic autonomy and sovereignty, to consolidate itself as a pole in a multipolar world, to be a great power.. All these objectives are based on the same aspiration: the EU has to be an independent global actor, on a par with the US, China and Russia. The EU seeks to work with all major powers to keep multilateralism alive and reformed, to level the economic playing field and to prevent the world from breaking down into spheres of exclusive interests and clashing blocs. If China becomes an aggressive power, the Europeans will have to ally with the Americans to stop any expansionist plans⁶⁶.

"The enormous geopolitical changes that have taken place on the international scene in recent decades could not fail to radically affect the European Union on the new global stage," recalls General Dacoba. "And not only in terms of the specific aspects of its security and defence, but also in terms of its role as an actor in the security and defence landscape. The Union's Strategic Autonomy is no longer to be considered exclusively in terms of military capabilities. The complexity of the challenges posed by the new commercial and technological powers, as well as their geopolitical challenges, make it necessary to broaden the focus. Europe's ambition cannot be limited to merely accompanying the powerful ally on the other side of the Atlantic"⁶⁷.

As German professor and renowned analyst Ulrike Guérot warns, "we are walking on thin ice. We urgently need to get out of this pandemic and start thinking again about how we want to live together in Europe after the crisis. Nothing will be as it was before.

⁶⁵ Borrell, Josep. "Por qué es importante la autonomía estratégica europea". Real Instituto Elcano, 23/12/2020. <http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/wcm/connect/5a3a48ee-c1fe-4230-bb5f-ae61bfc3837/Borrell-Por-que-es-importante-la-autonomia-estrategica-europea.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CACHEID=5a3a48ee-c1fe-4230-bb5f-ae61bfc3837>.

⁶⁶ Biscop, Sven. "La llegada de Biden y la autonomía de la Unión Europea". Política Exterior, 1/1/2020. <https://www.politicaexterior.com/articulo/la-llegada-de-biden-y-la-autonomia-de-la-union-europea/>.

⁶⁷ For a complete study on this issue, see Dacoba Cerviño, Francisco José. "European Strategic Autonomy: neither with you, nor without you...". IEEE Analysis Paper 13/2021. Available at: http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2021/DIEEEA13_2021_FRANDAC_Autonomi.a.pdf.

And the question is: Where do we want Europe to be?"⁶⁸. Answering it and implementing the answer is one of the challenges ahead.

Conclusions

Three decades ago, the EU accounted for a quarter of the world's wealth. Forecasts suggest that in twenty years' time we will be well behind China, below the United States and on a par with India. This means that if the 27 do not act soon and united, the EU will become economically irrelevant, with all that that implies.

2021 must be the year of recovery from the health and economic crisis and of maintaining cohesion, although the Union will not be free of clashes between its members. Angela Merkel will leave power and the European stage and Emmanuel Macron is set to lead the pro-European front. If Armin Laschet were to be the next German chancellor, he still lacks sufficient leadership at the European level and is little known. The same goes for Green candidate Annalena Baerbock. So for a while at least, France will be in the driver's seat, albeit accompanied in the leadership by Germany, no matter what colour the coalition that emerges from the elections or the chancellor.

With Joe Biden as US president, transatlantic relations will be revitalised after four years of Trumpism. But the EU will have to bear in mind that Washington always pursues its own interests and that these sometimes do not coincide with, or even oppose, those of Europe. It is therefore necessary and urgent for the 27 to resolve the question of strategic autonomy or sovereignty and what they want the EU's place in the world to be and to act accordingly.

The recovery fund, the Next Generation EU, is the opportunity for the worst affected countries to emerge stronger from the crisis and to proceed with a paradigm shift in their economic system so that the mistakes of the past are not repeated, and the focus is on modernisation and the necessary restructuring of the economy. This is a unique and historic opportunity. But it should not be forgotten that the negotiations once again brought to light the differences between the different EU countries and that the frugal

⁶⁸ Interview with Ulrike Guérot.

or austere countries will be closely monitoring the use of aid by the recipient countries.

The difference will probably remain, at least initially, between a Paris that is committed to a very firm and active model in the face of the major geopolitical challenges facing Europe and a Berlin that prefers an approach based on cooperation and dialogue, as represented by Macron and Merkel, respectively. Germany will always try to avoid confrontation with the US, Russia or China in order to preserve German economic interests, although with the Greens in the coalition, or even in the chancellery, a tougher attitude towards Russia and China for their violation of human rights or lack of freedoms is to be expected, as opposed to the pragmatic *Realpolitik* of the Christian Democrats.

The Green New Deal, digitalisation, fiscal and social union, migration and asylum, security and defence are some of the major challenges facing a European Union that has to realise that it is now or never if it does not want to be left out of the club of global giants and remain a decisive player in the multilateral system.

Finally, it would be desirable that the European media and social networks adopt a more proactive attitude towards the European Union and provide more information about it in order to make their citizens aware of the need for a strong, social, united and united Europe in an increasingly convulsive and globalised world⁶⁹. The Conference on the Future of Europe can also be a great opportunity to involve citizens in the future of the Union and to awaken the European spirit that has become dormant in recent years as a result of crises, internal confrontations and unresolved challenges.

In short, 2021 is a decisive year for the EU's future. It must emerge stronger and more united from this new crisis and show that it has learned from the mistakes of the past. The recovery fund is essential to help the most affected countries out of the crisis and thus avoid further crises in the future. The goal is a greener, more digital, more social and more sustainable Europe that carries more weight in the world. Merkel's departure from

⁶⁹ A good example of the role that the media can play is the programme on Europe 2021, which has been broadcast for years by TVE and is currently directed and presented by José Carlos Gallardo. In a fresh, dynamic, yet in-depth and analytical way, it tackles and analyses every week what is happening in the EU, seeking different perspectives and also attracting the youngest, who are the future of Europe. <https://www.rtve.es/television/europa/>.

power makes many people feel nervous. The pillar of stability and pragmatism on which to rely in turbulent times is being lost, but the door is being opened to riskier and less austere economic policies, with the frugals' permission. The EU now has the opportunity to reinvent itself anew and emerge from this crisis as a more relevant actor and take its rightful place in the world politically, socially, economically, militarily and morally.

Chapter Two

China-US disengagement and the year of Asia

José Pardo de Santayana

Abstract

Taking office as President of the U.S. Joe Biden has come across a complex domestic and international landscape.

The emergence of China seems unstoppable. Beijing has decided to reject the liberal-democratic model and to follow one inspired by its own civilization and a particular historical experience, diluting the possibility of building a world order based on common premises.

A bold economic-technological confrontation with innovation as key vault has developed between the two superpowers.

The developed nations of Asia have reacted better to the coronavirus pandemic than the old Western powers, confirming the strength of the Asian continent and accelerating the shift of the world's center of gravity from the West to Asia.

Southeast Asia has become the world's leading geostrategic theatre.

The strategy designed by the White House vis-à-vis China and its integration into a wider Asian policy will largely determine the overall strategic course.

Keywords

U.S., China, Joe Biden, Xi Jinping, strategy, world order, Cold War, coexistence.

Introduction

Robert O'Brien, the Trump administration's last National Security Adviser, stated that "for decades, conventional wisdom [...] held that it was only a matter of time before China would become more liberal, first economically and then politically. We could not have been more wrong—and this miscalculation is the greatest failure of American foreign policy since the 1930s"¹. This view, until recently firmly entrenched, has to be understood in the context of a general belief that history was moving inexorably towards an increasingly globalised world articulated on the liberal-democratic model. It was thought that a society could only be modernised by fundamentally following Western patterns of development, both political (democratic model in its many varieties) and economic (liberal-capitalist model). The forces that allow the full development of human potential could only be unleashed within a democratic society, making an efficient and advanced economic model possible.

This circumstance prevented attention being paid to the many signs—starting with the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) own statements—that the People's Republic of China (PRC) had no intention of adopting the liberal-democratic model in the future. When leading experts in China advocated different positions, they were simply not given enough attention.

Thus, in 2009 Martin Jacques already argued in his famous book, *When China Rules the World: The Rise of the Middle Kingdom and the End of the Western World*, that the Asian giant, far from progressively converging towards the Western model, would be governed by a very different pattern. He criticised Westerners who tried to understand and evaluate the Asian power through a Western prism rather than on its own terms, insisting that China could not be considered a conventional nation-state, but was primarily a civilisation-state. Westernisation, he suggested, had reached its peak, and the rise of China would lead to an increasing process of Sinicization in the world and the end of a Western-dominated international order².

¹ O'BRIAN, Robert C. 'How China Threatens American Democracy. Beijing's Ideological Agenda Has Gone Global'. *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2020.

² JACQUES, Martin. *When China Rules the World: The Rise of the Middle Kingdom and the End of the Western World*, Allen Lane, London, 2009.

Even earlier, in 2005, Robert Kaplan predicted that “the American military contest with China...will define the twenty-first century. And China will be a more formidable adversary than Russia ever was”³.

Although, since the 2008 financial crisis, Chinese leaders have explicitly presented their authoritarian system as an end in itself and not as a step towards a liberal state⁴, with Xi Jinping’s rise to power in 2012, Beijing’s attitude has become so assertive in its geopolitical claims and so hermetic towards outside influence on Chinese society itself that there is no longer much doubt about the authoritarian drift of the Chinese regime and its ideological hostility. The relatively enlightened authoritarianism of Deng Xiaoping and his successors has evolved with Xi Jinping into a harsh authoritarianism. Rather than a collegiate group of uncharismatic technocrats with limited mandates, there is now a president-for-life with a budding personality cult, overseeing thought control by digital means⁵.

Already in 2010, the PRC had overtaken Japan in GDP measured in dollars, transforming the Asian hierarchy of the last hundred years and making China the world’s second largest economy. In 2014, the Asian giant also became the leading trading power and the world’s largest GDP in terms of purchasing power parity (PPP).

The rise of a revisionist China would not have such an impact if it did not also coincide with the rise of Asia, the most populous and fastest-growing continent, to which the centre of gravity of human activity is shifting and over whose economy Beijing exerts a decisive influence.

The profound coronavirus crisis, which is affecting Western societies much more than Asian ones (figure 1), is accentuating these trends and has brought forward the timeline for the *sorpasso* of both China and Asia.

³ KAPLAN, Robert. ‘How We Would Fight China’. The Atlantic, June 2005. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2005/06/how-we-would-fight-china/303959>.

⁴ MITTER, Rana. ‘The World China Wants. How Power Will-and Won’t-Reshape Chinese Ambitions’. Foreign Affairs, January/February 2021, p. 162.

⁵ KAPLAN, Robert. ‘A New Cold War Has Begun’, Foreign Policy , 7 January 2019. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/01/07/a-new-cold-war-has-begun>.

Year	World	USA	Eurozone	China	India	ASEAN-5
2019	2.8	2.2	1.3	6.0	4.2	4.9
2020	-3.5	-3.4	-7.2	2.3	-8.0	-3.7
2021	5.5	5.1	4.2	8.1	11.5	5.2
2022	4.2	2.1	3.6	5.6	6.8	6.0

Figure 1: Real GDP growth as %. Source: IMF (January 2021)

Globalisation has created a closely interdependent world economy with extended global design, production and marketing chains, and cross-investment and debt among the major powers on which the health and strength of all nations depend and which require a framework of common understanding.

Since Donald Trump's arrival in the White House, the relationship between Washington and Beijing has deteriorated markedly. The confrontation was initially commercial, based on the imposition of import tariffs, but the technological dimension gradually gained relevance and now there is even talk of a *Digital Great Game*.

This rivalry is leading the global economy to gradually shifting towards 'strategic capitalism' in contrast to the free market capitalism that prevailed in recent decades. By resorting to geo-economic measures, governments are imposing conditions on transactions in goods, services and technologies according to considerations of a strategic nature⁶, which is transforming and partly reversing globalisation with a process of economic and technological decoupling between the great powers, the extent of which is not yet known.

In this context of great uncertainties, serious geopolitical challenges and a change of leadership, Washington is facing a strategic dilemma: on the one hand, it is showing signs of fatigue with regard to global responsibility accentuated by the unending conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, and on the other, it is concerned to see how the control it exercised over the international order is slipping from its grasp precisely when the Asian giant is beginning to openly show its true ambition. The great US power needs to rethink and devise a new strategic design that prevents Beijing from dictating the rules of the game, allows it to preserve maximum influence, and does so without suicidal confrontation.

⁶ CHOER MORAES, Henrique, WIGELL, Mikael. 'The Emergence of Strategic Capitalism. Geoeconomics, Corporate Statecraft and the Repurposing of the Global Economy'. FIIA working paper 117, September 2020. https://www.fiia.fi/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/wp117_the-emergence-of-strategic-capitalism_final30092020.pdf.

This paper seeks to analyse the evolution of Sino-US relations in the context of growing tensions, an expanding Asian continent and a de-Westernising international order.

Crisis of the US hegemonic order

Failure to foresee the consequences of China's rapid rise has facilitated the transformation of the international order and brought to a close an era in which the United States presided over the world with the vocation of shaping it in its image and likeness. GDP PPP in the USA has decreased from 50% of the global share in 1950 to 14% in 2018, while China's has recently exceeded 18%⁷. We are also seeing how the great impetus that the pain and destruction of World War II gave to the West's political conscience to build a multilateral, inclusive international order, guided by the ideal of peace, has lost its force and is fading away in sterile debates with little horizon.

To believe that the Red Dragon would end up democratising was a very serious mistake because, as Ambassador Eugenio Bregolat said, if Washington wanted to stop Beijing's rise, it is already too late, "someone should have thought, decades ago, about the consequences of the opening of markets, the flow of capital and technology and the opening of universities to a country of China's size and capacity"⁸. It was precisely the *pax Americana* and the open economic order promoted by the United States that has made the astonishing development of the Asian giant possible.

Washington rightly complains that Beijing has benefited from a liberal trade model without abiding by the rules that make it so effective and attractive. However, it has been the US multinationals themselves who, in order to reduce costs, have encouraged a system of extensive value chains which, by offshoring very significant parts of the production process, have benefited from the Chinese economic model without asking for compensation. Between 1999 and 2010, the US lost six million manufacturing jobs and the World Bank estimates that more than two-thirds of

⁷ WINNEFELD, James A., MORELL, Michael J., ALLISON, Graham. 'Why American Strategy Fails. Ending the Chronic Imbalance Between Ends and Means'. Foreign Affairs, volume 99 no. 6, 28 October 2020.

⁸ BREGOLAT, Eugenio. '¿Hacia una guerra económica entre EEUU y China? ('Towards an economic war between the US and China?')', Política Exterior no. 184, July/August 2018, p. 12.

total trade occurs through these global value chains that promote cross-border production⁹.

In the aftermath of 9/11, the US government, the proud indispensable power¹⁰, was ambushed by Al-Qaeda. Washington found in Afghanistan and Iraq an ordeal that ultimately weakened the superpower, diverted its attention from Asia and extinguished its appetite to act as a global gendarme.

Until 2008—the year of the Beijing Olympics—China's interest in ensuring peace and stability in its environment had prevailed, a necessary condition for its economic development and, in turn, to maintain the power of the CCP. The low-profile strategy had allowed it to expand its presence in Africa and Southeast Asia without resistance, and it was initiating moves to do the same in South America, Europe and the Middle East.

From that date onwards, events took place that prompted the PRC to embark on a new, more assertive phase in international relations: China overcame the financial crisis much more easily than the Western powers; serious differences between NATO and Russia, following the 2008 Bucharest summit that opened up the possibility of NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia and the subsequent Russian military intervention in Georgia that year, provided an opportunity to strengthen the Sino-Russian strategic partnership; and the continued growth of China's economy and the rapid modernisation of its armed forces—whose military budget was already the second largest in the world—had facilitated China's astonishing rise.

In contrast, the 2008 financial crisis, which seemed to rethink neoliberal capitalism based on the 'financialization' of the economy as the only economic solution, plunged Western countries into high levels of indebtedness, while financial stimuli failed to produce the expected effects in a situation of low interest rates and low economic growth in advanced economies, although with more success in the US than in Europe¹¹. When it was over, seri-

⁹ GERSTEL, Dylan, SEGAL, Stephanie. 'Allied Economic Forum, Lessons Learned'. CSIS Brief, August 2020, p. 2. file:///C:/Users/Jose/Downloads/200805_Economics_AlliedForum_v5_FINAL.pdf.

¹⁰ As defined by Madeleine ALBRIGHT, U.S. Secretary of State (1997-2001).

¹¹ OLIER ARENAS, Eduardo. Introduction, Cuaderno de Estrategia 204 del IESE, 'La dualidad económica Estados Unidos-China en el siglo XXI' ('US-China Economic Duality in the 21st Century'), September 2020, p. 20. http://www.iese.es/Galerias/fichero/cuadernos/CE_204_LaDualidadEconomicaEstadosUnidos-ChinaEnElSigloXXI.pdf.

ous social scars remained, with widening wealth gaps, a polarised society and a loss of trust in the political system and its institutions, leaving the ground ripe for populism and the emergence of the Trump phenomenon.

In 2014 the crisis in Crimea and Ukraine led to the definitive rupture between Moscow and NATO, with significant economic, technological and Putin-related sanctions by the US and the EU. Beijing has been the big winner. A closer Sino-Russian strategic partnership forces Washington to divide its attention towards two separate strategic theatres with a different geopolitical logic and facing two rivals ready to confront, each in its own way. It can be argued that the abrupt rupture between the Western bloc and the Kremlin, preceded by Xi Jinping's announcement the previous year of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), was the final blow to the liberal, rules-based international order that has governed international relations since the end of the Cold War with clear US hegemonism.¹²

The CCP's decision to follow its own path, self-referencing itself in Chinese history and not accepting—as the other developed Asian nations did before it—Western diktat, has changed the global order and forces a review of the premises from which



Figure 2: Projected real GDP growth in billions of dollars. Source: prepared internally with data (7 January 2021) from USDA Economic Research Service, International Macroeconomic Data Set.

¹² <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/international-macroeconomic-data-set.aspx>

international relations are analysed. The paradigm of the universalism of Western values is no longer effective because it is not recognised by what will most likely soon become the world's leading power. It will gradually be called into question by Asian nations who see it as a form of tutelage by the former colonial metropolises.

The future is always uncertain, but the hypothesis that China's economy will overtake that of the United States is gaining strength because it has twice its growth rate, which, if sustained, would allow it to overtake the US in just a decade (figure 2). While some voices in authority highlight the vulnerabilities of the Asian giant's economy¹³, the most plausible forecasts in recent decades have consistently fallen short of Beijing's achievements and claims. In both the 2008 and Covid-19 financial crises, the PRC has leapt to catch up with its US rival. It has become clear that the Chinese economy does not conform to the patterns and logic of conventional economic dynamics. However, it is also conceivable that China will indeed face serious economic obstacles this time around, which would in principle slow rather than halt its rise. The hypothesis that this will happen in one timeframe or another is also the most dangerous, which reinforces its strategic relevance.

According to Rafael Doménech, the most likely scenario is that, 'despite China's demographic crisis throughout the 21st century, in the coming decades its GDP will exceed that of the United States by 50-75%. Although in the last few decades the US has maintained its supremacy in the global economy, there has been a reduction in its relative advantage over other powers in terms of human capital, investment in R&D&I activities, automation, robotisation and artificial intelligence, which has significantly reduced the potential growth of the US. The opposite is true for China, unless the convergence process comes to an abrupt halt without it exceeding 40% of US per capita income'¹⁴.

¹³ BELLO, Walden. 'China's Economy Is Powerful, But Deeply Vulnerable'. Foreign Policy In Focus, 13 February 2020. <https://fpif.org/chinas-economy-is-powerful-but-deeply-vulnerable>. CITOWIKI, Philip. 'Domestic vulnerabilities lie behind China's aggressive expansion'. Theinterpreter, 14 February 2020. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/domestic-vulnerabilities-lie-behind-china-s-aggressive-expansion>.

¹⁴ DOMENECH VILLARINO, Rafael. 'EE.UU. como potencia económica del siglo XXI' ('The US as an economic power in the 21st Century'), Cuaderno de Estrategia 204 del IEDE, La dualidad económica Estados Unidos-China en el siglo XXI (US-China economic duality in the 21st century) September 2020, p. 195.

The trends thus point to a true Heraclitan revolution in which within a couple of decades: the Asian giant will have become the most powerful state; the world's centre of gravity will have shifted from the West to Asia, resulting in a completely different configuration of the world order; and the Fourth Industrial Revolution will itself have transformed many aspects of relations of all kinds¹⁵.

In the meantime, international order will be shaped by states following divergent paths. This does not mean an inevitable future of clashes between civilisations, but it does mean that global institutions will have to accommodate a much wider range of views and values than in the past¹⁶. Martin Jacques considers, however, that the West is seriously ignoring the civilisational element in how it interprets the changing world, as if this were a phenomenon of the past with no relevance today¹⁷.

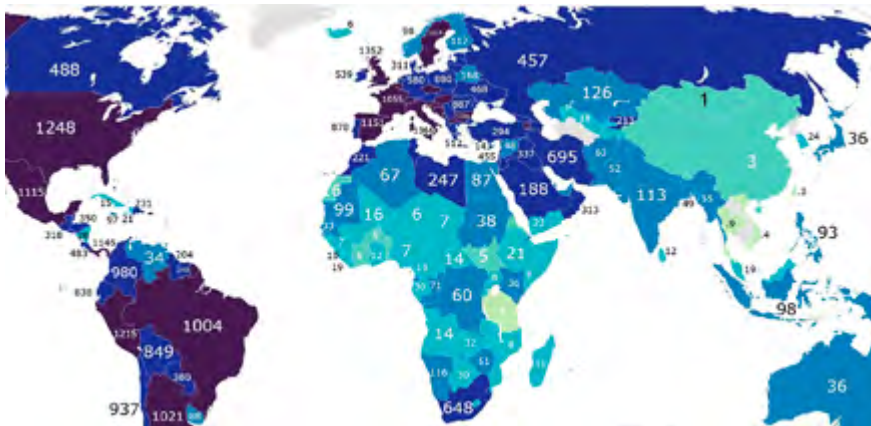


Figure 2: Covid-19 mortality per 1 million inhabitants. Source: Johns Hopkins University (18/1/2021)

The CCP, after a first major setback, is now using its successes in overcoming the pandemic to reassert its own authoritarian model

¹⁵ See in PARDO DE SANTAYANA, José. 'La revolución de Heráclito, todo fluye y nada permanece en el orden global multipolar' ('Heraclitan revolution, everything flows and nothing remains in the multipolar global order'). IEEE Analysis Paper 05/2020. http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2020/DIEEEA05_2020JOSPAR_multipolar.pdf.

¹⁶ MEADE, Walter Russell. 'The end of the Wilsonian Era. Why Liberal Internationalism Failed'. Foreign Affairs, January/February 2020.

¹⁷ JACQUES, Martin. Video Why the Debate about Civilizations matters and Why the West is Silent. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HHhSvqwhYpg>.

and highlight the shortcomings and decadence of Western powers. Not only has Washington failed to lead the global response to the pandemic, as it did with Ebola, but it has failed within its own borders. States that have managed the crisis the worst also include many European nations, undermining their prestige and public confidence. The most advanced nations in Asia, including China, are having mortality rates 30 to 40 times lower than those in the West (Figure 2).

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the atomisation of international society, weakening of international institutions and rules-based international governance, and the shift from multilateralism to competitive unilateralism.

When both climate change and the pandemic would require close cooperation, in 2020 the world has faced the biggest cooperation gap since World War II: Russian-Western relations are at their worst since the early 1980s; Sino-American relations are also at their worst since the late 1960s; Sino-Indian relations have seen the most violence since 1975; transatlantic relations have seen the most uncertainty since the late 1940s; multilateralism has come under attack not only from emerging powers but from the US itself; and the US-Russian nuclear monitoring system has virtually ceased to exist¹⁸.

The new administration faces the toughest foreign policy test the US has experienced since the early years of the Cold War. This situation stems not only from specific challenges, but also from a growing imbalance between the four classic grand strategy variables: ends, ways, means and the security landscape. The gap between US ambitions and the ability to meet them will generate increasingly unacceptable strategic risks¹⁹.

Strategic focus turns to Asia

As Parag Khanna says, the future belongs to Asia²⁰. The world map has been rotated 180 degrees to place the western shore

¹⁸ GOULD-DAVIES, Nigel. Presentation of the Strategic Survey 2020, 20 November 2020.

¹⁹ WINNEFELD, James A., MORELL, Michael J. ALLISON, Graham. 'Why American Strategy Fails. Ending the Chronic Imbalance Between Ends and Means'. Foreign Affairs, volume 99 no. 6, 28 October 2020.

²⁰ KHANNA, Parag. The Future is Asian: Commerce, Conflict and Culture in the 21st Century, Simon & Schuster, 2019.

of the Pacific Ocean and not the vertical of Europe at its centre. Asia, with more than half of the world's population, is the fastest growing region and during this decade its economy will overtake all other regions combined²¹. As discussed in the Strategic Panorama 2020²², after five centuries of Western leadership and progressive dominance, the world's centre of gravity is once again centred on the Asian continent. This is a revolutionary geopolitical shift because the world as we know it has been modernised and globalised following Western patterns. From now on, this will not necessarily be the case.

At the end of the 19th century, an Asian nation, Japan, entered the club of the most developed industrial nations. In World War II, the US wiped it off the map, but it soon re-emerged by the hand of Washington as the threat of the communist powers demanded it. Thus, between the 1950s and 1970s, Japan led the first wave of Asian economic development, overtaking Germany and becoming the world's second largest economy. Then, in the '70s and '80s, inspired by the example of Japan, it was the time of the 'Asian tigers' (South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore). In the last two decades of the last century, China made the great leap. The countries already developed in the two previous waves made it much easier thanks to their huge investment drive. Now, since the beginning of this century, the states of South and Southeast Asia, with their 2.5 billion inhabitants—one third of the world's population, the continent's youngest population and countries with very high economic growth—are immersed in the fourth wave of development.

The first two waves had less impact on the global economy because the population of all those nations together was two-thirds that of the US. However, the third—China's wave, with more than one-sixth of the world's population—boosted global economic growth and tightened the interdependence of a globalised world.

The fourth wave of economic development in Asia may have an even greater impact than the previous one. China's great BRI project is mobilising there unprecedented resources of all kinds,

²¹ LEE, Hsien Loong. 'The Endangered Asian Century. America, China, and the Perils of Confrontation', *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2020.

²² PARDO DE SANTAYANA, José. 'Geopolítica de Asia, el nuevo centro de gravedad del mundo' ('Geopolitics of Asia, the world's new centre of gravity'). *Panorama Estratégico 2020*, IESEE, March 2020. http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/panoramas/Panorama_Estrategico_2020.pdf.

and weaving an extraordinarily dynamic connectivity network. By the time of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, the Indian sub-continent has the advantage of having excellent mathematical and computer skills among its population. Furthermore, the most advanced nations in Asia already dominate many of the key vectors of the global technological transformation, offering the continent's less developed countries models of imitation and success, in the manner of a great Asian osmosis which is further enhanced by the regionalisation of the new globalisation.

The combination of this economic growth, with the geopolitical stability and technocratic pragmatism characteristic of Asian governments, has given rise to a new Asian ambition for the global order. Moreover, their improved performance in the fight against coronavirus has helped to boost Asian nations' confidence in their own benchmarks and they are no longer content to be good replicas of their former colonial metropolises or to remain forever under their tutelage.

As history teaches us, the end of the Western era will inevitably also bring about a change in the ideological-regulatory ethos that inspires and articulates it. Western universalism will have to coexist with other worldviews with a different civilisational root. Moreover, given that the 'existing international system is built on the back of a North Atlantic consensus' and given that 'the world has changed substantially since the end of World War II, and particularly in the post-Cold War era [...] The rest of the world is now staking its claim to shape global norms, regulations and standards'²³.

Nevertheless, the role of the North American power will continue to be decisive in the Asian continent, because it continues to be the state with the most powerful military force deployed in the Indo-Pacific space and because it is essential in the system of regional balances. Without its military presence, Japan and South Korea would be forced to contemplate developing nuclear weapons. Despite this, most Asian states do not want to be dragged into the US confrontation with China. Lee Hsien Loong, Prime Minister of Singapore, puts it as follows: "The troubled relationship between the US and China raises deep questions about the future of Asia and the shape of the emerging international order. The countries of Southeast Asia are particularly concerned, as they live at the intersection of the interests of several major pow-

²³ 'Decade Forecast: 2020-2030'. Stratfor, February 2020, p. 10.

ers and must avoid being caught in the middle or forced to make hideous decisions”²⁴.

For the time being, the creation of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in November 2020—in the impasse of the inauguration of the new president—represents a major victory for China and a clear signal that regional powers prefer to decouple strategic considerations from economic ones. Fifteen countries in Asia and Oceania, including Japan, South Korea and Australia—not India for the time being—have agreed to form the world’s largest trade association excluding the great American power, covering 2.1 billion consumers and 30% of world GDP.

The world seen from China

The weight of history

In his famous book *Diplomacy*, Kissinger already recounted the importance of the past for the Chinese and how it largely shapes their geopolitical vision²⁵. One of the events that most shapes the current Chinese outlook is the painful experience of the Opium Wars (1839-42 and 1856-60) and the ensuing hundred years of humiliation. China, the proud ‘Middle Kingdom’, had moved to the innermost, impoverished periphery. The PRC has always maintained the firm objective of equipping itself with the capacity to prevent one or more foreign powers from ever again dictating its future. However, to achieve this, the Asian giant first needed economic development. Implicit in Deng Xiaoping’s 24-character strategy²⁶ was the instruction to wait until circumstances permitted before moving on to a more ambitious strategy as we know it today, although Deng would probably have developed it with more tact and prudence. There are voices within the CCP that question whether China has not shown its intentions too early, allowing a still too powerful US to orchestrate a response.

The cyclical process of prosperity (unity)-decline and misfortune (division) that characterises China’s millennia-long history is ar-

²⁴ LEE, Hsien Loong. Art. Cit.

²⁵ KISSINGER, Henry. *Diplomacy*. Simon & Schuster, 1994.

²⁶ The 24-Character Strategy: “Observe calmly; secure our position; cope with affairs calmly; hide our capacities and bide our time; be good at maintaining a low profile; and never claim leadership”, dates from 1990 and was the legacy that Deng Xiaoping left to his successors, serving as a basis for Chinese diplomacy until the arrival of Xi Jinping.

guably the DNA of its civilisation. The opening sentence of the 14th century historical novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, known by all in China, expresses this very powerfully: 'The empire, long divided, must unite; long united, must divide. Thus it has ever been'²⁷.

Having left behind a century of humiliation and having needed time to develop its capabilities, the great Asian power sees itself at the beginning of a period of progress, reclaiming—in the words of Xi Jinping—"the Great Chinese Dream".

Periods of unity and progress have traditionally come with successive dynasties that were born out of the struggle against centrifugal forces and ushered in a period of peace and prosperity. Today, the CCP sees itself as a reincarnation of the dynasties, fulfilling the same historical function.

Ideology

Since the 19th CCP Congress in October 2017, Marxist-Leninist ideology has regained a pre-eminence not seen since Deng Xiaoping's reform in 1978. Deng's pragmatism was first tested by the Tiananmen riots in 1989, which forced the CCP to take defensive measures, fearful of a process of dissolution of central power along the lines of what the Soviet Union was experiencing. The party turned to nationalism—a concept alien to Chinese tradition—as an instrument to rally society against the external threat, and the role of ideology was revised and strengthened.

Jiang Zemin had the ability to promote détente with the West and put China back on the path of openness with a pragmatic approach, with the great success of China's admission to the World Trade Organisation in 2001. Since Hu Jintao's second term in office, and especially with Xi Jinping's rise to power in 2012, ideology has made a strong comeback and efforts have intensified to promote the study of Marxism in schools and universities²⁸ in a fusion of nationalism and ideology.

In the new context of international rivalry, the CCP fears that Western ideas and values could undermine China's political sys-

²⁷ LEÑA CAÑAS, Juan (Ambassador). 'Jiang Zemin y la emergencia de China como potencia económica' ('Jiang Zemin and China's emergence as an economic power'). Lecture delivered at INCIPE, 29 October 2020.

²⁸ 'STRATEGIC SURVEY 2018: THE ANNUAL ASSESSMENT OF GEOPOLITICS'. IISS, 15 November 2018, p. 75.

tem and give rise to secessionist movements in outlying territories, particularly Tibet and Xinjiang. China's leadership is fully aware of the soft power of democratic ideals, so Western values were formulated as one of the non-traditional threats to National Security along with terrorism, separatism and sedition. The enormous effort the PRC devoted to developing population control technologies is irrefutable proof of both the priority it gives to preventing the penetration of the Western value system into China and the threat it represents.

The new ideological design, which could be designated as 'Confucianism-Leninism'²⁹, combines old communist slogans with Confucian thought. The latter offers its hierarchical conception of society, the docility of the citizen to power and the need for a specifically Chinese characteristic that differentiates Chinese ideology from Western values. Leninism reinforces Party unity and the CCP's control over society without the need for reinterpretation. However, the new ideology only takes partial concepts and interpretations from Marxism, which remains a reference point for the party for reasons of legitimacy, far removed from the all-encompassing sense of Marxist worldview.

The economic model of centralised planning and rejection of private initiative and ownership has been discarded and replaced by a 'Chinese-style' socialism based on the free market but with powerful state control that sets priorities and resource allocation, and reserves the ability to limit freedom when advisable due to strategic reasons. Private initiative and ownership and market mechanisms are seen as essential to unleash productive forces and energise the economy.

Xi Jinping has become the longest-serving party leader since Mao Zedong. In addition, the rule limiting tenure to a maximum of 10 years was removed in 2018. Confrontational times ahead call for stronger and more united leadership. The people see him as a mixture of 'Great Helmsman' and former emperor, as the chosen one for the new era that will put an end to the centuries of decadence of a China that no longer sees becoming the world's leading power as a utopia. There is a phrase that sums it up very

²⁹ PARDO DE SANTAYANA, José. 'Confucianismo-leninismo en China' ('Confucianism-Leninism in China'). IEEE Analysis Paper 01/2019. http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2019/DIEEEA01_2019PARDO-China.pdf.

well: "Mao Zedong made China stand up; Deng Xiaoping made it rich; Xi Jinping will make it strong"³⁰.

Strategic tradition

Chinese civilisation is one of the oldest in the world, a very different and much stricter structured set of principles, values and beliefs that determines another interpretation of reality. Spiritual references are mainly based on animism and the influence of spirits on their way of life³¹. Through historical experience and the teachings of the great masters, Confucius, Lao Tzu and Sun Zu, the Red Dragon has developed a particular way of approaching strategic issues. While Western strategic tradition assimilates quite well to chess, where one manoeuvres to open a breach and reach the heart of the opponent, in China there is a greater preference for the game of Go, which originated there more than 4,000 years ago and which consists of positioning oneself step by step on the board, seeking to surround the opponent, in order to eventually dominate the maximum amount of space³².

Strategic patience and an aversion to direct action—so typical of Western tradition—mean that China articulates its strategic design in the long term and prefers the economic to the military approach. China continues to conceive of the world as a system of concentric circles in which the nature and intensity of the relationship with other regions of the world depends on the proximity of that region to its centre of power. Strategic objectives are to be achieved from the closest rings to the furthest rings on the basis of consolidating the previous space and the principle of not opening too many fronts at the same time³³.

In relations with other powers, prestige and reputation are highly valued, both one's own and that of one's partner or rival, with

³⁰ DOÑATE, Mavi. '¿Se cree China la reina de un nuevo tablero mundial?' ('Does China think it is the queen of a new world chessboard?') IEEE Opinion Paper 131/2020, 23 October 2020, pp. 4 and 5. http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2020/DIEEO131_2020MAVDON_geopoliticaChina.pdf

³¹ ZURITA BORBON, Alfonso. 'Características principales y peculiaridades de la economía china' ('Main characteristics and peculiarities of the Chinese economy'). Cuaderno de Estrategia 204 del IEEE, 'La dualidad económica Estados Unidos-China en el siglo XXI' ('US-China Economic Duality in the 21st Century'), p. 53.

³² KISSINGER, Henry. *On China*. Penguin Press, 2011.

³³ PARDO DE SANTAYANA, José. 'Geopolítica de Asia, el nuevo centro de gravedad del mundo' ('Geopolitics of Asia, the world's new centre of gravity'). Panorama Estratégico 2020 IEEE, March 2020, p. 153.

formalities determining rank being a key issue³⁴. China has a hierarchical conception of international relations, with itself at the top of the pyramid. In the traditional Chinese tributary system, the ceremony of kowtow or prostration before the emperor was intended as a formal recognition of this hierarchy in which China was the most advanced form of human civilisation and the emperor—the son of heaven and highest representative of the heavenly dynasty—was recognised as the highest expression of authority and dignity on earth.

The PRC has the advantage that the CCP has all the resources and capabilities of society at its disposal for implementing its aims. Individual freedom can be sacrificed at any time and under any circumstances to achieve the great goals of the Chinese nation. Likewise, China is much more resilient than Western nations and is much less resistant to the sacrifices imposed on it, which is also helped by its fervent nationalism.

Geopolitical challenges

Chinese leadership has set the year 2050—coinciding with the centenary (2049) of the founding of the PRC—as the target year for achieving its goal of 'National Rejuvenation', which is nothing more than the enrichment of the nation and recovery of its lost centrality. In order to become the world's leading power, China, aware that it is still far behind the technological and, above all, military capabilities of the United States, has developed a step-by-step strategy with the emphasis on the long term and innovation leadership as the keystone. The sword of Damocles is demographic decline and the consequent ageing of the population. This will peak in 2028, however, the working age population already started to decline in 2014 and will shrink by 100 million between 2015 and 2040³⁵. In the face of this, the US, the developed nation with the most balanced demographic prospects, could reduce the population ratio between the two powers by a quarter to a third by the end of this century. However, even if China were to become the world's leading economic power, it seems unlikely that it could ever play the hegemonic role the US has enjoyed.

³⁴ PYE, Lucian. 'Chinese Commercial Negotiation Style', Rand Corporation report, January 1982.

³⁵ EBERSTADT, Nicholas. 'With Great Demographics Comes Great Power. Why Population will Drive Geopolitics'. *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2019, p. 150.

The PRC is not interested in a fractured world order, a trading power like itself needs a dynamic global economy and will seek to make its way with minimum friction. The trade war came as an unpleasant surprise in Beijing. The CCP assumes that the days of double-digit export-led growth are over and intends to move towards an economy based on domestic demand. Xi Jinping made clear in his 2018 speech in Davos that China remained committed to a globalised trading system. In 2019, exports still accounted for 18.4% of Chinese GDP³⁶.

China's geopolitical design is determined by the natural barriers that hinder its communication with the outside world, as it is surrounded by deserts, mountain ranges, mountainous jungles and island chains that stand between China and the main trade routes. To overcome them, it has designed the BRI, which allows it both access to the natural resources it needs and the routing of its exports. At the same time, it has served as an outlet for excess industrial capacity and financial liquidity, and to reorient its production model towards innovation and high technology. Thanks to the size of its economy, through the new institutions and interconnection networks, Beijing hopes to create a relationship of interdependence with participating countries that will lead to a new model of regional integration and global governance³⁷.

Two regions are of particular strategic value as major BRI distribution hubs (Figure 3): the South China Sea (1) and Central Asia (2). In the latter region, which is particularly unstable and rampantly corrupt, the Sino-Russian strategic partnership has prevented this space from becoming a source of friction.

However, to access the Pacific and Indian Oceans, Chinese trade has to be routed through the South China Sea and through easily blockable straits—particularly the Malacca Strait (3)—that serve as gateways. The PRC is determined to push the US navy and air force out of the Western Pacific (South and East China Seas), while the US military is determined to stay in. The Asian giant sees the South China Sea as American strategists saw the Caribbean in the 19th and early 20th centuries: the main maritime

³⁶ 'STRATEGIC SURVEY 2020'. IISS, November 2020, p. 93.

³⁷ DELAGE, Fernando. 'China, Eurasia y el Indo-Pacífico. Claves geoestratégicas. Ascenso del nuevo espacio Indo-Pacífico, Fundación Seminario de Investigación para la Paz' ('China, Eurasia and the Indo-Pacific. Geostrategic keys. The rise of the new Indo-Pacific space'), Fundación Seminario de Investigación para la Paz, September 2019, p. 29.

extension of its continental landmass, control of which allows it to direct its naval fleet towards the Pacific and the Indian Ocean³⁸. This complex game, which has turned Southeast Asia into the world's main geostrategic theatre, is spiced up by the delimitation of maritime spaces for the exploitation of the region's rich natural resources. According to Josep Piqué, Chinese geopolitics can also be understood as China's version of the Monroe Doctrine³⁹. The case of Taiwan has a dual significance in terms of geopolitics and national identity. It dominates access between the South and East China Seas and between these and the Pacific (4). Its reunification with China—the CCP's unwaiverable goal, subject only to concessions over time—is the last chapter that would close the foreign affronts of the century of humiliations.



Figure 3: China's New Silk Road geopolitics.
Source: Prepared internally

China's ambitions also clash with those of the other looming states. Despite the deteriorating regional security environment, most Southeast Asian governments continue to focus primarily on managing internal affairs and seek to escape the squabbles of the giants. Indonesia, with its economic and demographic growth and possession of many of the straits, is the great object of geopolitical desire in the region. The government of President

³⁸ KAPLAN, Robert. 'A New Cold War Has Begun', *Foreign Policy*, 7 January 2019.

³⁹ PIQUE, Josep. Conference 'Interpretar China a la luz de su historia' ('Interpreting China in light of its history'). INCIPE, 15 December 2020.

Widodo—better known as Jokowi—prioritises economic considerations, especially the importance of Chinese investment in a national infrastructure programme⁴⁰, which for the moment favours Beijing's claims.

The PRC has not wasted the year of the pandemic to assert its strategic primacy in the contiguous seas. It sank a Vietnamese fishing boat, made incursions into the exclusive economic zones of Indonesia and Malaysia, and harassed Japan in the territorial waters of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands (administered by Tokyo but claimed by Beijing). It also stepped up its attempts to intimidate Taiwan, whose President Tsai Ing-wen, while stopping short of favouring *de jure* independence, strongly asserts the island's quasi-national status with support from the US President. In March 2020, the US enacted the Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative Act. On numerous occasions, Chinese fighter aircraft flew near or within Taiwan's Air Defence Identification Zone⁴¹.

Iran, a country rich in natural resources and where the land and maritime branches of the BRI converge (5), is a very important player in the Chinese network. Beijing will progressively make Washington uncomfortable by backing an actor with whom the US has a difficult relationship.

Two branches of the BRI, through Pakistan (6) and Myanmar (7), which connect inland China with the Indian Ocean, as well as the ports that the Asian giant is building in there, cast China's shadow to the south, seriously inconveniencing India, surrounded by the growing presence of its powerful northern neighbour. This has brought New Delhi and Washington closer in the strategic dimension, even if it still maintains close economic ties with Beijing for the time being.

Pacific island states are gaining prominence in Beijing's geopolitics, and Beijing is strengthening diplomatic, trade, fisheries and development aid relations with the region. This is of concern in the US and Australia in case the PRC ends up establishing a military base there⁴².

China is resistant to any interference in its internal affairs, particularly in human rights, considered a threat to territorial integ-

⁴⁰ 'STRATEGIC SURVEY 2020'. IISS, November 2020, p. 123.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 118.

⁴² *Ibidem*, pp. 172 and 173.

rity and to the stability and legitimacy of the established power system. Three territories—Tibet, Xinjiang and Hong Kong—are of concern to the international community because of increasing repression of the population there and the implantation of Han citizens in the first two aimed at changing ethnic balances and thus weakening the strength of regional secessionism. Tibet and Xinjiang are of great geopolitical value to Beijing for reasons of both natural resources and strategic depth. Tibet's water is also a commodity, threatened by climate change, essential both for China and for the countries through which the great rivers that flow there find their sources. Xinjiang, where repression against the Uyghur population has soared in recent years with close to a million Uyghurs interned in labour camps, has acquired additional geopolitical value as the main land branch of the BRI runs through it (8). In 2020, the US passed the Uyghur Human Rights Act and imposed sanctions on individuals and entities it considered to have violated Uyghur Human Rights.

China has intensified its efforts to assert dominance over Hong Kong, where large-scale protests against Beijing's tightening political and jurisdictional control have been taking place since June 2019. In that year, the United States passed the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act, which requires the US Government to certify each year that this territory preserves a high level of autonomy and, in June 2020, Trump announced that he would cease defence exports to Hong Kong, restrict transfers of sensitive dual-use technologies, as he does with China, and impose visa restrictions on CCP officials.

In contradiction to the principle of 'one country, two systems', that same month, China's Standing Committee of the National People's Congress enacted a National Security Law for Hong Kong that aims to prevent foreign interference, criminalises acts that threaten national security, such as subversion and secession, and allows Chinese security organisations to set up in Hong Kong. The CCP carefully measures its steps in the territory in terms of the repercussions they might have on the resolution of the Taiwan issue.

US Allies: Japan, South Korea and Australia

The dispute over the China Seas and Southeast Asia also affects Japan, South Korea, Australia and, increasingly, India. New Delhi

and Washington have signed military cooperation agreements, adding to existing agreements between India and Japan, with joint military exercises in the Indian Ocean. Japan's *Free and Open Indo-Pacific* (FOIP) initiative aims to articulate a coordinated response among these powers by sharing their common values: promotion of the rule of law, freedom of navigation and free trade. The PCR sees this, not without reason, as a clear attempt to create a 'cordon sanitaire' to facilitate the containment of its expansionism throughout the region⁴³.

In 2020, Australia and Japan have continued to develop regional policies aimed at countering Chinese pressure. In September 2019, the Tokyo Defence White Paper identified China rather than North Korea as the most serious military threat to Japan for the first time, arguing that infrastructure built through the Chinese BRI could be used to promote Chinese military activities in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Australia's Defence Strategy 2020 states that its strategic environment has deteriorated more rapidly than anticipated and sets out plans to modify the national defence posture in favour of developing a more powerful and self-sufficient military deterrent⁴⁴.

South Korea, the other major US ally in the region continued to focus on the immediate challenge from North Korea, which in May 2019 resumed ballistic missile testing after a nearly 18-month pause and has continued its nuclear weapon development. The diplomacy of inter-Korean dialogue collapsed for good after Pyongyang demolished with explosives the inter-Korean liaison office in Kaesong on its side of the border in June 2020.

At a time when close policy coordination on North Korea is needed between Seoul and Tokyo, their relations remain frosty despite US efforts and Korean-Japanese talks in February 2020⁴⁵.

In September 2020, the forced end of Shinzo Abe's term in office due to health issues after 20 years as prime minister and his replacement by Yoshihide Suga, although representing continuity, introduces an element of uncertainty at a key moment for the definition of the new US foreign policy for Asia.

⁴³ PIQUE, Josep. 'El Atlántico cede el paso al Indo-Pacífico' ('The Atlantic gives way to the Indo-Pacific'). *Política Exterior*, 19 November. <https://www.politicaexterior.com/el-atlantico-cede-el-paso-al-indo-pacifico>.

⁴⁴ 'STRATEGIC SURVEY 2020'. IISS, November 2020, pp. 121.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 122-123.

India, the emerging power

India's time has come. It is the world's third largest economy by GDP PPP and, by the end of this decade, it will become the world's most populous nation. Since Prime Minister Narendra Modi came to power in 2014, Delhi has gained geopolitical ambition, changed its traditional non-aligned position and aspires to be recognised as a global power.

Following his re-election in 2019, Modi has taken a Hindu-nationalist turn in his political action that has generated domestic and international tensions. In August 2019, the Government of India announced the controversial decision to end the constitutional status of the Indian province of Jammu and Kashmir, which had been in place for almost 70 years. In addition to internal unrest, this led to serious differences with Pakistan.

In another controversial decision, in December 2019, India passed the Citizenship Act which amended the 1955 act to speed up the granting of citizenship to religious minorities from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan who had entered India before 2015. This was strongly criticised because religion had never been used in Indian law as a criterion for citizenship and because, as its provisions did not extend to Muslims, it discriminated them severely⁴⁶.

Although Modi and Chinese President Xi held their second informal summit in Chennai, India, in October 2019, tensions flared in May and June 2020 along the Line of Control in the Aksai Chin territory that China dominates and India claims as part of Ladakh province. On 15 June, a violent clash in the Galwan Valley resulted in the deaths of 20 Indian soldiers and an unknown number of Chinese, the first military incident involving casualties in 45 years.

The border clash, although triggered by India's construction of a road to facilitate the movement of troops into the disputed area, is a response to a realignment of power relations in which India no longer wants to play the role of little brother and China wants to make clear that it is willing to set the rules, and that it dislikes the rapprochement between New Delhi and Washington.

Sino-Indian tensions, the recurring Kashmir conflict, the close Sino-Pakistani alliance, the aggressive conventional attitude of In-

⁴⁶ 'STRATEGIC SURVEY 2020'. IISS, November 2020, pp. 126-128.

dia and Pakistan following the Pulwama incident (February 2019), and the asymmetric nature of their nuclear doctrines paint a picture fraught with rising risks⁴⁷.

United States defends its hegemony

Since the inter-war period, the US holds the primacy of world power. There is concern in Washington that China is making inroads with the potential to displace the great American power from its position of privilege. The fear and insecurity this inspires, to use the simile of Thucydides trap popularised by Graham Allison⁴⁸, means that tension between the emerging and established powers grows and the danger of a serious clash is not negligible. Washington still has the upper hand. US experts believe that in a military confrontation the US would now have an 80% chance of prevailing, but in a decade this advantage could be reduced to around 50%⁴⁹. The time pressure is generating a certain state of anxiety and alarm.

Authors such as Christopher Layne and Margaret MacMillan warn in *Foreign Affairs* of the dangerous parallels between our times and the inter-war crisis that combined growing power rivalry (then the British and German empires) and the Great Depression that eventually triggered World War II. Today the US and China are on a collision course fuelled by the dynamics of a power transition and their struggle for status and prestige and, without a change of direction, war between them in the coming decades is not only possible, but likely⁵⁰.

Since 2017, Washington's policy towards the PRC has clearly moved away from patient multilateralism and integration towards impatient unilateralism and disengagement⁵¹. President Trump's trade confrontation, using a style that was offensive to the Chi-

⁴⁷ RAFI, Huhammad Asad. 'The Geopolitics of the China-India Conflict', ISPI, 16 July 2020.

⁴⁸ ALLISON, Graham. *Destined for War: can America and China escape Thucydides's Trap?* Mariner Books, Boston-New York, 2018.

⁴⁹ Video China's Rising Assertiveness. CSIS, November 2020. <https://www.csis.org>.

⁵⁰ Layne, Christopher. 'The Return of Great Power War'. *Foreign Affairs*, November/December. MACMILLAN, Margaret. 'Heeding the Right Warnings From History'. *Foreign Affairs*, September/October.

⁵¹ KENNEDY, Scott. 'A Complex Inheritance: Transitioning to a New Approach on China'. CSIS Commentary, 19 January 2021. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/complex-inheritance-transitioning-new-approach-china>.

nese mentality, gave arguments to Chinese nationalism and its hackneyed century of humiliation. For the time being, intense rivalry has led to what has come to be called strategic capitalism and the attempt to reduce the deep interdependence that globalisation has fostered, seeking to disconnect value chains both economically and technologically. The pandemic has further highlighted the vulnerabilities of excessive interdependence.

The philosophical-ideological divide between US and Chinese systems is becoming as great as the gap between US democracy and Soviet communism, something that technology tends to accentuate because both countries inhabit the same digital ecosystem and the CCP knows how closely its strategy is attuned to the sentiments of the Chinese masses. This potential new cold war is more susceptible than the previous one to irrational passions fuelled by economic shocks. The fusion of military, trade, economic and ideological tensions, combined with the destabilisation brought about by the digital age—with the collapse of physical distance—has created a vicious circle in Sino-US relations⁵².

The change of presidency in the United States is first an impasse and then an opportunity to revisit the grand strategic design. Nonetheless, the ongoing, lingering economic-technological warfare conditions Biden's approach to relations with Beijing. The basic choice is between a strategy that opposes the transformation of the international order, especially the rise of China, or one that aims to position itself as well as possible in the face of an inevitable global mutation.

Economic warfare

For far too long, the US and its allies had focused their security strategy on combating jihadist terrorism, which distracted their attention from what was happening on the Asian continent. In 2011, President Obama reacted with the Pivot to Asia, whose undisguised aim was to contain China. The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) was the central economic component. This created the largest free trade area involving the United States, accounting for 40% of all its goods trade with potential for expansion to other regional economies and reinforcing US presence in the region.

⁵² KAPLAN, Robert. 'A New Cold War Has Begun', *Foreign Policy*, 7 January 2019.

Without it, regional actors would have viewed the turn with scepticism, as it was primarily a military effort⁵³.

At the same time, some economic disengagement was already taking place between Beijing and Washington as rising costs and a more restrictive environment drove foreign companies—including major US technology firms such as Apple, Dell and Hewlett-Packard—to relocate some China-based manufacturing to cheaper locations⁵⁴.

In the 2016 election campaign, Donald Trump put both the TPP and Beijing in his sights. Upon winning the election it took only three days to reject the TPP, which was replaced by a bilateral approach that made many traditional allies in the region uncomfortable. His administration turned the tide in international economic relations, abandoning the neo-liberal economic model and replacing it with a neo-nationalist economic model of 'Fair Trade versus Free Trade'⁵⁵. Trump was inspired by the idea that the free trade model favoured China, his systemic rival, that it had displaced jobs elsewhere in the world and that many nations were abusing it by accumulating large trade surpluses relative to the US.

In December 2017, the U.S. National Security Strategy declared rivalry between major powers as its main strategic concern, singling out China and Russia as revisionist powers that want to shape a world antithetical to US values and interests⁵⁶. In addition to the use of economic measures as a means of geopolitical pressure, Beijing was criticised in Washington for its subsidies and state support for the *Made in China 2025* programme, obstacles to US investment, misappropriation of intellectual property and demands for technology transfer to enter the Chinese market.

In March 2018, the president launched a trade offensive against China. It initially imposed tariffs on steel (25%) and aluminium (10%), then added levies of USD 50 billion per year on China, which it later increased by a further USD 200 billion. In January

⁵³ MILLER, Scott, GOODMAN, Matthew P. "'Pivot 2.0' How the Administration and Congress Can Work Together to Sustain American Engagement in Asia to 2016'. CSIS, January 2015. https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/141223_Green_Pivot_Web.pdf.

⁵⁴ 'STRATEGIC SURVEY 2020'. IISS, November 2020, p. 98.

⁵⁵ ZURITA BORBON, Alfonso. Op. cit. p. 48.

⁵⁶ National Security Strategy of the United States of America, December 2017.

2019, tensions rose even more with the arrest of Meng Wanzhou, Huawei's top US official and daughter of the company's founder, which had 5G technology ready, far ahead of other European and American tech companies. Beijing reacted with measures against the import of American products, and also took control of some companies on Chinese soil. However, it ended up making important concessions, which allowed both countries to agree to sign a trade agreement, the first phase of which took shape on 13 December 2019⁵⁷.

China pledged to buy an additional \$200 billion of US agricultural products, energy, finished goods and services over the 2020-21 period and agreed to implement enhanced protections for US internet protocols and open its financial sector to companies from the US. Tariffs already imposed on Chinese imports remained in place pending compliance with the terms of the agreement. However, Chinese investment in the US fell to almost zero in 2019-20, while Chinese companies listed there started to relocate to Hong Kong to avoid having to submit to US rules⁵⁸.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the negotiation process, introduced questions about its future and produced a deep downturn in the world economy, affecting the US much more than the PRC, and shortening times for the Chinese economy to overtake that of the US. Now, the world is waiting to see how the new occupant of the White House will redefine international economic relations.

Technological warfare

Notwithstanding Trump's preference for an economic focus, the struggle for global supremacy has increasingly centred on technological innovation, where the ultimate source of power lies. Long-standing US leadership in the technology sector, which was the last guarantee of its global hegemony, is rapidly declining as a result of innovation and China's ability to effectively penetrate other markets. The battle is being fought for dominance in the development, production and access to key emerging technologies: semiconductors, artificial intelligence and 5G mobile communications systems. The major powers, in close interaction with the private sector, are seeking to control the global market, supply chains and the provision of services to citizens, pro-

⁵⁷ OLIER ARENAS; Eduardo. Op. cit. p. 31.

⁵⁸ 'STRATEGIC SURVEY 2020'. IISS, November 2020, pp. 92 and 98.

protecting their national interests. At stake is the ability to reduce technological dependence and ensure the provision of advanced components, products, systems and services to maintain competitiveness and ensure a sufficient degree of technological sovereignty to increase resilience. A primary strategic objective is to avoid unilateral dependencies on technologies classified as critical because of their relevance from certain socio-economic and security perspectives⁵⁹.

United States seeks to maintain its leading position in information and communications technology (ICT) by controlling the microchip and semiconductor industry. However, its sanctions policy carries risks. China has a domestic market of one billion Internet users and will eventually be able to create its own products. Chinese technology is attractive to developing countries, which appreciate both its low cost and strong surveillance qualities. If the United States is excluded from the Chinese domestic market, US companies will lose out. China will slow its progress, but the US will reduce its ICT dominance and much of the world will become the battleground of a 'Great Digital Game' for which Beijing is best positioned thanks to its Digital Silk Road⁶⁰.

The implications of Chinese technological advances on data security and privacy are of concern in the United States, a country that has gone to great lengths to prevent Chinese access to its technologies and to persuade other states—especially in Europe—that the adoption of Chinese technology could jeopardise their relationship with Washington.

Any strategic consideration depends on whether or not China is believed to be able to overtake the great American power in the race for economic and technological supremacy. A successful course of action aimed at containing China's rise would lead to a tense relationship, but Washington could retain the initiative. In the event of failure—a highly likely outcome—Beijing's revenge could be devastating and all sides would lose out. A major advantage for the PRC is that, with the world's centre of gravity shifting

⁵⁹ LEON, Gonzalo, DA PONTE, Aureliano. 'Desafíos para la Unión Europea en las redes de innovación y producción de comunicaciones móviles, semiconductores e inteligencia artificial' ('Challenges for the European Union in mobile communications, semiconductor and artificial intelligence innovation and production networks'), IEEE Research Paper 08/2020, November 2020. http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_investig/2020/DIEEINV08_2020GONLEO_desafiosUE.pdf.

⁶⁰ 'STRATEGIC SURVEY 2020'. IISS, November 2020.

towards Asia, it would only need to assert itself in the Indo-Pacific region to achieve *de facto* global primacy.

The need to redefine a strategy towards China

Trump's tenure has strained both domestic and international relations in the great American nation. Racist incidents, disproportionate and violent backlash, policy response to the pandemic, the heated election process and the final twist of the assault on the Capitol have all contributed to further fracturing American society. As Pedro Rodríguez points out in the previous chapter, the country has been left in a state of disrepute and bewilderment. Regaining confidence will not be easy, and any major external strategy requires a solid internal foundation. President Biden's age is not in his favour. Nor are democratic lurches favourable to the US, which contrast with the continuity and long-term strategy of China's authoritarian regime.

We can assume that given his ties to Obama—as his Vice President—the new president's international vision will in part be a continuation of Obama's, but before he can design a coherent foreign policy and integrate into it a strategy against China as the main vector, he will need some time, a certain impasse, to recompose essential, fundamentally domestic issues. According to Richard Haas, in occupying the Oval Office, Joe Biden has been faced with a daunting set of issues to address. The number of national and international challenges is seemingly limitless in a world in urgent need of repair. This will consume six to nine months of his administration's foreign policy, and only after that will come the opportunity—and in some areas the need—to build. In addition to an assertive China, the global landscape presents a Russian Federation willing to use force and cyber capabilities to further its aims; a North Korea with growing nuclear and ballistic capabilities; an Iran determined to develop an imperial strategy in a turbulent Middle East; rising climate change, and weak and ineffective governments in most of the developing world. This is compounded by Trump's weakening of alliances and withdrawal from many agreements and institutions⁶¹.

While there is broad consensus that on substantive issues not much change can be expected from the broad foreign policy lines

⁶¹ HAASS, Richard. 'Repairing the World. 'The Imperative-and Limits-of a Post-Trump Foreign Policy'. Foreign Affairs, November/December 2020.

of his predecessor, Biden has experience and a taste for international affairs, and will use his conciliatory approach to reset transatlantic relations and improve the overall tone of Washington's relations with its partners and rivals. In his inspiring inaugural address, the new White House occupant expressed his desire to regain international leadership "by power of our example, not by example of our power".

There is likely to be a moderate revival of multilateralism and a special emphasis on strengthening economic relations with as many Asian states as possible to balance Beijing's economic weight in the region. Although there is room for manoeuvre to seek greater economic reciprocity between China and the US, signing the RCEP has been a major obstacle to the economic policy that the US wants to promote in the Asia-Pacific region. In Southeast Asia and the South China Sea it will try to contain Chinese ambitions with a firm and determined approach. The Taiwan issue can be dealt with tactfully, China is in no hurry. Addressing human rights issues, where Beijing is intransigent, will be more difficult.

One sensitive issue will be the sanctions and tariffs in place against rival countries that Biden will be unable and unwilling to remove with the stroke of a pen. However, in his close entourage he will find economists and businessmen who oppose trade tariffs and who see serious risks both in the use of the financial system as a tool to contain China and in excessive economic disengagement.

The White House will undoubtedly intensify its efforts to ensure that the United States will maintain primacy over China in key technologies of the future, from artificial intelligence to quantum computing, with massive investment support for basic science. Pressure will come from Silicon Valley for the government to be more selective in declaring certain high-tech products and supply chains as national security threats that should be banned from China⁶². Washington will also try to line up as many of its allies as possible in the technological battle to impose its technological standards against China's, but it will encounter much resistance from them and the advantage given to China by the BRI network of tentacles and its geographical proximity and close economic ties with Asian countries.

⁶² RENNIE, David. 'The World in 2021. Joe Biden's in-tray is already overflowing'. *The Economist*, 16 November 2020.

George Friedman predicts that, in favour of economic logic, the US will transfer many economic activities from China to India, to reduce its interdependence with China, to strengthen a major rival of China and to further anchor India in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue with Japan, Australia and the US ⁶³.

President Biden's close team wants superpower rivalry to become both more orderly, less overtly ideological and more defiant towards China, making this compatible with tackling major global challenges such as climate change or the nuclear order together. The incoming Democrats want to see a more skilled and smart United States that chooses its confrontations with China more carefully and then prepares well to win them⁶⁴. Such an approach is not easy to execute because the strategy is dialectical and must also incorporate the opponent's reactions. There is a danger that the relationship could drift towards a Cold War 2.0 model that promotes the creation of a large bloc of democracies to oppose the front of authoritarian powers, which seems to be the preferred option of the Washington establishment.

Graham Allison rejects the idea and argues that, to prevent the Thucydides trap from boiling over, Washington's new strategic approach should be good enough for the US—certainly not perfect—,focusing on the basic interests of the nation and good enough for China as well, combining elements of Kennedy's strategy after the 1962 missile crisis (a World safe for diversity) and that of the Song dynasty a thousand years ago with the Liao tribe's kingdom of northern nomads (rival partners). On the one hand, everything possible must be done to prevent the confrontation from leading to a catastrophic outcome—undesired by either side—by accepting the existence of another power with a different worldview and with which it must compete peacefully with the intention of showing which model is better; on the other hand, a reciprocal relationship must be developed in which rivalry in some areas is compatible with collaboration in others⁶⁵.

⁶³ FRIEDMAN, George. 'From China to India'. GFP, 2 June 2020. <https://geopolitical-futures.com/from-china-to-india>.

⁶⁴ RENNIE, David. Art. Cit.

⁶⁵ ALLISON, Graham. Virtual interview on the topic 'Destined for War: Can America & China Escape Thucydides's Trap?' organised by the Center for the Study of the Presidency & Congress. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C__JcMbBIro.

An approach of coexistence would make it possible to address the global challenges—climate change, sustainable development, health security, jihadist terrorism, organised crime, nuclear proliferation, etc.—on which the future of all nations depends, and would also make it easier to adapt the different strategies to the profound changes in a transforming world order. The key would lie in the internal strength of the United States and in the number of effective power centres—making a more integrated EU desirable—to compete with China and prevent the Asian giant from imposing its will on them.

The US strategy towards China would be much easier with a pragmatic approach to the relationship with Russia. The Biden administration would have to overcome Washington's deep aversion to Putin's Russia, which does not appear to be on the Democratic party's agenda. Deep-rooted convictions and the Kremlin's increasingly confrontational attitude come into play. However, the United States no longer has the capacity—and will have less and less—to simultaneously contain the two revisionist powers; sooner or later it will have to seek *détente* with one of them. Betting on the Russian Federation falling under its own weight is like playing Russian roulette.

The general outlook does not bode well for proponents of a Cold War-inspired model of engagement with China. The Red Dragon is more resilient, it has a long-term strategy with the ability to use all the levers of society and trends will make it stronger and stronger, unlike the Soviet Union. Cold wars end with a winner and a loser. This time the loser could be the US whose population is no longer able or willing to bear the cost of a confrontation of such magnitude.

When closing this chapter (January 2021) we do not know which course of action Biden will choose: tense coexistence or alignment of warring blocs, the CCP will calmly contemplate the White House's moves and act accordingly. China has a memory, and when the dust settles it will want to collect the bills, which will be higher the more intense the hostility towards it. The Anglo-Saxon world finds it hard to accept that the great human evolution has its cycles and, although empires—and the US is one in all but name—feel exceptional and entitled to exercise their dominance, history is flowing, especially in this Heraclitian period⁶⁶, and there

⁶⁶ See in PARDO DE SANTAYANA, José. 'La revolución de Heráclito, todo fluye y nada permanece en el orden global multipolar' ('Heraclitian revolution, everything flows and nothing remains in the multipolar global order'). IEEE Analysis Paper 05/2020.

are many indications that in a couple of decades nothing will be like this world that they want to preserve at all costs. The important thing is tensions along the way do not turn into a raging fire that engulfs everything.

A world where the great powers give up the pursuit of some kind of *modus vivendi* does not seem to be in Spain's best interests; smaller nations would pay an even greater price than the more powerful ones. What seems clear is that the focus should be on an increasingly integrated EU, with a good understanding with the United States and sufficient critical mass to prevent China from dictating its own rules.

Conclusion

United States failed to foresee the consequences of China's emergence, nor did it believe that China would be able to reach such great heights of power and development in such a short period of time. In any case, it was believed that economic development would eventually lead to a democratisation of the Asian giant, bringing the Red Dragon into the Western-inspired liberal international order.

This has not been the case; China has positioned itself firmly on the international stage and has shown its new ambition to regain its lost centrality. Washington no longer has a strategy to force Beijing to play by the current rules.

President Obama attempted to retake the initiative with the Pivot to Asia, with the negotiation of the TPP as a key vector. His successor, Donald Trump, changed his strategy, discarded multilateralism, opted for bilateral relations and raised the tone of the confrontation with China, giving rise to an economic-technological war.

While China was gaining ground, the Asian continent, home to more than half of the world's population, was also gaining positions in the global hierarchy and soon the world's centre of gravity will have shifted there. This favours Beijing, which has tightened relations with its entire geopolitical neighbourhood and launched the BRI, now also digital, which articulates a new model of geo-economic dominance.

2020 with the coronavirus crisis has seen many of the structures that order international relations continue to crumble and tensions between the great powers have soared.

President Joe Biden faces serious challenges at home—pandemic, climate change, racial injustice and a fractured political system—and abroad, and a core issue will be his strategy towards China⁶⁷. The Washington establishment favours a Cold War-inspired model and wants to call on the world's democracies to create a large bloc against authoritarian powers. This strategic design is not only extremely dangerous, it would require the unconditional co-operation of Asian democracies, which are not in favour because they would be the main victims of a clash between the giants.

On the other hand, China has a better framework to withstand a dull war of attrition, has a more resilient society, can use all the country's levers and capabilities to achieve its objectives, masters strategic patience, has a political leadership that gives continuity to the struggle and will appeal to nationalism to close ranks. It also seems that time will play in their favour and that their relative power will increase. For its part, the West would not endure the sacrifices that a protracted confrontation would demand, and in the end China would make it pay without hesitation the price for the century of humiliation.

A tense and difficult coexistence as proposed by Graham Allison does not augur a future following Western societies wishes and the world would fracture into actors and regions with different value systems, but there would be room for different societies to develop according to their own convictions, different models would compete with each other, the risk of serious confrontation would be avoided and the capacity to address the great global challenges on which the common future depends would be protected.

Time will tell. President Biden bears a heavy responsibility. A cautious China will seek to ease tensions, but has no illusions about a full restoration of relations⁶⁸ and will remain steadfast in the pursuit of its objectives.

⁶⁷ KENNEDY, Scott. Art. Cit.

⁶⁸ RENNIE, David. Art. Cit.

Chapter Three

Half a million dead: bad times for Latin America

Jorge Heine

'The pandemic... will lead to the most severe contraction that the region has experienced since records began in 1900', said the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), describing the situation in Latin America in 2020¹. With 8% of the world's population, Latin America has the dubious distinction of having suffered 28% of the deaths from the Covid-19 pandemic, with more than 500,000². In fact, the region together with the United States and Canada, i.e. the Western Hemisphere, with 12 % of the world's population, has suffered nearly half of the deaths from the virus, with 850,000 as of December 2020. This impact has been especially visible in the larger countries of the region, such as Argentina, Brazil and Mexico.³

This is not to underestimate the very real challenge that this pandemic, the biggest in a century, poses to all the world's governments. Scientific uncertainty as to the nature of the virus and

¹ ECLAC, 'Report on the economic impact of coronavirus disease (Covid-19)', Santiago: ECLAC, May 2020, p.1

² Figures in *ncov2019.live*, as of 30 December 2020.

³ As of 30 December 2020, Brazil had 193 000 COVID-19 deaths, Mexico 123 000, and Argentina 43 000, according to *ncov2019.live*.

difficult public health policy decisions on its management put Latin American governments at a complex crossroads.

However, for a virus originating in Asia, which arrived in the region two months later than in other parts of the world, what happened reflects the vulnerability of Latin American countries to new global threats and their lack of preparedness to deal with them. A stultified view of national security, obsessed with the old threats of tanks crossing borders (something that has not happened in the region for a long time), has led to a neglect of the new global threat agenda, the so-called human security agenda. Rather than focusing on the security of states and the staunch defence of every inch of national territory, it focuses on the defence of the nation and the population. Natural disasters, droughts, organised crime, drug and human trafficking, global warming and pandemics are all part of it. However, resources allocated to address its challenges in the region are minimal, reflecting a view firmly anchored in the past.

2020 was thus both tragic and chaotic, marked by scenes of dozens of corpses piled up in the streets (as in Guayaquil); of denialist presidents who delayed taking measures to protect the population as long as possible (as in Brazil and Mexico), with the predictable effects; of tens of thousands of travellers prevented from returning to their countries of origin for up to months; of governments competing with one another in the number of people infected by the virus, without the slightest effort to coordinate efforts to combat it effectively. This despite the fact that both UNASUR and Mercosur had long-standing health agreements and protocols in place to deal with emergencies such as this one. And, as the icing on the cake, a year in which the United States, with a great sense of timing, drastically reduced its budget contribution to the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO)⁴. A clearer sign that the concept of hemispheric solidarity, once so much a part of Washington's rhetoric, has been consigned to the dustbin of memories, impossible.

Some will say that this was an unforeseeable catastrophe, and that it has affected everyone, so the region's authorities should not be held accountable. According to this reasoning, if the United States itself has been unable to control the pandemic, it would

⁴ The New York Times, 'Trump, Bolsonaro and a Virus-Ravaged Region', 27 October 2020, pp.1-1-A-6 and A-7.

be wrong to demand that much less developed countries, such as those in Latin America, do so.

This, however, is not the case. First, this type of pandemic was not only foreseeable but had, in fact, been predicted. By President Barack Obama in 2015 (who even pointed out the year it would happen) and Microsoft founder Bill Gates in 2017. The outbreak of numerous other epidemics so far this century (SARS, Ebola and H1N1, among others), which, although controlled at the time, gave a hint of what was to come and warned of the looming danger, was not taken into account. They are a logical consequence of the way humans have invaded nature and interfered with flora and fauna. There is no excuse, therefore, for Latin American governments to have been unprepared to deal with Covid-19. On the other hand, the argument of the supposed inevitability of what happened would still not explain the fact that Latin America has four times the number of deaths from the virus than it should have according to the size of its population.

As Pia Riggiozzi pointed out at the very beginning of the pandemic, the reasons for this debacle are not difficult to establish. They stem from the type of government response to the pandemic. Instead of resorting to the mechanisms of regional cooperation in health matters that had previously been developed by entities such as UNASUR in terms of health diplomacy, the response on this occasion, very typical of a set of 'neo-patriot' governments, was twofold: a) to take refuge in an isolationism that saw the closure of borders as the solution to the emergency; and b) to consider the virus as a 'political nuisance', so the best thing to do was to minimise it. This was particularly true in Brazil and Mexico⁵. This approach continued throughout the year, with countries competing with each other for ventilators, masks and protective equipment, culminating in competition for vaccines once they came on the market in December.

Although with a much higher standard of living and much more advanced health systems than Africa, the region has thus had a much higher mortality rate than Africa⁶. And while the overall picture of the pandemic's impact in the region is devastating, some

⁵ Pia Riggiozzi, 'Coronavirus y el desafío para la gobernanza regional en América Latina', *Análisis Carolina* 12/2020, Madrid: Fundación Carolina, 30 March 2020.

⁶ As of 30 December 2020, the number of COVID-19 deaths in Africa reached 64 000.

countries, such as Cuba and Uruguay, that have managed to deal with the health emergency and limit its impact⁷.

What happened in Chile is instructive. As the most developed country in the region, with one of the highest per capita incomes, high life expectancy and a sophisticated health system, Chile should be considered—at least in theory—one of the best prepared to face the pandemic. At the same time, its natural borders (the Andes Mountains, Pacific Ocean, Atacama Desert and Cape Horn) mean that the vast majority of visitors from abroad enter by air (and at only one airport, AMB in Santiago), making it relatively easy to control. While at the beginning of the pandemic, i.e. in March, there was a widespread impression that Chile was doing well, especially given the low number of deaths relative to infection numbers, this same discrepancy soon began to attract attention.

This found the anomaly of a much higher number of deaths in April 2020 than April 2019, in numbers well above those corresponding to the pandemic⁸. The use of double counting by the Ministry of Health, with certain figures being sent to the WHO and others (lower) being distributed for public consumption in Chile, ended up being the straw that broke the camel's back, and cost Health Minister Jaime Mañalich his departure from the Cabinet⁹. At that time, already in July, Chile had the second highest number of Covid-19 deaths per 000 inhabitants in the world, and in December 2020 it still has one of the highest mortality rates in relation to population in the region¹⁰.

One of the most controversial aspects of Minister Mañalich's tenure had been the erratic management of quarantine zones in the Metropolitan Region of Santiago, the capital. These quarantines were initially imposed only in the high-income residential areas of eastern Santiago (where the first outbreaks of the virus,

⁷ The number of deaths in Cuba and Uruguay as of 30 December 2020 was 145 and 168, respectively.

⁸ A key role in this was played by investigative journalist Alejandra Matus, working independently, with figures that were later corroborated by statistical studies by the think tank Espacio Público, www.espaciopublico.cl

⁹ Cíper, 'Minsal reporta a la OMS una cifra superior de fallecidos por Covid-19 a la que informa a diario en Chile', 13 June 2020.

¹⁰ With 18.7 million inhabitants, Chile had 16 500 COVID-19 deaths as of 31 December 2020. With 868 deaths per 1,000 population, it ranked fourth in South America, after Peru, Argentina and Brazil. El Mercurio, 2 January 2021, 'Los países con más contagios' ('The countries with most infections'), p. A-7.

brought by travellers from Europe, had occurred), but were later imposed throughout the capital, including the popular sectors of the southern and western zones. And it was the impossibility of maintaining social distance in the overcrowded living conditions of Santiago's working-class neighbourhoods that helped spread the virus, with fatal consequences for Chileans. This led Minister Mañalich (who had already held the health portfolio in Sebastián Piñera's first government, between 2010 and 2014), to declare that 'in sectors of Santiago there is a level of poverty and overcrowding of which I was unaware of the magnitude'¹¹.

Few phrases better reflect the disconnect between the country's ruling sectors and the population than this. If a long-serving doctor, for many years general manager of one of the country's leading clinics, Clínica Las Condes, and twice minister of state, does not know about the conditions in which vast sectors of the population live in the Chilean capital itself, what is left for the rest of the country's ruling class?

And this brings us to the ultimate roots of the current crisis in Latin America. It is most visibly expressed in today's tragic health situation, but is rooted in the profound inequality of societies in the region, the most unequal on the planet.

The social uprisings of 2019

And it is no coincidence that it was in Chile, one of the countries most affected by the pandemic, where to the surprise of many one of the epoch-making events in the region in 2019 took place, the social uprising of 18 October 2019. On 18-O, as Chileans refer to it, after the announcement of an increase in the Metro fare in Santiago, high school students, led by those from the Instituto Nacional, took to the streets in protest. Coordinated through social networks, they were soon followed by others, carrying out acts of violence rarely seen in Chile. Vandalised underground stations, burned churches and looted supermarkets set the tone for a wave of violence that began in the capital but soon spread to the rest of the country.

This took the Chilean government itself by surprise (President Piñera, in an interview with the *Financial Times* published two

¹¹ 'Mañalich reconoce que en sectores de Santiago hay niveles de pobreza y hacinamiento del cual yo no tenía conocimiento de la magnitud que tenían', La Tercera, 28 May 2020.

days before the outbreak, had said: 'Look at Latin America, in this context Chile looks like a real oasis") as well as foreign observers¹². This uprising was followed by similar ones in Peru, Ecuador and Colombia, reflecting the frustration of vast sectors of the population, tired of economic stagnation and insufficient government services¹³.

In other words, far from occurring in a vacuum, the pandemic hit Latin America at a sensitive time. The first decade of the new century (more precisely, the period 2003-2013) was a golden decade for the region. Driven by the commodity and natural resource boom, and especially by Chinese demand, Latin America grew at a rate of close to 5 % in 2003-2007, successfully weathered the 2008-2009 financial crisis, and reduced poverty as well as income inequality¹⁴. However, the end of the natural resources super-cycle, partly due to the slowdown in the Chinese economy, made itself felt. The five-year period 2015-2019 was one of slow growth, averaging no more than 0.4 % per year, in a lost half-decade which generated frustration among the population¹⁵.

The traditional approach, followed in countries such as Chile, which increased per capita income sixfold between 1990 and 2020 (from 2,500 to 15,000 dollars per year) and reduced poverty from 39 to 8% of the population in the same period, has been to prioritise job creation, wealth creation and poverty reduction. This was successful. These advances changed the face of the country and improved the standard of living of many Chileans, who for the first time gained access to higher education, decent housing and other consumer goods associated with belonging to the middle class¹⁶.

What was less obvious, and something for which the tools available in public policy are less well-honed, is that this was not enough. The persistence of huge inequalities within a society, even in societies that have made great strides in poverty reduc-

¹² 'Chile president Sebastián Piñera: 'We are ready to do everything not to fall into populism'', Financial Times, 17 October 2020.

¹³ See in this regard, 'Sudamérica indignada', special section of Foreign Affairs Latinoamérica, vol. 20, issue 2, April-June 2020, pp. 2-68.

¹⁴ See on this subject, Kevin P. Gallagher, *The China Triangle: Latin America, the United States and the End of the Washington Consensus*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

¹⁵ ECLAC, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ See on this subject Ricardo Ffrench-Davis, *Reformas económicas en Chile 1973-2017*. Santiago: Taurus, 2018.

tion and wealth creation, remains an obstacle to social peace. Solving it is not easy, and what is valid for Chile is also valid for the rest of the region. Instruments to reduce poverty are generally more developed than those to reduce inequality. While the former is absolute, the latter is relative. In turn, rapid growth, while generating wealth, tends to generate inequality. And some of the goods to which these new middle class sectors have access are positional goods, the value of which decreases with their increased supply. This is the case of university degrees, now much more widespread in the region but which no longer guarantee access to well-paid jobs, as was the case a few decades ago, with the resulting frustrations. The old notion of the revolution of rising but unfulfilled expectations has once again proved its worth. It is not a matter of questioning progress made. The point is that after such progress, a sudden slowdown, let alone a reversal, in the upward curve is frustrating.

There is little doubt then that, until Latin America resolves this endemic inequality, it will not be able to overcome its already chronic social and political instability¹⁷. With a Gini index of 0.46, versus 0.32 on average in developed countries; with the highest income decile of the population concentrating 22 times the income of the lowest income decile; and with 1% of the population accumulating almost half of the available wealth in the country, the gap between the better-off and the less fortunate is enormous.¹⁸ Unlike in many developed countries, tax policy is not progressive, nor does it contribute to reducing this inequality. Tax extraction in Latin America remains low (around 21% of GDP); evasion high (estimated at 6 % of GDP); and the proportion collected via direct taxes, such as income tax, low. Again, the case of Chile is emblematic. Although one of the countries with the highest per capita income in the region, its tax extraction is only 21% of GDP, which is close to the average for the region, although *strictu sensu*, it should be several points higher given its income level. And of this already meagre tax revenue, half comes from an indirect tax, VAT, which is paid by all Chileans.

¹⁷ See Diego Sánchez-Ancochea, *The Costs of Inequality in Latin America : Lessons and Warnings for the Rest of the World*. London: Bloomsbury, 2020; and Inter-American Development Bank, *La crisis de la desigualdad en América Latina y el Caribe*. Washington D. C.: BID, 2020.

¹⁸ See on this subject, Luis Alberto Moreno, 'Latin America's Lost Decades: The Toll of Inequality in the Age of Covid-19', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 100, issue 1, January-February 2021, pp. 138-149.

The challenges to successfully combating inequality in Latin America, however, go beyond tax policy. Many of the public policies in place in the region *perpetuate*, if not directly *increase*, social and income inequalities. This is the case for private pension systems. Pension funds with individually funded systems, originally initiated in Chile in 1981, and which have been introduced in several countries in the region, are the best example of this¹⁹. In Chile, almost forty years after their establishment, they have proved to be a bonanza for the capital market, with 200 billion dollars accumulated by the companies that own the pension fund associations, AFPs (largely invested abroad and controlled by the country's large economic groups, if not already sold off entirely to foreign companies), but not so much for pensioners²⁰.

The average pension paid to men in 2019 in Chile is around \$200 per month (a replacement rate, i.e. the proportion of the last salary received, of 30%, well below the 70% announced when the system began) in one of the countries with the highest cost of living in the Americas. In these conditions, many older people are unable to retire and are forced to work until their last days. These pension funds do not constitute a social security system, although they are presented as such, but a mandatory individual savings system with minimum return, which is different. It is not surprising, therefore, that one of the social movements that has taken off the most in Chile in recent years has been the 'No more AFPs' movement.

Economies in free fall

Affected by the 'lost half-decade' of 2015-2019, and, in several cases, by the social upheavals of 2019, Latin American economies were in a vulnerable situation at the beginning of 2020, with high debt levels and little fiscal space. Internally, they were heavily impacted by the aftermath and restrictive measures resulting from the pandemic.

Externally, as ECLAC indicated, the fall in economic activity caused by the pandemic has affected Latin America in the following ways:

¹⁹ The most comprehensive study on this is Alberto Arenas de Mesa, *Los sistemas de pensiones en la encrucijada: Desafíos para la sostenibilidad en América Latina*. Santiago: CEPAL, 2019.

²⁰ Jorge Heine, 'Solving Chile's Crisis Starts With Solving Its Pension System', *Americas Quarterly*, 8 January 2020.

- 1) Downturn in economic activity in its main trading partners
- 2) Falling commodity prices
- 3) Breakdown in global value chains
- 4) Fall in demand for tourism services
- 5) Risk aversion and deterioration in financial conditions²¹

The economies of Latin America as a whole are projected to have negative growth of 8.1% in 2020, the worst performance of any region except the European Union. Oil-producing countries (above all Ecuador and Venezuela, but also Brazil, Colombia and Mexico) have been particularly affected by the fall in oil prices.

In this context, the poverty rate in the region in 2020 is projected to increase from 30.3% of the population to 37.2%, an increase of 45 million people, of whom 18 million will fall into extreme poverty, for a total of 230 million. Per capita income will fall to 2010 levels, and poverty to 2006 levels. It is estimated that 2.7 million businesses will close and unemployment will reach 14 %, a figure that does not reflect the reality on a continent where half of all jobs are informal.

In the face of the crisis, international financial institutions have had to extend their cooperation to the region²².

- 1) In this, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) has provided an additional 3.2 billion dollars over and above the regularly programmed amount for 2020, bringing the total to 12 billion dollars.
- 2) The World Bank, in turn, has done so with \$4.5 billion as of October 2020.
- 3) The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has also had to step in, with loans totalling \$63.3 billion for 20 countries in the region, the bulk of which has gone to Chile, Colombia, Peru and Ecuador.
- 4) The Development Bank (former CAF) has also provided \$4.7 billion for this purpose.

By the end of the year, the region's exports, which had grown by 2.4% in 2019, were estimated to fall by between 11.3 and

²¹ ECLAC, *ibid.*

²² Congressional Research Service, 'Latin America and the Caribbean: Impact of Covid-19', 7 October 2020.

13% in 2020. However, the impact has been differentiated. While countries such as Venezuela (8% contraction), Bolivia (-28.7%), Colombia (-23.6%) and Peru (-21.7%) are among the worst affected, others such as Paraguay (4.1% increase in exports) and Chile (2.1% increase in exports) have not fared so badly²³.

Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that an end-of-year newspaper article described Latin America as the big loser in the pandemic crisis²⁴.

Resurrecting the Monroe Doctrine

Beyond the domestic mishandling of the pandemic by the governments in power, the devastating impact of the pandemic was facilitated and driven by the Trump administration's policy towards the region. As the *New York Times* has noted, over the course of 2019, Washington pressured the governments of Bolivia, Ecuador and El Salvador to expel teams of Cuban doctors who had been serving in those countries for years, usually in rural areas where they provided the only medical services available to the population. These medical teams were expelled in late 2019, just before the start of the pandemic. This left these countries without a critical mass of health professionals who could have played a key role in containing the spread of the virus. Alongside this, and for related reasons, Washington proceeded to cut the Pan American Health Organisation (PAHO) budget. This made it much more difficult for the Western Hemisphere's leading health organisation to assist the region in combating the pandemic, as it had done on previous occasions²⁵.

The results are there for all to see. Ecuador, with 17,000 deaths from the pandemic, and Bolivia with 9,000, countries with already fragile health systems, were decimated by Covid-19. Even

²³ IDB, 'Trade Trends Estimates Latin America and the Caribbean 2020-2021', Buenos Aires: INTAL, December 2020.

²⁴ Explica.co, 'China wins with the pandemic, Latin America loses and the EU and the US in the middle ground', 18 December 2020. <https://www.explica.co/china-wins-with-the-pandemic-latin-america-loses-and-the-eu-and-the-us-in-the-middle-ground/>

²⁵ The New York Times, op. cit. See also, Congressional Research Service, 'Latin America and the Caribbean: Impact of Covid-19', 7 October 2020. In the 2020 fiscal budget, the Trump administration requested a total of US\$1.4 billion in cooperation for Latin America, 18 % less than requested in 2019; US\$133 million in global health funding for the region, 37 % less than in 2019; and US\$16.3 million for PAHO, 75 % less than in 2019. Data in Congressional Research Service, in this note.

in June 2020, with the pandemic in full swing, USAID, the State Department agency in charge of international cooperation, refused to restore original funding to PAHO during the worst health crisis in the Americas in a century.

This has underlined the urgency for Latin America to reconsider the way it has handled its international politics. The origin of the whole problem with the Cuban medical teams can be traced back to their expulsion from Brazil by the Jair Bolsonaro government in early 2019 and his eagerness to ingratiate himself with Washington. As a consequence, numerous indigenous peoples in the Amazon were left without medical services, succumbing en masse to the virus. It was this same eagerness to ingratiate itself with Washington that led the governments of Bolivia, Ecuador and El Salvador to give in to Washington's pressure to expel the Cuban doctors, for which these countries would also pay a high price in human lives.

The fact that the United States has not only failed to help Latin America deal with this crisis, but has contributed to exacerbating it, reflects Donald J. Trump's policy towards the region²⁶. From its national-populist perspective, dedicated to vindicating the alleged victimisation of the white and Christian population in the United States by African-American and Hispanic minorities, as well as non-European immigrants in general, Latin America, the source of a large part of these immigrants, is seen and labelled as a threat.

From the very start of his 2016 presidential campaign, when he denounced Mexican immigrants as 'rapists' and 'drug traffickers', Trump made disparagement of the Hispanic population in the United States and Latin Americans in general a hallmark of his discourse. In his four years in office, he visited Latin America only once, to attend the G-20 Summit in Buenos Aires in December 2018. He was also the first US president not to attend a Summit of the Americas (the one held in Lima in April 2018), a triennial exercise whose sole purpose is to promote dialogue between Latin American leaders and the US.

The construction of a wall ("a beautiful wall", in Trump's words) on the southern border of the United States was a *leitmotif* of

²⁶ To put this in perspective, see Jorge Domínguez, 'Entre la obsesión y el olvido: Estados Unidos, América Latina y su redescubrimiento por Trump', in Wolf Grabendorff and Andrés Serbin (eds.), *Los actores globales y el (re) descubrimiento de América Latina*. Barcelona: Icaria, 2020, pp. 85-95.

Trump's 2016 campaign, and a recurring theme of his four-year term. It is aimed at stemming (or at least slowing) the flow of Mexican and Central American migrants to the United States. The way they were treated at the border, including the forced separation of parents and children, and the detention of the latter in cages, has been another hallmark of the Trump years. Budget to US aid programmes to the countries of the so-called 'Northern Triangle' (El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras), aimed at punishing them for their alleged inability to stem these waves of migration, was also cut drastically. This runs counter to conventional wisdom, which holds that reducing economic assistance only *increases* migration pressures in countries whose socio-economic conditions and rampant criminality, with the highest homicide rates in the world, are the main factors driving people to leave for better fates²⁷.

Another *leitmotif* in US policy towards Latin America in the region has been the promotion of regime change in Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela, identified by John Bolton, President Trump's National Security Adviser, as the 'triangle of tyranny'. This led to strong economic sanctions, especially in the cases of Cuba and Venezuela, and in a willingness to increase them in the course of 2020 even in the midst of the pandemic, despite calls from various quarters, including members of the US Congress, to suspend them because of the emergency. In any case, the fact that Nicolás Maduro's government has emerged stronger after four years of the Trump administration is revealing of the limits of this policy towards Venezuela. It has little to do with what is happening in that country and is aimed primarily at appealing to the Cuban-American vote in Florida, for whom Venezuela is a traditional campaign wedge. As part of this, in late December 2020 the State Department was even considering labelling Cuba as a state sponsor of terrorism, without evidence.

Any serious effort to move towards a solution to Venezuela's complex situation would have to contemplate a different approach. This would mean dialogue not only with countries that oppose the government of Nicolás Maduro, such as the members of the Lima Group (who do not even recognise Maduro as president of Venezuela, but do so with a fictitious 'acting president', such as opposition leader Juan Guaidó), but also with the governments

²⁷ See, Tom Farer, *Migration and Integration: The Case for Liberalism Without Borders*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

of countries that support Maduro's government, such as Cuba, China, Iran and Russia. This, however, would be unacceptable to the Cuban-American lobby in Florida.

And this brings us to another of the constants of US policy towards Latin America in 2020, which has been to try to contain, as far as possible, Chinese presence in the region. From Panama to Jamaica, through El Salvador and the Dominican Republic, to Brazil, Chile and Uruguay, the State Department's message has been loud and clear: Washington takes a dim view of China's presence in the Western Hemisphere, whether in trade, investment, financing, infrastructure or energy projects. The resurrection of the Monroe Doctrine ('America for the Americans'), proclaimed in 1823, buried by Secretary of State John Kerry in 2013 but revived by his successor Rex Tillerson in February 2018, on the eve of his first trip to the region, has been part of this effort. This has been accompanied by a discourse that seeks to delegitimise the presence of the so-called 'extra-hemispheric powers' in Latin America, with the apparent aim of somehow limiting Latin American countries to having diplomatic, trade, financial and investment relations with each other and with the United States, and not with other powers.

This runs counter to one of the main trends there over the course of this century. This has been the *diversification* of diplomatic and other relations, especially with Asia, the great growth pole of the world economy in recent decades²⁸. As we will see below, the fact that China is today South America's main trading partner as a whole, as well as of Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Peru and Uruguay, makes this offensive by Washington somewhat absurd, but has not prevented it from being deployed. This has put the region between a rock and a hard place in this new Cold War, in this case no longer between the United States and the Soviet Union, but between the United States and the People's Republic of China²⁹. How the region will deal with this situation is one of its main strategic and foreign policy challenges in 2021 and beyond³⁰.

²⁸ Andrew F. Cooper y Jorge Heine (eds.), *Which Way Latin America? Globalization and Hemispheric Politics*. Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2009.

²⁹ See Gian Luca Gardini (ed.) *External Powers in Latin America*. Oxford: Routledge, 2021; and the special double issue of *Pensamiento Propio*, vol. 24, issues 49-50, (January-June and July-December 2019) 'América Latina y el Caribe en un mundo en transición: Actores extrarregionales y estrategias latinoamericanas'.

³⁰ Osvaldo Rosales, *El sueño chino: Cómo se ve China a sí misma y cómo nos equivocamos los occidentales al interpretarla*, chap. 13, 'China-Estados Unidos: ¿cooperación

The result of Washington's policies towards the region has been a sharp drop in US approval ratings in Latin America. It fell from 66 % in 2015 to 47 % in 2017, leaving a tough job ahead for new president Joe Biden if he is interested in repairing deteriorating inter-American relations³¹.

A development bank turned upside down

And few instances better reflect this deterioration than the election of a new IDB president in September 2020. This broke a 60-year precedent, and drove another deep wedge in US-Latin American relations.

The election of the president of a multilateral development bank is normally a bureaucratic, behind-the-scenes affair, and of little news interest. However, in this case, the White House announcement of the candidacy of young Miami-born Cuban-American lawyer Mauricio Claver-Carone for the IDB presidency in June 2020 generated headlines and for three months dominated editorial and opinion pages across the Americas³².

What was the reason for this?

Of all the inter-American institutions, perhaps none enjoys the prestige of the IDB. Founded in 1960 and headquartered in Washington, the IDB, traditionally headed by a Latin American, lends some \$12 billion a year. It has 48 member countries, 2000

o conflicto en el resto del siglo XXI?', pp. 211-230.

³¹ Pew Research, 'Fewer People in Latin America See the US Favorably under Trump', 12 April 2017. <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2018/04/12/fewer-people-in-latin-america-see-the-u-s-favorably-under-trump/>

³² Jorge Heine, 'América Latina y la presidencia del BID' ('Latin America and the IDB Presidency'), Clarín (Buenos Aires), 1 July 2020; Kevin P. Gallagher and Jorge Heine, 'The Inter-American Development Bank isn't broke, so don't fix it', The Hill, 7 July 2020; Felipe Larraín, 'El futuro del BID' ('The future of the IDB'), El Mercurio (Santiago), 18 July 2020; Jorge Heine, 'Chile y la batalla por el BID' ('Chile and the battle for the IDB'), La Tercera, 4 August 2020; George P. Shultz et al, 'BID precisa continuar com um latinoamericano no comando', Folha de Sao Paulo, 8 August 2020; Jorge Heine and Francisco Cruz, 'Presidencia del BID' ('IDB Presidency'), El Mercurio de Valparaíso, 23 August 2020; Gisela Salomon, 'Los ojos de la elección del BID caen sobre México' ('The eyes of the IDB election fall on Mexico'), Associated Press, 10 September 2020; Christopher Sabatini, 'Latin America must reject Trump's attempts to leave his mark on the region's crucial development bank', The Washington Post, 9 August 2020; Leandro Dario, 'Trump's Candidate Would Be a Disaster for Latin America's Bank', Foreign Policy, 10 September 2020.

employees, representatives in all countries of the region, and ideas inspired by its founding president, the Chilean Felipe Herrera (1960-1970). Herrera believed in regional integration and that the Bank should respond to the priorities and urgencies of the region, rather than those of Washington. Later led by other notable statesmen such as Mexico's Antonio Ortiz Mena (1970-1987) and Uruguay's Enrique Iglesias (1987-2005), the IDB, unlike the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, is characterised by its proximity to and good understanding of the realities of the region. It prioritises areas traditionally ignored by the WB and IMF, such as infrastructure, intra-regional connectivity and environmental sustainability³³.

As with many multilateral organisations, the implicit agreement in establishing the Bank's headquarters in Washington in 1960 was that the Bank's president would not be an American, but a Latin American, something also expressed by President Dwight Eisenhower under whose mandate the IDB was created. This is how multilateralism works, and for sixty years this was the established practice, which more than a few have claimed would transform it into customary law. Latin American countries agreed on a joint candidate (a senior, long-standing figure, preferably a former finance minister or foreign minister), who was agreed with the United States and who, once elected, served for several terms, giving continuity and predictability to the Bank's work. The president of the bank worked closely with the region's heads of state, who treated him as a peer, promoting joint projects and setting the broad lines of the Bank's policies, for which the statutes give him wide latitude.

The controversy generated by the Claver-Carone 2020 bid was mainly due to the fact that it broke an established 60-year precedent. A government characterised by its disdain and lack of interest in multilateral institutions insisted on stripping Latin America of its only presidency of a Washington-based multilateral financial institution, in a gesture that caused deep unease in the region. To do this in the midst of the pandemic, and in the full knowledge that the Bank and its leadership would have to play a key role in the coming years in the recovery and reconstruction of the region's economies, only aggravated the situation.

³³ For a history of the IDB, see Eugenio Díaz-Bonilla and María Victoria del Campo, *A Long and Winding Road: A History of the Inter-American Development Bank*, Washington D.C.: Lulu.com, 2011.

The fact that the election of the new IDB president would take place in September 2020, barely two months before the US presidential elections, which all the polls indicated would be won by the opposition candidate Joe Biden (who objected to Claver-Carone's candidacy), thus installing a Trumpist ideologue in a Democratic government for five years as IDB president, made this even more unusual. The candidate's profile, a young lawyer from Miami who before taking office in the Trump administration was a blogger/lobbyist dedicated to promoting regime change in Cuba and Venezuela, with minimal governmental experience, and a meagre professional background, very different from that of previous IDB presidents, only underscored the disregard this entailed for Latin America³⁴.

It is, however, proof of the region's fragmentation and lack of direction that it was the Latin American governments themselves, so divided that they were unable to agree on a joint candidate, that enabled and facilitated Claver-Carone's candidacy and subsequent election. The governments of Brazil and Colombia, led by Jair Bolsonaro and Iván Duque, led the way on the issue, but they were also joined by Ecuador, Uruguay and Paraguay, the Central American countries (except Costa Rica, initially) and the Caribbean countries. Argentina, which had counted on a previous commitment from Trump to support an Argentine candidate for the IDB presidency, and which had raised the candidacy of a former Bank official and current advisor to President Alberto Fernández, Gustavo Béliz, was particularly frustrated. These months coincided with Argentina's negotiations with the IMF and the renegotiation of its external debt, leaving it particularly vulnerable to pressure from Washington.

Despite the undignified role of almost all Latin American governments, which, even knowing that Trump would lose the election, succumbed to his threats (Claver-Carone was serving as director for Latin America on the National Security Council, giving him ample power to do so), the disregard was so extreme that there was a strong reaction from civil society and from numerous former presidents, former foreign ministers and former finance ministers from across the region and of all political stripes. They

³⁴ It was this that led prominent US Republican Party figures, such as former Secretary of State George P. Shultz and World Bank President Robert Zoellick, to publicly oppose Claver-Carone's candidacy.. See article by Shultz, McLarty, Hills, Lowenthal and Cunningham in *Folha de Sao Paulo*, text also published in *Reforma* in Mexico, in *Clarín* in Argentina, in *La República* in Peru, and in the *Globe and Mail* in Canada.

signed declarations in Chile, Peru, Argentina and Brazil, as well as in Central America, expressing their opposition to the imposition of an American at the head of the IDB³⁵. Rejection of this change to established rules and procedures was widespread throughout the region. This explains media coverage of the process, including radio and television forums as well as panel discussions at universities, something rarely seen in elections of this type³⁶.

Faced with the impossibility of raising a united candidacy to confront Claver-Carone's, the strategy of the member countries that were not with the man from Washington (Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica and Mexico, plus the European members of the Bank), was to postpone the election from September 2020 to March 2021. By then, the US presidential election would be settled, and it would be clear who would occupy the White House in 2021-2025, which is no small matter in a bank whose largest partner is precisely the United States.

It soon became obvious that the only procedure that would allow for a postponement of the election, which was also facilitated by the fact that there was a pandemic, would be to not provide a quorum for the meeting at which the IDB president would be elected³⁷. The quorum for the Bank's General Assemblies of Governors to elect the President is 75 %, so that with 25.1 % of the votes not present, the virtual Assembly could not take place. Enough votes were there. However, at that decisive moment, Mexico 'ruffled feathers', indicating that it was unwilling to take such a bold step as not providing a quorum (something the US does all the time). The same was noted by European countries. Josep Borrell, the EU High Commissioner for Foreign Affairs, who had sent a letter to the European IDB member countries expressing his support for postponing the election, had been an important point of reference throughout this process, as had

³⁵ 'Ex presidentes latinoamericanos contra la posible presidencia de EEUU del BID', Telam, 18 June 2020; 'No puede permanecer en silencio: excancilleres y exministros de Hacienda piden a Chile tener un 'rol activo' para oponerse a nominación de EEUU al BID', La Tercera, 11 July 2020; 'Seis excancilleres de Perú, en contra de la candidatura de EEUU al BID', EFE, 6 July 2020; 'Excancilleres argentinos piden que presidencia del BID sea ocupada por un latinoamericano', Clarín, 7 August 2020.

³⁶ For example, 'Elecciones en el BID: lo que está en juego para la Región y para Centroamérica', a panel forum on Radio Panama, FM 94.5, 17 August 2020; and 'La importancia del nombramiento del Presidente(a) del BID', panel forum at the Institute of International Studies of the University of Chile, 4 August 2020.

³⁷ 'Ex cancilleres y dirigentes políticos brasileños de alto nivel piden postergar designación de nuevo presidente del BID', El Mostrador, 4 August 2020.

the Spanish government headed by Pedro Sánchez³⁸. At the decisive hour, however, none of this would be enough. In September 2020, Claver-Carone was elected president of the IDB for a 5-year term³⁹. This would reveal the weakness and disorientation of Latin American foreign ministries, and especially that of its two largest countries—Brazil and Mexico—leading to what Alain Rouquié has called “a true eclipse of Latin America on the global stage”⁴⁰.

China, Latin America and the Second Cold War

An underlying issue in the US bid for the IDB presidency was Chinese presence in the region. While Claver-Carone’s main focus in his tenure as Latin America desk officer at the White House National Security Council had been regime change in Cuba and Venezuela, something he insisted would remain among his priorities at the IDB, another recurring theme in his campaign was that of the so-called ‘Chinese peril’. This had a precedent at the IDB itself in 2019. In March of that year, the United States, using its 30 % voting power (and the possibility of blocking the General Assembly of Governors), had vetoed holding the General Assembly in Chengdu four days before it was due to begin. This, with the consequent financial and opportunity cost of an international meeting with 7,000 participants from 70 countries, cancelled at the last minute⁴¹.

2020 was the year in which the Sino-US dispute shifted from trade and technology to diplomacy⁴². This occurred with the closure of the Chinese Consulate General in Houston ordered by

³⁸ ‘Borrell insta a retrasar la votación del jefe del Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo’, Reuters, 4 August 2020.

³⁹ Claver-Carone was elected with 66.8 % of the votes. The percentage seems high, but it is not that high. Discounting the voting power of the US. (30%) and that of Venezuela (3.4%, illegitimately exercised by Juan Guaidó), it is reduced to only a third of the total (33.4%), barely higher than the 31.28% of the sixteen member countries that abstained. And if we consider only the votes of the countries in the region, and discounting Guaidó’s vote, Claver-Carone obtains 22.89% of the votes, somewhat lower than the 23.06% of the votes represented by abstentions in the region.

⁴⁰ Alain Rouquié, ‘La encrucijada latinoamericana y los actores globales’, foreword to the book by Grabendorff and Serbin, (eds), op. cit., p. 17.

⁴¹ Jorge Heine, ‘China, el BID y el chavismo: la ‘venezolanización’ de una región sin rumbo’, Clarín, 23 March 2019.

⁴² Esteban Actis and Nicolás Creus, *La disputa por el poder global: (The global power struggle: China versus the United States in the pandemic crisis)*. Buenos Aires: Capital Intelectual, 2020.

the State Department in July, followed by the closure of the US Consulate in Chengdu, ordered by the Chinese Foreign Ministry in response. Over the course of the northern summer, four speeches by senior US government officials, including the Secretary of State, the Attorney General, the National Security Advisor and the Director of the FBI, beat the drums of this Cold War II. These speeches made the case for the supposed inevitability of conflict between the US and China.

And it is in this conflict that Latin America finds itself between a rock and a hard place. The most significant development in Latin America's international insertion into the international political economy in the new century has been its links with Asia in general, and China in particular. Sino-Latin American trade grew from \$10 billion in 2000 to \$307 billion in 2018, a 31-fold increase. As indicated above, China is today the largest trading partner of Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Peru and Uruguay. And while trade has been the driver of this relationship, investment has also played a significant role⁴³.

China's financial cooperation flows to the region should also be considered. There have been years in which financial flows from Chinese development banks to Latin America have exceeded those of the World Bank, IMF and IDB combined although these flows, which peaked in 2015, have been on a downward trend since then, reaching just US\$1.1 billion in 2019⁴⁴. Alongside this, and especially since 2010, we have also seen Chinese foreign direct investment flows to the region, fluctuating between 10 and 15 billion dollars a year. Today Chinese investment stock in the region stands at \$130 billion, with \$60 billion in Brazil and \$27 billion in Peru. This is still much lower than the investment stock accumulated in the region from countries such as the United States, Japan, Canada and some European countries, but it is still a significant flow. China, for example, has been a leader in mergers and acquisitions in the region, and in 2020 its share in Latin American companies was larger than in similar deals in the United States and the EU combined

⁴³ For a report on recent figures on trade and investment between China and Latin America, see, Sergio Ley López and Salvador Suárez Zaizar, 'Dealmaking with China amid global economic uncertainty: Opportunities, risks and recommendations for Latin America and the Caribbean', The Atlantic Council, Washington D.C.: December 2020.

⁴⁴ Margaret Myers and Kevin P. Gallagher, 'Scaling Back: China's Development Finance to Latin America in 2019', Inter-American Dialogue and Global Development Policy Center, Boston University, 20 March 2020.

⁴⁵. And even a country like Chile, which has seen an exponential increase in its trade with China (which in 2019 exceeded \$40 billion), but until recently had not been a major magnet for Chinese investment, has become one since 2017. In 2019, China was the largest originator of foreign investment in Chile, with 4.8 billion dollars⁴⁶.

The main initial interest in the region for China lies in the vast natural resources it offers in minerals, fossil fuels and agricultural products. Products such as oil, copper, iron, zinc and soybeans account for the bulk of Latin American exports to China, and their production and associated infrastructure was also the main initial focus of interest from Chinese companies⁴⁷. Over time, however, this has diversified into energy (especially electricity and its transmission), transport (particularly railways), finance, IT and telecommunications, sectors that accounted for half of Chinese investment in the region in 2017-2019⁴⁸.

The case of Panama, which established diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China in 2017 and has since established a fruitful relationship with Beijing, is instructive⁴⁹. Numerous Chinese companies have arrived there and their involvement in various infrastructure projects, including the fourth bridge over the Panama Canal, a USD 1.4 billion project awarded in open bidding by China Harbor Corporation in 2018, reflects this new dynamic. Far from solely focusing on extraction activities, Chinese companies are now betting on a variety of sectors in Latin American economies. While this is welcome, it introduces a new variable in the relationship with China. It is different to export and import than to have giant Chinese companies buying public utilities, building ports or installing railways and telecommunications cabling in a Latin American country, some of them smaller than the size of a Beijing or Shanghai neighbourhood. This means that China is no longer merely a vast market on the other side of the Pacific, or the home of computers and televisions, but a very

⁴⁵ 'América Latina, favorita para fusiones y adquisiciones chinas', *La Tercera*, 28 December 2020.

⁴⁶ Sergio Bitar and Jorge Heine, 'Con China, lo que Chile requiere es iniciativa', *El Mercurio*, 1 December 2020.

⁴⁷ Carol Wise, *Dragonomics: How Latin America is Maximizing (or Missing Out on) China's International Development Strategy*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020.

⁴⁸ Ley and López, *op. cit.* p. 9.

⁴⁹ Jorge Heine, 'Chinese Inroads in Panama: Transport Hubs and BRI in the Americas', *Global Americans*, 26 June 2018.

real presence in Latin American countries. This makes it a factor in domestic politics, something that has not been the case until now, or at least only on the margins⁵⁰.

In 2020, the relationship between China and Latin America, after two decades of almost uninterrupted progress and advancement, was subjected to two strong shocks that put it, if not in check, at least to the test. First, there was the strong pressure from President Trump's administration, determined to do whatever it could to minimise these ties, deploying all available resources. One *modus operandi* has been to send high-level government officials (though not the president) to read the riot act to Latin American governments. One of the most high-profile examples was a tour by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to South America in April 2019. Pompeo gave his warning in a speech delivered in Santiago (where he began his tour), but addressed to the region. He argued that while it was true that the United States itself traded with and received investment from China, the situation in Latin American countries was different. They would be much more exposed to corruption and dependence on China, so they should avoid doing business with China at all costs. In other words, conduct that was perfectly acceptable from the United States was not acceptable from Latin American countries⁵¹.

This continued over the course of 2020. The Panamanian government was informed that it should suspend ongoing major infrastructure projects by Chinese companies. Washington's global offensive against Chinese telecommunications company Huawei also reached Latin America, with Under-Secretary of State Keith Krach sent on a tour of the region in November, visiting Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, the Dominican Republic and Panama. The aim was to demand written commitments from governments that they would not allow Huawei to install 5G technology, a commitment that the government of the Dominican Republic was the first to sign.⁵²

Chile did not sign that commitment, but it did buckle under to Washington's instructions on a related matter. Perhaps the first

⁵⁰ I am grateful to Francisco Urdínez of the Institute of Political Science at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, who has been following the issue of public perception of China in Latin American countries, for this observation.

⁵¹ In Pompeo's words, 'when China does business in places like Latin America, it often injects corrosive capital into the economic bloodstream, giving life to corruption and eroding good governance'. Cited in Congressional Research Service, 'China's Engagement with Latin America and the Caribbean', Washington D.C.: 12 November 2020.

⁵² 'DomRep could be first LatAm country to ban Huawei', BNAméricas, 16 November 2020.

major project in the region to fall victim to the Second Cold War between the United States and China was the trans-Pacific fibre optic cable between Chile and China, specifically between Valparaíso and Shanghai. This would have been the first submarine internet cable to cross the South Pacific. A 20,000 km long cable that would have connected Chile, and South America as a whole, with Asia and the huge Chinese market, was formally proposed by the Chilean government to China in 2016, and formalised in the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between the two governments. The project underwent pre-feasibility and feasibility studies in 2017 and 2019, respectively, only to be discarded by the government of Sebastián Piñera in 2020. Under strong pressure from Washington (the issue was one of the main items on Secretary Pompeo's agenda during his visit to Chile in April 2019), in July 2020 the Chilean government announced instead the installation of a fibre optic cable between Chile and Australia. The purpose of this is uncertain, as trade between Chile and Australia is minimal, and demand for electronic communication is also minimal⁵³.

The other litmus test for the Sino-Latin American relationship in 2020 was the pandemic. Given the impact of the virus in the region and the fact that it originated in China, one would think that this would affect the trade relationship. In fact, trade between China and Latin America fell in the first half of 2020, but by June it already started to recover. Countries such as Argentina, Brazil and Chile saw strong year-on-year increases in their exports to China in June and July. At the end of the year, it was predicted that, while Latin American exports as a whole would fall by 11-13% in 2020 (compared to a 2.3% drop in 2019), one of the few markets where Latin American exports would grow in 2020 would be China, by 2.1% (although total imports from China *fell* by 3.1%). In fact, one of the few countries in the region whose exports increased in 2020 was Chile: by 2.1 %, thanks in large part to Chinese demand, the destination of 35 % of that country's exports.

This contrasts with a market such as the United States, where imports from Latin America are estimated to fall by 14.6 % (versus a 10 % drop in total imports) in 2020. The same is true for

⁵³ Jorge Heine, 'Early Glimpses of Post-Pandemic China-Latin America Relations', Latin America Program and Kissinger Institute, The Wilson Center, Washington D.C., October 2020.

the European Union, where imports from Latin America fell by 16 %, compared to an 11.2 % contraction in its total imports⁵⁴.

Therefore, far from being weakened, in 2020 China emerged stronger in its trade relations with Latin America. A separate issue is the extent to which the pandemic affected Latin Americans' perceptions of China, where preliminary evidence reflects a sharp drop in approval ratings of the Asian country⁵⁵. In any case, there is little doubt that in 2021 and beyond, China will play an even more significant role in the region, which now faces the arduous task of recovering the ground lost in previous years. This brings us to what some argue is the other side of the coin of these growing trade and investment flows.

The cost of sino-dependence

Given the rise of China's presence in the region, some observers wonder whether there might not be 'too much China' in Latin America. In other words, does this veritable irruption of what was once the Middle Kingdom not carry with it the danger of substituting one dependency for another? Will China not replace the United States as the dominant power in the Western Hemisphere?

Without taking things to that limit, a book by leading Brown University academic, Barbara Stallings, published in 2020, *Dependency in the 21st Century: The Political Economy of China-Latin American Relations*, put the issue on the table⁵⁶. It argues that China has come to play a role in the region comparable to that once played by the United States, undermining its development.

In a sophisticated analysis that distinguishes between markets, leverage and linkages as the mechanisms that generate dependence, Stallings argues that Chinese presence in Latin America over the last two decades has not promoted development. Nor would it have promoted a broader definition of development that includes social services, poverty reduction and greater equality.

⁵⁴ IDB-Intal, op. cit.

⁵⁵ Urdínez, op. cit.

⁵⁶ Barbara Stallings, *Dependency in the 21st Century: The Political Economy of China-Latin America Relations*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020. On this issue, see also Raúl Bernal Meza and Li Xing (eds.), *China-Latin America Relations in the 21st Century: The Dual Complexities of Opportunities and Challenges*. Cham: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2019.

The core argument is that Chinese demand for natural resources has had a de-industrialising effect.

There is little doubt that Latin America is stagnating, and that it has not emerged from the so-called middle-income trap. This is due, among other things, to its inability and/or unwillingness to add more value to their abundant natural resources, which constitute the bulk of its exports. Adding value to the natural resources that give them their initial comparative advantage in the international division of labour is the path that Scandinavian countries, as well as Australia and New Zealand, have followed to emerge from underdevelopment. However, noting this stagnation is very different from blaming it on China.

Here we must distinguish between two issues. One is trade, financial and investment links with China, especially during the years of the *commodity boom*, i.e. between 2003 and 2013, a period that generated considerable surpluses and revenue, particularly in South American countries. What happened to these surpluses is a different matter. The investment rate in Latin America rose from just 18 % in the 1990s to 19 % in the 2000s. One of the reasons why the 2015-2019 growth rate has been the lowest in the last 70 years is precisely due to lack of investment. And Beijing is not to blame for this. This is due to the lack of public policies to promote investment; the absence of an industrial policy (a term banned in the vocabulary of economic authorities and most economists in the region); and the lack of policies to promote scientific and technological innovation. Even in a country like Chile, spending on research and development (R&D) does not exceed 0.38 % of GDP, a tiny figure compared to the 2 % spent on R&D in developed countries, and close to 3 % in the United States and China. It is true that Latin America is deindustrialising and its repeated crises are not unrelated to this real regression, if not economic regression, it is going through. But this has its origins in policy decisions made by governments and the business preferences of the private sector, which is satisfied with the huge profits obtained from the extractive agro-export model, and has no interest in innovations in the productive matrix.

A second aspect relates to the meaning of the word dependence. Stallings is critical of countries such as Argentina, Ecuador and Venezuela for their willingness to sign direct government-to-government contracts with China. This contrasts with the approach in countries such as Chile, Colombia, Mexico and Peru, where projects are tendered and go through a complex public evalua-

tion process. Their argument is that such government-to-government contracts lend themselves to non-transparent situations. The point, however, is that these three countries were excluded from international credit markets. China was only the lender of last resort.

Would Argentina, Ecuador and Venezuela have been more *independent* if Chinese credits and contracts had not been available? The reality is that these countries were going through a rough patch and Chinese funding allowed them to cope.

In other words, China's presence *increased* the range of options for these countries, increasing their room for manoeuvre, and thus their independence. Ecuador in 2020, with a different government, seeks to move closer to the United States, and Argentina renegotiated its debt with the IMF, without having broken its ties with China. Both are proving to be more *independent* than before, having increased their ties with China.

The truth is that, during their two centuries of independent life, Latin American countries have had diplomatic, trade, financial and investment ties almost exclusively with the United States and some European countries. With the emergence of China into the picture, a third alternative has suddenly arisen. This means diversifying the region's options and *decreasing*, not *increasing*, dependence on one or two foreign markets and sources of capital. If there is a downturn in one or another, as happened, for example, with the US and the EU in 2020, having a third party—in this case China—reduces the *vulnerability* of the region's economies to the inevitable fluctuations in international markets. It is not good to put all one's eggs in one basket, and it is possible to argue that some countries in the region have focused too much on China, neglecting the enormous opportunities offered by India, for example. However, it is not possible to argue that the emergence of a third major trading partner in the region would *increase* rather than *decrease* Latin America's dependence.

Countries turning their backs on each other

In addition to establishing a strong diplomatic presence in almost every country in Latin America and the Caribbean (for example, in the Eastern Caribbean, China has a larger diplomatic presence than the United States, which has only an embassy in Barbados),

China has also developed multilateral ties with the region⁵⁷. One instance is the China-CELAC Ministerial Forum at Foreign Ministerial level. It has already met twice, the first in Beijing in January 2015, and the second in Santiago de Chile in January 2018. And although this triennial meeting should have taken place for the third time in January 2021, it did not. Such is the fragmentation and polarisation in the region that the mere notion of having all Latin American and Caribbean foreign ministers around a table, albeit virtually, and even to deliberate on something as urgent as possible Chinese cooperation to help the region out of the crisis, has become difficult. In addition, Brazil has left CELAC, with all that this implies.

What can be said about Latin American regionalism at a time when Brazil's president does not speak to Argentina's president and Mexico's president does not set foot in Latin America?

One would have to go back to the late 1970s for another moment of such division and fragmentation in the region. This comes after at least two waves, first in the 1990s and then in the first decade of the new century, of a strong push for political cooperation and regional integration in Latin America, two 'golden decades' in the field. In the 1990s, in the early post-Cold War period, the Rio Group and Mercosur expressed this willingness to work together to face the challenges of globalisation. The urgency of this was made clear by the creation or consolidation of macro-regions, such as NAFTA in North America, the deepening of the European Union, and the advances of ASEAN. The notion that Latin America in general, and South America in particular, could not remain on the sidelines of this process became apparent. Mercosur in particular made remarkable progress in its first five years of existence (1991-1996), integrating the Brazilian and Argentinean automotive sectors, among other achievements. Political cooperation was also reinforced by bodies such as the Ibero-American Summits, initiated in 1991 at the initiative of Spain, whose annual meetings were another manifestation of this spirit.

In turn, the 2000s, with the rise of left-wing governments in the region and the boom in natural resources, brought a new wave of regional bodies. These include the Bolivarian Alternative for the Peoples of the Americas (ALBA) in 2004, the South American Union of Nations (UNASUR) in 2008, and the Community of

⁵⁷ China has embassies in Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Dominica and Grenada, while the United States only has an embassy in Barbados.

Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) in 2010. Shared perspectives in the capitals helped. UNASUR developed the profile of the South American identity, something driven by Brazil, and played a role in supporting the democratic process at critical moments in Bolivia and Ecuador, among other countries. CELAC fulfilled the function of an 'umbrella' entity, encompassing the 33 countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, giving them a voice and a dialogue with the rest of the world. This was manifested in formal dialogues of its *troika* of foreign ministers with their counterparts in China and India in 2012, as well as in the EU-Latin America Summit held in Santiago that same year.

The shift to the right during the second half of the second decade of the new century, and the polarisation caused by a deteriorating situation in Venezuela, however, led to the crisis of these bodies, although it came from before, as Caetano and Pose have pointed out⁵⁸. The inability of UNASUR members to agree on a secretary general contributed to undermining the viability of the entity. In 2019, Brazil announced that it would leave CELAC, and in 2018, six South American countries with conservative governments announced that they would suspend their membership in UNASUR. In 2019, in Santiago, a group of like-minded countries (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia and Ecuador) announced the creation of the Forum for the Progress of South America (PROSUR), a body intended to replace UNASUR. However, it has remained little more than a WhatsApp group, and not much has been heard of it since its launch. The inability of the Lima Group, the Montevideo Mechanism and the Contact Group, various *ad hoc* entities created to confront and seek a solution to the Venezuelan crisis, to find a solution to it, are the best demonstration of the ineffectiveness of collective diplomatic action in Latin America today.

Moreover, differences between the governments of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and Alberto Fernández in Argentina have hampered the functioning of MERCOSUR, which is at a standstill. And any possibility of rapprochement between MERCOSUR and the Pacific Alliance (PA, formed by Chile, Colombia, Mexico and Peru), something that Chile had promoted under the slogan of 'convergence in diversity' during Michelle Bachelet's second government (2014-2018), has been frustrated by the paralysis that has also affected the latter. Mexico's disinterest (the PA's largest country)

⁵⁸ Gerardo Caetano and Nicolás Pose, 'The weakness of Latin American bodies against current scenarios: Notes for debate', Work Papers no. 41/ 2020 (2nd period).

during the government of Andrés Manuel López Obrador has detracted from its dynamism and left it in a semi-comatose state.

In November, the announcement in Asia of the signing of the RCEP, the largest regional integration scheme with 15 member countries, 30 % of the world's population and 29 % of world output, underlined three things: 1) the degree to which the world is moving towards the creation of large regional blocs; 2) how Asian countries do not allow geopolitical or ideological differences to interfere with their willingness to promote free trade; and 3) that even small and medium-sized countries can take meaningful international cooperation initiatives: the RCEP, contrary to what is sometimes believed, was not an initiative of China, but of ASEAN⁵⁹.

At a time of crisis in Latin America, they should provoke reflection in the countries of dark America. The abdication of any international leadership evident in the region in 2020, at a time of profound changes in an international system in transition, underlines that this only further marginalises an already peripheral region. The fact that Latin America has lost ('given away' would perhaps be the more accurate expression) the presidency of the IDB is emblematic. This is what happens in countries whose own governments, taking refuge in an outdated neo-patriotism, reject the *Patria Grande* but hand over everything to the great powers, in what has been called a 'nationalism of subordination'.

This brings us to the outlook for 2021.

Towards active non-alignment

It is within this framework that the region's international insertion and its countries' foreign policies need to be rethought. The US-China dispute, increasingly described by some as the start of a Second Cold War, puts Latin America between a rock and a hard place. This is a situation in which, as the events of 2020 reveal, the region, if it continues in its current state of fragmentation and disorientation, stands to lose.

With half a million dead, we have seen the very high price the region has paid for its unwillingness to engage in regional collaboration and cooperation, a price paid in human lives, in economic

⁵⁹ Nicolás Albertoni and Jorge Heine, 'América Latina se está quedando al margen del mundo que viene', *The New York Times*, 30 November 2020.

activity and in increased costs of paying for inputs to combat the pandemic. In the globalised world of the new century, far from being a marginal area of government management, managing international relations is increasingly central. In 2020, the winds of change continued to blow through the region, with the election of Alfredo Arce and the return of MAS to the Bolivian presidency; with a plebiscite in Chile paving the way for a new constitution; and with the constitutional impeachment of Peruvian President Martin Vizcarra, which threw the country into political crisis, and the rule of three presidents in the space of a week.

In 2021, as the region enters a new electoral cycle, with the IMF forecasting a meagre recovery of just 3.1 % in the region's economies, with presidential elections in Ecuador, Nicaragua, Peru and Chile and parliamentary elections in Argentina and Mexico, this puts the approaches of the different political sectors to the issue at the centre of attention. Should the countries of the region continue along the path of self-absorption and 'nationalism of subordination', led by countries such as Brazil and Colombia, or should they look for a different alternative?

Hence the proposal for an Active Non-Alignment for Latin America⁶⁰. What does this mean?

Beyond taking an equidistant position from Washington and Beijing, it also means assuming that there is a big world out there world beyond the region's traditional diplomatic partners, that Asia is the main growth area in today's world, and that there are several areas of the world that have been off the radar of Latin American countries until now. These include much of Africa and Central Asia, whose population and economic growth projections for the coming decades offer enormous potential. As for Europe, its search for strategic autonomy, so as not to be crushed by the

⁶⁰ This was originally posed by Carlos Fortin, Jorge Heine and Carlos Ominami in 'Latinoamérica: no alineamiento y la segunda Guerra Fría', *Foreign Affairs Latinoamérica*, vol. 20, issue 1, July-September 2020, pp. 107-115. Versions in English (in *Global Policy*), in French (by the Institute of International and Strategic Relations, IRIS, in Paris) and in Mandarin (by the Institute of International Studies, Peking University) have also been published. A follow-up by the same authors is 'El no alineamiento activo: un camino para Latino América' ('Active non-alignment: a way forward for Latin America'), *Nueva Sociedad*, September 2020, from which this section is adapted. A forum with the participation of half a dozen former Latin American foreign ministers on the proposal was held in Santiago de Chile on 21 August 2020, 'Dialogue of former foreign ministers: Latin American Alternative, Active Non-alignment', Permanent Foreign Policy Forum, FLACSO-Chile, Chile 21 and Institute for International Studies of the University of Chile.

confrontation between the United States and China, generates some convergence with Latin America, something that deserves much more systematic attention than it has received so far.

At the same time, it is obvious that this task cannot be undertaken individually by the countries of the region, but requires the creation of regional entities that allow for dialogue with the rest of the world. These entities need a permanent secretariat or budget (as has been the prevailing dogma in institutions such as CELAC). The notion that a region of 650 million people is not in a position to fund such bodies is untenable. The example and achievements of an entity such as ASEAN, which has successfully positioned Southeast Asian countries in Asia's regional integration schemes and in international politics in general, is proof to the hilt of the benefits of regional cooperation for small and developing countries.

In these terms, and on the basis of this necessary rebuilding of one or more viable regional entities, far from becoming increasingly *closed* in on itself, as the anachronistic application of the Monroe Doctrine in the 21st century would have it, Latin America must *open up* to this new 'post-Western world, in the words of Oliver Stuenkel⁶¹. In this world, parameters, standards and resources no longer come only from the North Atlantic countries, as they did for much of the 20th century, but also from new emerging powers, led by the BRICS, and from other countries in Asia and Africa, which are breaking new ground and setting new standards.

Unlike the Non-Alignment of the past, which along with its proactive agenda of decolonisation and its search for a New International Economic Order also had a strong defensive element seeking above all to stay out of the conflicts of the great powers, this Non-Alignment will have a proactive attitude, and will be effectively non-aligned. It will look for opportunities to *expand* rather than *limit* Latin America's ties with this vast post Western world that is emerging before our eyes and that will shape the new century.

Active Non-Alignment is not ideologically biased and can be a great point of convergence for governments of different orientations to create spaces for sovereign decision-making. At a time

⁶¹ Oliver Stuenkel, *Post-Western World: How Emerging Powers are Remaking World Order*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016.

of an international order in transition, having a voice in matters as decisive for the future as global governance or the new international financial architecture, opens up enormous possibilities.

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Chapter Four

Conflicts in and around the Middle East

José María Ferré

Abstract

The region we overview includes the places with the most important conflicts today. It is a región where several civilizations, according to the criteria of Toynbee, border each other, and where always there has been tension. The foundation of the State of Israel provoked a very big unrest that has not finished yet. There are external pressures over the Arab world, from Turkey, Russia, Iran and Israel that have provoked conflicts since a century ago. The aftermath of the Arab Spring is another source of conflict different from the previous ones, in which crystallizes misrule, lack of human rights, corruption and injustice. The economic questions are well present to destabilize, like the lack of water, the decrease of the oil prices or the very unfair wealth distribution. Pandemic has drawn a terrible stage whose consequences are still unknown. Many unsolved problems that add to the internal difficulties. As was written in an Arab Development Report of the UNDP, the deficiencies in education, freedom and treatment of women provoke the lack of development in this región; we can add that they also provoke the appearance and maintenance of the several conflicts that we have mentioned.

Keywords

Mediterranean, Turkey, Palestine, Israel, Iran, communities, Syria, Irak, militias, Terrorism, Lebanon, Hizbolla, Caucasus, Refugees, Pandemic and crisis, USA presidency, Russia.

Introduction

The ICG refers to ten conflicts¹ to watch in 2021. Many of them are in and around the Middle East: Afghanistan, Yemen, Ethiopia, Libya, Somalia and US-Iran. Add also tensions between Russia and Turkey, which we still see as a novelty, and climate change. All of this presided over by the consequences of the pandemic throughout 2020 and entering 2021, awaiting an acceptable medical solution and with very serious general economic consequences.

Its chairman, Robert Malley², refers to the many events that have taken place in 2020, starting with those not strictly war-related, ranging from pandemics to climate change, but whose effects are devastating.

The change of US presidency is due in 2021, but President Trump's last weeks have been very active, even close to Spain with the new US stance on Western Sahara. Biden's presidency will foreseeably change some approach, but it will be difficult to do so almost immediately. Conflicts over Nagorno-Karabakh and in Ethiopia have been very intense at the end of 2020, and the also ended with a jihadist attack on the Syrian army in the north-east of that country or the attack on Yemen airport with numerous casualties.

The pandemic did not dramatically affect countries in conflict, but it is difficult to know whether the data are clear or whether any circumstances have made them less vulnerable. In any case, according to the WHO Dashboard³, 2020 ends with 80 773 033 infected people and 1 783 619 deaths worldwide, with the highest incidence at the end of the year. Obviously, vaccines will be the main focus in 2021. Other consequences are tragic and may well lead to increased intensity of existing conflicts or the emergence of new ones. An economic crisis unprecedented since World War II has emerged, 150 million people have been pushed into extreme poverty and tensions are rising in places such as Sudan and Lebanon, to focus on this region alone. Unemployment will rise, it will be difficult to pay security forces or the army, the state will not be able to cope with increasing requests for aid and income will fall. This is the scenario in Lebanon, but does not have

¹ ICG, "Ten Conflicts to Watch in 2021".

² Robert Malley, ICG, "Ten Conflicts to Watch in 2021".

³ WHO Dashboard, 31-12-2020.

the exclusive. It will be hard for the US or the EU to help in all that is asked of them as they have a lot to do with their own populations. The UN system will face funding difficulties, as already seen in UNRWA and other agencies.

Climate change has been dampened by the pandemic, but its consequences continue and related problems such as food insecurity, water scarcity, migration and competition for raw materials can still be observed, all of which can lead to conflict. President Biden has assured that the US will re-accept the Paris Protocol, which gives hope for a realistic policy.

Eastern Mediterranean and Turkey

Gonul Tol⁴ notes that 2020 has been a busy year for Turkish foreign policy with military activity overtaking diplomacy. The results have been meagre and rather for domestic consumption.

In early 2020, Erdogan announced that Turkish troops would be sent to Libya to support the internationally recognised government. He threatened to teach Hafter's eastern forces a lesson if they did not cease their attacks on the Tripoli government. Previously, an agreement was signed between Turkey and Libya on the delimitation of maritime spaces (with dubious respect for international law) and military cooperation. The agreement should serve to change Turkey's status quo in the Eastern Mediterranean vis-à-vis Greece and Cyprus.

This has been condemned by several countries, notably the US, Egypt, Greece, Cyprus and Israel. Complaints grew as Turkey sent thousands of Syrian mercenaries to Libya. Syrian mercenaries are constantly being sent to theatres of war, as recently in Azerbaijan, prompting condemnation from the US, Russia and the EU. Turkey is beginning to feel some isolation.

There have also been tensions between Turkey and Russia, especially in Idlib (Syrian territory dominated by Turkish-backed rebels). Russia accuses Turkey of not attacking the jihadists in Idlib or even fighting alongside them.

Another point of tension arises from the incompatible claims of Greece and Turkey to explore the seabed. In this area, Turkey has disregarded Cypriot maritime space and does not fully rec-

⁴ Middle East Institute, "2020 The Year in Review", Gonul Tol, 14-12-2020.

ognise Greek space. France demanded that Turkey cease exploration for possible oil or gas deposits in the area and deployed a ship, another American ship arrived in Crete. Further reference to this issue can be found in the section on Lebanon and Hezbollah.

The US Congress has toughened its stance towards Turkey. There are bipartisan initiatives to punish Turkey for its purchase of the Russian S-400 missile defence system, despite objections from NATO, of which Turkey is a member. Turkey was expelled from the US-led F-35 programme, costing Turkish companies billions of dollars in addition to sanctions on official Turkish defence-related entities and even Turkish citizens. The US has also been involved in defence-related issues such as visas for certain individuals or freezing of financial assets. Other possible sanctions, not implemented but mentioned, would be very damaging to the Turkish economy.

EU members have imposed sanctions on Turkish officials and entities linked to gas exploration in Cypriot waters. It should not be forgotten that Cyprus, like Greece, is a member of the EU and Turkey is not. More punitive measures such as new customs tariffs or arms embargoes are planned after the start of Biden's presidency.

Saudi Arabia has had high tensions with Turkey since the beginning of the Arab Spring and accuses the Turks of supporting Islamist groups. Turkish goods are informally boycotted in Saudi Arabia. Resolving the Quartet's crisis with Qatar may facilitate rapprochement with Turkey and Saudi Arabia but not with Egypt or the UAE.

New MEPP, Palestine and Israel

Khaled Elgindy⁵ notes that in 2020 the already deplorable situation of Palestinians has further worsened in the West Bank and Gaza, due to increasing political and economic problems.

After much waiting and rumours, the Trump Plan was published at the end of January 2020. It confirmed Palestinian fears linked to official or historical structures but opened a new era. Whether the 70-year-long conflict is closer to a solution and how just or unjust it will be remains to be seen. The conflict is not just about sovereignty, but about issues of private property or citizenship that

⁵ Middle East Institute, "2020 The Year in Review", Khaled Elgindy, 14-12-2020.

could be dealt with in other ways. The economic catastrophe could be mitigated by devoting fewer resources to conflict and more to productive activities and infrastructure. It is still too early to tell.

The key to the Trump Plan is to establish a Palestinian state in the West Bank with disconnected enclaves surrounded and controlled by Israel. Israel would annex 30% of the West Bank, including all of Jerusalem, the Jordan Valley and the settlement areas of some 650,000 settlers. Israel would retain control of borders, airspace, territorial waters and the electromagnetic sphere. Nothing that has not already been happening *de facto* and for some time.

The Palestinians rejected the plan, but Trump and Netanyahu assured that they would stick to it. New Israeli general elections are now scheduled in addition to the new US administration but given the indirect support received from the Gulf states and even Morocco, establishing diplomatic relations with Israel, a total reversal of the Trump plan does not seem possible. The Plan suspended the previous Israeli decision to annex much of the West Bank. Trump punished the Palestinians by getting the Gulf states to withhold aid to the Palestinian National Authority. Economic pressure and incentives were extremely important during the Trump presidency.

The pandemic and Israel's unpaid withholding of Palestinian tax transfers left the Palestinian economy in tatters. In May, President Abbas, faced with the Israeli threat of annexation, terminated agreements between the Palestinian National Authority and Israel, including very important pacts on security cooperation. Several months later they were restored due to the isolation of President Abbas and the election victory of President Biden.

Geopolitically, 2020 has been the year of Israel's oft-cited agreements with several Arab states, adding to agreements reached years ago with Egypt and Jordan. Israel's has gained proximity with states that are also close to Saudi Arabia. Israel is approaching Arab states that have a complicated relationship with Turkey. The region's decades-long alignments and evidence are rapidly transforming, and a new mindset should crystallise in 2021. The new agreements have immediate consequences for the US, which has supported and even provoked them, as its partners and allies in the region begin to work together. There are also consequences for Iran as its enemies begin to collaborate, and for the Palestinians who have been overwhelmed by events. Geographically closer to Spain, there are also consequences for Western Sahara whose claim to independence is greatly weakened.

The normalisation of diplomatic relations with Israel by the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan or Morocco, as part of the Abraham Accords in the first two cases, or similar agreements, seems difficult to reconcile with the Arab Peace Initiative and also opens up a change in security and defence issues. The UAE's F-35 rearmament reflects this in the event that the Administration, which suspended it at the end of January, eventually approves it.

The enemy, if it was an enemy, will not be Israel but Iran.

In the Palestinian camp, Arab normalisation with Israel is seen as an existential threat to national aspirations. Fatah, Hamas and other Palestinian factions reconciled and agreed to hold presidential and legislative elections in the Palestinian National Authority and the Palestine Liberation Organisation. As on other occasions, the reconciliation stalled.

There is no doubt that the new approaches have also reached Syria and Lebanon even if, for the time being, they are still rejected. A large part of Lebanese society has begun to publicly ask why it is not possible to end the state of war with Israel, the Hezbollah resistance thesis is beginning to raise questions.

President Trump's electoral defeat prompted recent fast-track initiatives such as Secretary of State Pompeo's visit to Israeli settlements in November. It is the first from someone at his level. He announced new rules of origin for Israeli products. Products originating from Area C in the West Bank (an area under Israeli control) may be exported as 'Made in Israel'. This is tantamount to recognising Israeli sovereignty over 60 percent of the West Bank. Shortly afterwards, Morocco normalised diplomatic relations with Israel in exchange for US recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara.

Many initiatives and measures are outside UN resolutions and international law. It will be wise to correct where necessary during the Biden presidency, which will have more sympathy for multilateralism than the Trump presidency has had.

Iran, Revolutionary Guard and the Shiite Corridor

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)⁶ was badly damaged during the Trump presidency and even seems to have

⁶ ICG, "Ten Conflicts to Watch in 2020".

been overtaken by events. Since 2018, it has suffered from the US withdrawal from the deal, the Trump administration's maximum pressure campaign against Iran, sabotage (without known perpetrator) against Iranian nuclear facilities, or the assassination of Iran's top nuclear scientist. Iran has defied JCPOA restrictions. The Biden Administration will have the last chance to prevent the JCPOA from collapsing.

The US has imposed 1,500 unilateral sanctions with restrictions on Iran's energy and financial sectors, which have significantly damaged Iran's economy. Secretary of State Pompeo put Iran's revenue loss at \$70 billion. Despite maximum pressure, Iran's nuclear activity could not be reduced; it has increased. Attempts to reduce Iran's regional influence have been met with enormous resistance and tensions that have led to situations of great conflict in Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and Iraq.

A scenario opens up in which the US and Iran must begin a negotiating process to get sanctions lifted and return to the JCPOA. It remains to be seen. Gulf neighbours are very concerned and Iranian pressure in the region, through militias, is worrying.

Alex Vatanka⁷ considers 2020 to be an *annus horribilis* for Iran. US pressure was strong and Iran's domestic political mistakes have provoked a general malaise with many public appeals. This does not seem to be enough to bring about the demise of the Islamic regime and its hardliners retain their strength and influence. The pandemic has been very damaging and more so as a result of sanctions. Attempts at autarky and barter trade to avoid the damage caused by sanctions have not been very successful due to the health situation. Iran has failed to elicit international sympathy and has found itself isolated in many respects. Iran has not reacted with retaliation to the more symbolic attacks attributed to the US or Israel, but is keeping the threat for a better occasion. It has been very cautious in Syria following several Israeli attacks.

Iran will seek to take advantage of the change of US administration to increase its regional activity. Will it be able to cope with its weak economic situation? Will it be able to control Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen? It will continue to count on China. Shortly after being elected president, Biden gave an interview to Thomas Friedman. In it, Biden spoke of a 'two-step procedure' and a

⁷ Middle East Institute, "2020 The Year in Review", Alex Vatanka, 14-12-2020.

'parallel negotiation', in which Iranian regional behaviour and the Iranian ballistic missile programme would be dealt with in parallel with the reinstatement of the JCPOA and the gradual lifting of sanctions. Biden would not want to start by lifting sanctions to salvage the JCPOA, as he believes such a tactic would encourage Hezbollah and Iran's expansion in the region. The interview has been criticised by those who believe that by uncovering some of his cards, Biden is giving encouragement to the Revolutionary Guard who want the reinstatement of the JCPOA to be conducive to consolidating their strength in the region.

Syria and Iraq, militias

Ba'athist Syria has managed to consolidate much of its territorial dominance, but there are still areas under Turkish, Jihadist and Kurdish control and Russian, US and Iranian presence. The economic and health catastrophe will not be resolved any time soon, nor will the refugees return to a country that can offer them little or nothing. Changes to the MEPP could provide a way out, but the Ba'athist regime will not yield easily in this area. The dire situation could facilitate some internal change.

Russia does not have a comfortable position in Syria⁸. It has tensions with Turkey, Iran or the Ba'athists, not to mention the US and Israel, but is likely to play a major role in 2021. It must rely on Iran in the face of the change of US Administration, seek some common ground with Turkey and facilitate the need for internal change. Perhaps it wants to consolidate President al-Assad's hold on the jihadists in Idlib. Iran could guarantee stability for Russia to maintain its bases. Iran will want to consolidate its strength in the region, which not only makes the US uncomfortable but much of the Arab world. In Syria, Russia and Turkey have different views on the Ba'athist regime, but what is perhaps most important is Turkey's great caution towards the Kurds, who are of less concern to Russia. Russia could consider solving Syria's problems with Israel in exchange for reducing Iran's military presence. Russia, through Syria, seeks its role in the Middle East by isolating Turkey and Iran.

Maha Yahya⁹ points out that the Syrian media have used the pandemic to condemn the US. and praise the health measures of

⁸ Raghida Dergham, Beirut Institute, December 2020.

⁹ "Conflict Zones in the Time of Coronavirus", Maha Yahya, 17-12-2020.

Russia, China and Iran These views are widespread in the region, and some have seen the pandemic as a US biological weapon, indirectly facilitating the shift from clerical to military rule in Iran. It is not clear that this facilitates excellence in health measures, but that is not the point. Yemeni Houthis have accused Saudi Arabia of such evil.

Robert Ford¹⁰, a Trump administration official, told Congress in December that it was possible to defeat ISIS in Syria, achieve full withdrawal of Iranian forces in Syria, and achieve a political settlement there. Perhaps it is a wilful stance or the frustration of the Trump Administration's failure to win a second term, but the fruits are not immediate. In November, a Pentagon report pointed to the poor situation of ISIS in eastern Syria, where it can no longer consolidate its territorial position, something the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces can do. US. These forces control small oil wells and a no-fly zone is maintained, as well as a small US military force that deters Russia and the Syrian Ba'athist government from occupying the area. There is tension between the Russian and American troops.

The Syrian Ba'athist government has faced a severe economic recession in 2020 caused by corruption, mismanagement and Western sanctions. Buying bread or fuel has been difficult. The pandemic has hit very strong. Despite so many pressures and difficulties, the Syrian Ba'athist government did not budge at the UN-backed constitutional talks in Geneva to push through reforms. There have been tensions within the clans that control the regime. The consolidation of Iranian militias near the Euphrates was accepted and has provoked retaliatory Israeli air strikes.

Heavy fighting took place in the north-east in early 2020 between the Syrian Arab Army, supported by the Syrian air force, and the Turkish-backed opposition. Fighting ended without a clear outcome, but pro-government forces were able to control the vital highway between Damascus and Aleppo. In Jihadist- and Turkish-controlled Idlib, combat was reduced although there were Russian and government air strikes. By the end of 2020, Turkey has consolidated its positions amidst great instability and with three million internally displaced persons.

There is less fighting but no political solution, and the situation is dramatic for the Syrian population.

¹⁰ Middle East Institute, "2020 The Year in Review", Robert Ford, 14-12-2020.

Regarding Iraq, Randa Slim¹¹ comments that 2020 started with a big bang, with the liquidation of Revolutionary Guard commander General Qassem Soleimani and the deputy commander of the Iraqi Popular Mobilisation Forces, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, on Iraqi soil. This was followed by a retaliatory Iranian missile attack on Iraqi bases where US military personnel were stationed. Iraq was caught in the middle of the military escalation between the US and Iran, something it had always tried to avoid. This escalation conditioned the political and security situation in Iraq during 2020.

Pandemic-imposed health conditions and great economic challenges hit Iraq hard in 2020. Iraq has ranked second in deaths and infection by the pandemic in the region. Falling oil prices and the global economic catastrophe have been particularly hard on the country. The government had to borrow money to pay for public sector salaries and essential food and medicines. A far-reaching economic reform plan was adopted to address the dramatic situation and restore economic solvency. Endemic corruption and the vested interests of political and economic elites prevented its implementation, contributing to further deterioration.

The pandemic and political assassinations, coupled with pressure on civil society activists, have prevented the October 2019 protest movement from achieving results. It is a scenario similar to the one seen in Lebanon. General elections are scheduled for 2021, and whether the protest movement manages to reach parliament or whether electoral inertia continues to prevail will be seen.

The presence of so-called pro-Iranian militias is very strong and, predictably, they have continued to pursue their approaches outside the government and with the support of Iran or Lebanese Hezbollah. These include Kata'ib Hezbollah, Badr Organisation and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, which are part of the Popular Mobilisation Forces, and others that are not part of this group, such as the Sadrist Mahdi Army. These militias defend Shia Islam and have been very effective in fighting ISIS. Obviously, if the state does not have a monopoly on the use of force, the situation is chaotic. The militias are also present in the Iraqi parliament and administration. Some Sunni or Turkmen militia have emerged in response, with Iraqi support, in addition to the well-established Kurdish Peshmerga.

¹¹ Middle East Institute, '2020 The Year in Review', Randa Slim, 14-12-2020.

The government formed in May 2020, led by Mustafa al-Kadhimi, was deemed a crisis government in order to address the health, security and economic challenges facing Iraq. There have been no noteworthy developments. Pro-Iranian militias have not yielded and could not be defeated, thus maintaining their pressure and their position of blocking any change.

Relations between Baghdad and the Kurdish regional government have continued in their ongoing cycle of deterioration and improvement, while protests are also taking their toll in the region where, as in the rest of Iraq, the public sector cannot be paid. Ongoing discussions continue over the funds Baghdad must pay from the national budget to the Kurdistan Regional Government and its contribution to Iraq's public accounts. Nothing new for years.

The US-Iraq relationship has gone from very positive during Prime Minister al-Kadhimi's August trip to Washington, accompanied by a large delegation, to Secretary of State Pompeo's threats to close the US embassy shortly thereafter. The issue of closing the embassy was raised because of attacks by pro-Iranian militias without any reaction from the Iraqi government, although there was little it could do to intervene. The US- Iraq strategic dialogue to establish a substantive bilateral relationship beyond the strictly military began in June. The Biden administration is thought to perhaps have less interest in such a strategic dialogue if it wanted to reduce its activity in the region.

In its very recent report, the ISW¹² notes that the stabilisation of Iraq is of strategic importance to the US, and merits a major political effort. Iraq's continued domestic fragility creates an open field for foreign interventions, most obviously from Iran, and for the emergence of armed groups. This increases instability in the region and in Iraq in a permanent cycle of fighting. Using this open field must be prevented, which requires Iraq to re-establish a strong and stable sovereign state. This is a prerequisite for stability in the region and also for economic progress and prosperity, as well as for avoiding new sources of conflict.

The new Biden administration will continue to need a stable region, maintain the success of counterterrorism and prevent the resurgence of ISIS, compete with Russia and China, contain Iran

¹² "Iraq is fragile, not hopeless", Katherine Lawlor and Ketti Davison, ISW, December 2020.

and make the seventeen-year effort in Iraq pay off. Iraq will continue to be of great importance not only to the US but also to the EU and NATO, which is leading an operation there.

Cross-cutting terrorism

John Philip Jenkins¹³ defines terrorism as the calculated use of violence to create a general climate of fear in a population in order to achieve a particular political objective. Terrorism has been practised by political organisations with right-wing or left-wing objectives, by religious or nationalist groups, by revolutionaries, and even by state institutions.

In this region, the spread of terrorism over the past decade has been unstoppable. It has gone from being an instrument to achieve political or social gains, in the wrong way, to achieving territorial dominance. The Islamic State (ISIS) managed to control hundreds of thousands of square kilometres, to establish a civil service and a judiciary, and to have a say in any world event. To be defeated in Syria and Iraq required the intervention of the best fighter aircraft and military dispatches from the best armies in the world. Spain was well represented and played a leading role. Not only was territorial dominance sought and threats made that new lands would be acquired, but classically terrorist operations were carried out in Europe and elsewhere. All this with the aim of establishing a caliphate based on approaches that are rejected by many Muslims but not completely rejected by others. At the moment, the territorial presence of ISIS is limited but the terrorist network continues and expects to act in the same way again. It is still present, territorially, in Syria and Iraq and shows that it can make an appearance in Lebanon. It is also present in other countries in the region and in Africa. The parallel presence of Al Qaida is not to be forgotten.

After the severe economic consequences of the pandemic, it may well be that this terrorist route offers hope to many of the dispossessed, but there may also be fewer means to deal with them effectively.

Hezbollah and pro-Iranian Iraqi Shia militias have effectively fought the more radical Jihadists. Hezbollah has fought them in Syria and Iraq, but has also been very active in Lebanon without

¹³ John Philip Jenkins, Encyclopaedia Britannica.

interfering in the work of the Lebanese Armed Forces and reaching de facto coordination with them. Shiite radicals are pro-Iranian, Sunni radicals are anti-Saudi. There may be more to them than meets the eye.

In 2017, the CIA released 470,000 documents pointing to close contact between Al Qaeda and Iran. They reported that Iran had provided Al Qaeda with money and weapons and even offered training at Hezbollah camps in Lebanon in exchange for attacking US interests in Arabia. Eight of the 9/11 terrorists had passed through Iran before arriving in the US. Iran provided funding, logistical support and ammunition to Al Qaeda leaders, and sheltered many in return for their attacks on American interests.

This means that despite outright opposition between Shiite and Sunni extremist militias or armed groups, there is common ground, especially in opposing the US. There have been many such episodes, and in Lebanon it seems to have been the norm, since the very serious incidents at Nahr el-Bared between the Lebanese Armed Forces and Fath al-Islam jihadists.

The goals of these groups may be different, caliphate or resistance, but they can come together in their destructive zeal. In outright opposition to the Western way of life and what they believe to be their interests, they also seek to reach out to large or medium-sized powers that can help or provide armaments. Another particularly important issue is how funding is organised.

In 2020, the effort to include women in solving conflicts was highlighted¹⁴ and, among them, those linked to terrorism. The 20th anniversary of UNSC Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) has been commemorated. Its principles remain vital but there has been little progress in advancing them. One problem is integrating the WPS with the opposition to violent extremism (CVE). This issue of women's reaction to international terrorist activity is important to highlight and recognise the difficulties encountered.

Many women activists feel that their activism has been subordinated to state efforts to combat Islamist militancy. Whether or not this is true, it has hindered women's activity and even exposed them to physical danger. The CVE seeks to disrupt Islamist militant recruitment that attracts foreigners or organises terrorist

¹⁴ ICG, 'Ten Conflicts to Watch in 2020'.

activities outside the region. It combats their attractiveness and roots, and promotes women's safety and equality. The role of women in disproving the terrorist narrative at social and family level is extremely important, in addition to the fact that this kind of terrorism is characterised by deep misogyny.

Lebanon, Hezbollah

The renewed conflict in Lebanon is difficult to understand without looking at Hezbollah. Hezbollah has a parliamentary majority together with its allies (CPL, Amal, Pro-Syrians, PSNS, Marada and others) and a decisive influence in the presidency of the Republic after the pact that allowed General Aoun to be elected, and it consequently plays an important role in the government. Different parliamentary majorities cannot be ruled out but they are difficult to achieve, and in any case there is no discipline in the parliamentary groups as there may be in European parliaments. The resignation of Kata'ib MPs, PLC independents and others leads to more parliamentary influence for Hezbollah, at least until by-elections are held. The road to the 2022 parliamentary and presidential elections has begun and the possibility of profound change then is reduced by the usual electoral behaviour of half of citizens voting and the other half abstaining, and the possibility of the planned elections being delayed. The influence of the Uprising will continue but it is not evident that it will have striking electoral results, as of today. Parliament elects the President of the Republic, so there is an interest in maintaining the current President with an extension so that the existing parliamentary majority can elect the new President of the Republic for a six-year term.

In the general economic, financial, health, political and social crisis that Lebanon is now deeply affected by, Hezbollah remains strong in its areas of deployment and its militia force wields obvious power in the Shia community and is a deterrent in others. Hezbollah's allies are visible in the Christian, Sunni and Druze communities. In any case, Hezbollah has suffered significant reputational damage in the aftermath of the Uprising.

Hezbollah stresses that it is a Lebanese political actor that fulfils its commitments and supports the existence of a state, weak at the moment in order to be able to influence Lebanese life, and strong in the future. Hezbollah maintains a parallel economy, which allows it to cope with US sanctions. Its domestic focus does

not make it abandon its regional priorities, especially in Syria, while remaining very cautious about escalation with Israel.

Hezbollah reinforces its Lebanese identity and political legitimacy. This makes it very difficult for outside pressure to remove it from power in Lebanon to succeed and is a source of significant internal conflict. Hezbollah has always been resilient. It entered politics in 1992 and the government in 2005. It has sought to benefit the Shia community, which has had a long history of marginalisation, and is embedded in the Shia tradition of the disinherited, not just the Lebanese tradition. It knows how to adapt its narrative. After the disappointment caused by its attitude to the Uprising, it has been able to handle itself skilfully in the fight against the pandemic. In the Uprising it emerged as a staunch defender of the establishment and rejected protester demands. Its position as a bulwark of the 'left' suffered greatly and, for example, the Communist Party has re-emerged after having lost much of its importance due to the rise of Hezbollah. Hezbollah's health and social network was put at the disposal of the fight against the pandemic and has proved useful and effective even if it has been rivalled by a Ministry of Health with a minister close to the party. Recognition of its caring for 6,000 people showed that many of them came from Syria and were Syrian, Iraqi and Iranian fighters or associates. They also highlight their support for the Syrian Ba'athist regime from Lebanon, with all sorts of practices that do not benefit the common Lebanese.

The transformation of Lebanese society and the emergence of profound changes in new generations makes the existence of a party with such a confessional, armed and militia structure strange. The war from 1975 to 1990 is increasingly distant and rejection of the clan and clientelist system that resulted from it is also distant. Hezbollah strives to attract young people. Hezbollah wants to maintain Shia hegemony in Lebanon and contributes to maintaining an increasingly outdated sectarianism.

The start of talks between Lebanon and Israel, albeit heavily conditioned by Hezbollah itself, has taken the wind out of the sails of the Resistance theory it espouses. Talks on maritime delimitation involve the US and the United Nations and are similar to the Tripartite with UNIFIL. More and more Lebanese people are asking why Lebanon cannot be the same as the Gulf Arabs, Sudan or Morocco, as well as Jordan and Egypt, have been doing for years and come to an understanding with Israel. Here one can see Hezbollah's link to Iran and the enormous difficulty of moving

in a different direction. Talks are suspended and are expected to resume with the new US presidency.

This issue is linked to the exploitation of gas in this maritime space adjacent to Hezbollah and Amal areas. The gas pipeline (EastMed) agreed by Greece, Cyprus and Israel in January 2020¹⁵ to supply natural gas to the EU and facilitate its energy independence is categorically rejected by Hezbollah because of Israel's presence. The US was sympathetic to the EastMed. Turkey also rejects it, and has even signed a maritime delimitation agreement with Libya to hinder the construction of such a pipeline. Hezbollah prefers the Turkish option of a gas pipeline with Russia and even China or others outside Europe. It is not surprising that, in the face of Lebanon's severe economic and financial crisis, Hezbollah suggests relying on the support of Russia, China, Turkey, Syria, Iran and Iraq as opposed to those who prefer the EU or its member states, the US or international financial institutions. The East Med Gaz Forum involving Greece, Cyprus, Israel, Italy, Egypt, the Palestinian National Authority and Jordan exists for dialogue and cooperation, but Libya, Syria and Lebanon are not members. The EU, US and UAE are permanent observers. Turkey and France should join the Forum in 2021. Major oil and gas companies such as Total, ENI, Novatek or Exxon have signed agreements with countries in this region and are important players.

Hezbollah's presence in places where it does not belong, such as Beirut Airport, Beirut port, telecommunications, electricity, etc. has raised obvious questions about the very serious causes of the brutal explosion of 4 August. Doubt has spread and this had led to refusals to allow neutral investigations. The severe financial crisis in the banking sector, of which Hezbollah is not part due to its sanctioned status, means that there are also more questions. Hezbollah has a semi-bank institution, Al Qarqi Al Hasan (A Loan in Kind), which provides loans and mutually guaranteed community loans, and has benefited from the Lebanese banking crisis by being outside the system. The destabilisation of the \$ and the role of Hezbollah-controlled money changers, the shipment of subsidised goods to Syria or even \$, are very serious issues that cause an internal Lebanese conflict that does not require weapons.

High tensions with Arabia and other Gulf countries in the context of the tension with Iran is causing Lebanon many problems.

¹⁵ El País, 2-1-2020.

Arabia and the UAE were very close to Lebanon and contributed to its financial well-being, all that has disappeared, and a deep distrust of any Lebanese government has settled in as it is seen as always being linked to Hezbollah. The US, UK, Germany, the Netherlands, Argentina, Australia, Canada, Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Japan, etc., condemn Hezbollah in no uncertain terms, and this has consequences in Lebanon.

We should not forget UNIFIL's presence in southern Lebanon. Some 600 Spanish military personnel are taking part, forming the largest contingent outside Spain at the moment. UNIFIL was expanded in 2006, through UNSC Resolution 1701, following the conflict between Hezbollah and Israel, with France, Spain and Italy playing a key role. Hostilities ceased but a ceasefire must be reached. UNIFIL has been successful in stabilising southern Lebanon and returning the Lebanese Armed Forces to the area that had been occupied by Israel between 1978 and 2000.

Armenia and Azerbaijan

Turkey and Azerbaijan may have jointly planned the offensive to oppose Armenian control of Nagorno-Karabakh, which served to reignite the conflict between the two Caucasus countries. Tensions between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh escalated into conventional fighting in September. The media described the situation as a spontaneous escalation. Military cooperation between Turkey and Azerbaijan, the sale of drones and military mobilisation suggest that Azerbaijan was preparing, with Turkish support, to contest Armenian presence in Nagorno-Karabakh even before September, when fighting began.

Azerbaijan appears to have acquired Turkish drones in June and deployed them very effectively. The use of Israeli drones has also been reported. Between July and August 2020, Azerbaijani and Turkish armed forces conducted large-scale joint exercises and organised bilateral meetings at a very high level. Following the manoeuvres, Turkey left F-16 fighter jets in Azerbaijan as a deterrent against Armenia. It was unclear to what extent Turkish military personnel would have been actively involved in combat operations. Before fighting began, Turkey helped deploy some 1500 fighters from the rebel Syrian National Army to Azerbaijan to reinforce its army (according to the US State Department, Russian Foreign Intelligence and the President of the French Republic). In September there was already reliable information about

the presence of these Syrian fighters who were also deployed on Azerbaijan's border with Iran (we must recall that in Syria these fighters, supported by Turkey, are enemies of Iranian forces and their allies). Turkey denied any Syrian National Army presence in Azerbaijan, but claimed that members of the PKK were fighting alongside the Armenian army. The danger of escalation to active theatres of operations in Syria and Iraq would have existed and even if Azerbaijan had acted spontaneously against Armenia, Turkish support has been explicit and visible.

Azerbaijan owes its quick victory in Nagorno-Karabakh to Turkish arms sales, Syrian militia and diplomatic support¹⁶. Turkey boasts longstanding ties with Azerbaijan but has now sought to consolidate its position in the Caucasus and replace Russia in Azerbaijan. All this at little opportunity cost. Russia, in return for maintaining control in the region, has forced Armenia to accept its withdrawal from almost all of Nagorno-Karabakh in response to Azerbaijan's repeated demands. Land lost in 1994 has been recovered but Azerbaijan will have to accept Russian military presence, strain its relationship with Turkey and not accept Turkish military presence.

Russia would have intervened if Azerbaijani troops went beyond Nagorno-Karabakh and entered Armenia (in application of the 1997 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation between Russia and Armenia). Russia thus considers Nagorno-Karabakh to be a disputed territory. Russia wants to maintain a balance in former USSR territory and is has an active presence in other arenas such as Ukraine and Belarus.

With the 9 November agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which puts an end to the war, Russia manages to reaffirm its position in the Caucasus and underline its presence in the 'Near Abroad', strengthens the relationship between Moscow and Baku despite Turkish efforts, will deploy 1960 military personnel in Azarbaijan recovering presence in a former USSR territory, there will be no Turkish military in Nagorno-Karabakh, and opens the door to a pro-Russian leadership in Armenia in the face of the foreseeable political and electoral defeat of the current pro-western leadership of Prime Minister Pashinyan that emerged from the popular protests of 2018. The agreement takes up the principles of a negotiation that has been stalled for 25 years¹⁷. Armenian

¹⁶ ISW, 13-11-2020.

¹⁷ Félix Flores, El País, 11-11-2020.

refugees organised by UNHCR are expected to return. Pashinyan wanted to make Armenia the Israel of the Caucasus with Western support but only France has sent humanitarian aid.

Russia partly sacrificed Armenia, which is a staunch ally and militarily dependent on Moscow, by making a smart policy to prevent Azerbaijan from fully surrendering to Turkey. Turkey has succeeded in establishing an observation centre in Azerbaijan and opening a corridor between the two countries. Putin has always considered that he has the legitimacy to act throughout the territory of the former USSR and, in particular, where there is a Russian population, although this is not the case in this conflict.

Competition between Turkey and Russia will continue in other theatres. The future is uncertain. Tension between Turkey and Armenia will increase. Other stakeholders include Israel, which has an excellent relationship with Azerbaijan, from which it imports oil and gas and maintains a military and intelligence presence on its territory, and Iran, which is concerned about this Israeli presence and because there is a large Azeri minority on its territory. Armed groups reportedly attack Iran from Azeri territory on occasions.

Refugees and displaced persons

Conflict in the region is an unfortunate source of hundreds of thousands of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) with numbers increasing year by year. UNHCR, IOM and UNRWA are doing a tremendous amount of work to resolve very distressing situations. Budgetary difficulties are increasing as the number of refugees and displaced persons rises, and also because of the consequences of the pandemic.

According to UNHCR data¹⁸ there were 80 million forcibly displaced people in the world by mid-2020. Of these, 45.8 million are internally displaced, 26.4 million are refugees, 4.2 million are asylum seekers and 3.6 million are Venezuelans displaced abroad. It should be noted that 67 % come from five countries, of which three are from our area of interest: Syria (6.6 million), Afghanistan (2.7 million) and South Sudan (2.3 million). Turkey hosts the most refugees, with 3.6 million (mostly Syrians, but also Iraqis). Germany hosts 1.1 million. Some 32 million of the

¹⁸ UNHCR, Refugee Data Base, 2020.

refugees are minors. 86 % of refugees reside in developing countries. Only 120,000 refugees returned to their country of origin in the first half of 2020.

These figures give an idea of the terrible consequences of the above-mentioned conflicts and how, for some time now, the main number of victims has not been among combatants but among the civilian population.

Data are highly variable, and the official nature of the data may not reflect reality. For example, Lebanon is currently considered to be able to host more than one million Syrian refugees, but this is not exactly reflected in the statistics, although it would be the country hosting the most refugees in proportion to its number of citizens. The presence of these refugees is seen as a possible first step for them to move to Europe if conditions in the region do not improve or if Lebanon becomes a failed state. The same, but with higher numbers, is true for Turkey. The large number of refugees who moved to Europe in 2015-2016, mainly from Syria and Iraq, has had significant political and social consequences and has indirectly led to the strengthening of political parties that are very sceptical about them.

Palestinian refugees fall under the competence of UNRWA¹⁹. UNRWA considers 'Palestine Refugees' to be 'persons whose normal place of residence was Palestine during the period 1 June 1946 to 15 May 1948, and who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict'.

Descendants of these refugees also have the same rights for the Agency, which serves refugees living in the five areas in which it operates (Gaza Strip, West Bank including East Jerusalem, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria). The number of Palestine refugees has grown from 914,000 in 1950 to over 5.6 million today, due to natural population growth.

They certainly constitute a very serious problem that has been going on for more than 70 years and in which, in addition to sovereignty and human rights issues, there are questions of property rights. The conflict is still ongoing, although 2020 has seen major changes as several Arab states, not bordering Israel, have recognised the legal existence of Israel. It is worth noting that being a Palestinian refugee on UNRWA lists has become a certain status for people who might not be considered refugees accord-

¹⁹ UNRWA Spain, 2020.

ing to UNHCR. UNHCR cares for all refugees in the world except Palestinians. Critics of UNRWA point out that while UNHCR works to make refugees cease to be refugees (with their return in accordance with international law to their places of origin or their full integration where they have sought refuge), UNRWA works to keep Palestinian refugees as refugees.

UNRWA estimates that there are 075 refugees²⁰ in Lebanon, however in 2017 the Lebanese and Palestinian Statistical Offices, with support from the UK government, estimated that there were 000 Palestinian refugees residing in Lebanon rather than the above figure.

UNRWA's current severe economic crisis and the change taking place in the Middle East following President Trump's initiatives (very hostile to UNRWA) could change the Agency's activity. Spain is one of the 28 members of UNRWA's Advisory Committee and is making a great budgetary effort at this difficult time for the Agency.

²¹The IOM adopts UNHCR data on refugees and displaced persons, but has its own data on migrants. There are 45.6 million migrants in the West Asia sub-region, 16.6 percent of the global total.

Pandemic as conflict

Paul Salem²² notes that in 2020 this region was marked by the COVID-19 pandemic and its severe economic consequences, and by regional movements due to the normalisation of relations between several Arab states and Israel.

The pandemic hit Turkey and Iran early on, followed by Iraq and some Gulf states, and spread rapidly across the region. Infection and death rates have never been very precise but there have been obvious health crises in the region, with a large number of deaths and difficulties in hospital care. Many states acted quickly to impose control measures with closures, curfews, travel restrictions, contagion tracking and control, training, medical care, medicines, etc. to reduce the damage. Lebanon excelled in this, with exemplary results, until the explosion on 4 August. 2021

²⁰ UNRWA, 2020.

²¹ OIM, 2020.

²² Middle East Institute, '2020 The Year in Review', Paul Salem, 14-12-2020.

begins with efforts to cope with a new wave, how to procure sufficient vaccines and how to store and distribute them.

The region's economies have shrunk by an average of 5 percent, tens of millions of people have fallen below the poverty line and millions have lost their jobs. If there is no rapid improvement, the chances of social conflict will increase considerably. Social safety nets need to be established in some places, which requires financial means that do not exist today. Political response is often very poor and the administration and the government in general are not up to the task. Pressure on international bodies to help is constant and increasing, and great hope is also placed in the EU, although this does not mean that there is a desire to accept its human rights policy, for example. The economic blow has been caused by the slowdown in domestic economic activity due to pandemic-related closures, damage to sensitive sectors such as tourism and the collapse in oil prices. The year 2020 has been the worst economically in half a century and high levels of poverty and unemployment will be even worse in 2021. Fiscal margin is very narrow and has conditioned governments' actions. Social peace is being maintained for the time being.

In conflict areas, such as Yemen, Syria and Libya, there has been heavy damage. In these places, the economic decline would be 13 percent and there are no government or state institutions in a position to manage the crisis or reduce the damage.

A more optimistic note is offered by JP Morgan, which believes that although the pandemic has hit the region's economy very hard, a gradual recovery is expected by 2021 and full recovery by 2022.

Conflicts in the region: Western Sahara, Libya, Afghanistan, Yemen, Ethiopia and Somalia

On 30 October, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2548/2020, in which it invites Morocco, the Polisario Front, Algeria and Mauritania to resume dialogue following recent armed incidents between Polisario forces and Morocco in some areas of Western Sahara²³. The Resolution, which was supported by the US, recalls previous UNSC commitments and resolutions such as 1754 (2007), 1783 (2007), 1813 (2008), 1871 (2009), 1920

²³ Pablo Sebastián, República, 12-12-2020.

(2010), 1979 (2011), 2044 (2012), 2099 (2013), 2152 (2014), 2218 (2015), 2285 (2016), 2351 (2017), 2414 (2018), 2440 (2018), 2468 (2019) and 2494 (2019).

A month and a half after the approval of Resolution 2548/2020, US President Donald Trump announced an agreement with the Kingdom of Morocco whereby the US recognises, on its own and outside the UN, Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara.

In return, the Moroccan government agrees to establish diplomatic relations with Israel. An announcement that was accompanied by a statement from King Mohamed VI of Morocco saying that his country remains committed to the Palestinian people.

The Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs also issued a statement, reaffirming Spain's commitment to the UN resolutions and consequently to the right to self-determination of the Saharawi people.

The fact that the US voted in favour of Resolution 2548 means that it recalls previous commitments and resolutions but also that it supports resolving this conflict with dialogue between Western Sahara's three neighbours and the Polisario Front. The Resolution welcomes the new momentum generated by the first Round Table, held on 5-6 December 2018, and the second Round Table, held on 21-22 March 2019, and the commitment of Morocco, the Polisario Front, Algeria and Mauritania to engage in the UN political process on Western Sahara in a serious and respectful manner, in order to find elements of convergence. It encourages the resumption of consultations in this regard between the new Personal Envoy and Morocco, the Polisario Front, Algeria and Mauritania in order to build on the progress achieved.

The Resolution insists on the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara in the framework of arrangements consistent with the principles and purposes of the UN Charter, and noting the role and responsibilities of the parties in this regard. Referendum is only mentioned when referring to MINURSO, whose mandate is extended until 31 October 2021.

American recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the territory obviously conditions this dialogue and even the holding of a referendum, from the US point of view, and seems to suggest that the solution can only be found within Morocco through pure and simple annexation or some form of regional autonomy. The US is also willing to open a consulate inside Saharawi territory. It

is worth recalling that other Arab countries have opened consulates, or said they would, in recent months.

It is original that this change in US position is linked to the establishment of diplomatic relations between Morocco and Israel. In a way, the Palestinian and Sahrawi disputes are linked by suggesting solutions that would not involve recognition of statehood. The United Nations has passed numerous Resolutions on both disputes and it how it will act from now on remains to be seen. The post of UNSG Personal Envoy has been vacant since May 2019.

This new situation created by Donald Trump is unlikely to be altered by President Joe Biden from next year onwards, as it would affect Washington's relations with Rabat and Tel Aviv. It may be a strategic shift in the North African region by the US and also in the area of the Strait of Gibraltar. However, during the final stage of President Trump's term there were moves to see if this recognition would be nuanced.

After the approval of Resolution 2548 on 13 November, the 1991 ceasefire between Morocco and the Polisario was broken in what would be a provocation by Sahrawi activism to break the long information silence²⁴ and regret that the Resolution calls for negotiations, without conditions, by all parties in what would be a regional conflict. The 1991 ceasefire ended the conflict that lasted from 1975 to 1991 and set out to begin the process of decolonisation overseen by the United Nations. The trigger for the breakdown of the ceasefire was reportedly the expulsion of 50 Saharawi activists by the Moroccan army in Guerguerat. It is a crossing point to Mauritania considered illegal by the Polisario Front. There have been skirmishes at various points along the security fence, but no casualties have been reported. The conflict lasted a week but is not yet closed. Morocco has won strong international support either for itself or for the continuation of the ceasefire with the Polisario often being blamed for the breakdown. The Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic won the support of Cuba, Venezuela, South Africa, Namibia and Nicaragua.

There is no doubt that this conflict, coupled with the change in the US position on the recognition of sovereignty, is a diplomatic success for Morocco. It is worth noting that Morocco has needed to recognise Israel in order for the US to recognise Moroccan sovereignty in Western Sahara, something the Moroccans have

²⁴ Beatriz Mesa, *El País*, 18-11-2020.

always claimed. Perhaps the price paid is not too high given the changes taking place in the Arab world regarding recognition of Israel.

The King of Morocco chairs the Al Quds Committee (of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation), an international entity that brings together Arab support for the Palestinian cause to work for the preservation of Jerusalem's religious, cultural and urban heritage.

Recent events could lead to an escalation. A Polisario attack took place at the end of January. The scenario features Morocco and the US on the one hand and Algeria and Russia on the other, but this does not necessarily mean that there must be a conflict. It would be good if the Polisario did not feel isolated. No one seems to want a more serious conflict. The serious economic situation of the various actors is also not conducive to increased tension. All this will serve to consolidate Morocco's position.

Libya. A fragile ceasefire was signed in October and is holding, and has prevented renewed conflict. Tensions remain high and more so because there is no substantive progress in the political and economic negotiations that should allow for the reunification of a country divided in two, with rival governments and distinct financial and military institutions, since 2014.

UN intervention to appoint a unity government has not yet succeeded. There is no agreement on the appointment of senior officials in the administration. A temporary oil deal was reached in September that allowed production and exports to resume at a very difficult time for the international oil market. The financial situation has deteriorated significantly. Work is underway to hold a general election in December 2021 after reaching a number of political agreements.

Jonathan Winer²⁵ recalls that in late 2019 General Hafter, with the support of Egypt, Russia, UAE, Israel, France, Greece, Syria, Saudi Arabia and foreign mercenaries was close to seizing Tripoli and toppling the internationally recognised Government of National Accord, taking control of government funds and institutions.

Turkey's 2020 intervention has led to Hafter's withdrawal from the western Libyan region. Escalation was halted to avoid a regional war and to allow for the resumption of UN-backed nego-

²⁵ Middle East Institute, "2020 The Year in Review", Jonathan Winer, 14-12-2020.

tiations. Foreign fighters and mercenaries must be withdrawn, but this is not yet being done. A new front opened up for Turkey, which sent military material until December 2020²⁶ and even prepared air defence systems that could lead to a confrontation with Egypt and the UAE, which support Haftar, as well as Russia. Another scenario in which President Biden is expected to be able to intervene effectively.

That an internal military solution is not possible seems to be accepted, but inter-Libyan agreements have not yet been fully reached. To end the conflict, foreign powers should stop arming their Libyan allies and put pressure on them to negotiate. In the meantime, fighting between militias could continue instead of achieving a stable national government.²⁷

In Afghanistan, Marvin Weinbaum²⁸ notes that optimism is a scarce commodity, but in 2020 it has appeared thanks to negotiations to end a long and very bloody civil war. Intra-Afghan negotiations were scheduled to begin when a US-Taliban agreement was reached in February. The conflict in Afghanistan has resulted in 100,000 civilian casualties since 2010. A peace agreement was signed in February 2020 following talks between the US and the Taliban. The Taliban should avoid terrorist activity on their territory, break with Al Qaida and start talks with the Afghan government and the US, and gradually withdraw their troops. There is still no ceasefire and non-Taliban jihadist presence in Afghanistan remains significant. There is a long road ahead of good-faith talks and accommodation among Afghans, but it is the only way to end a long and very bloody conflict.²⁹

The US-Taliban talks were the first between the two. The US has given preference to reaching an agreement with the insurgents. These talks have been widely praised by the international community, which saw that the endless conflict could continue to cause much damage outside Afghanistan itself. Qatar proposed hosting the Afghan and Taliban delegations for their deliberations. A huge majority of Afghans agreed to this process, which opened the door to ending so many years of suffering.

Talks were initially difficult. Disagreements arose on many issues, the most relevant of which was the exchange of prisoners. Months

²⁶ Crisis Group Libya Update #2, 24-12-2020.

²⁷ ICG, "Ten Conflicts to Watch in 2020".

²⁸ Middle East Institute, "2020 The Year in Review", Marvin Weinbaum, 14-12-2020.

²⁹ ICG, "Ten Conflicts to Watch in 2020".

passed before a formal meeting took place and there were formal difficulties. And a lot of mistrust. Internal political disputes did not facilitate negotiations either. The pandemic hit very strong in Pakistan and Iran, and with the return of refugees settled in both countries, the health situation in Afghanistan deteriorated sharply. Afghanistan's health structure is very poor and the possibility of knowing the level of infections or deaths is very limited, as is the possibility of providing adequate medical treatment.

Nevertheless, the war continued to grow in intensity throughout 2020. Peace talks brought hope, but insurgent attacks increased. Concerns about the peace process, security and the political system continue. The Taliban see the talks as a way for them to make their gains visible, the Afghan government does not. By May 2021, the withdrawal of US and NATO forces should be completed. The Taliban want a withdrawal at that time, the US might want to link it to progress in negotiations. It will be one of President Biden's first foreign policy decisions. US military presence should not be indefinite.

The conflict in Yemen has caused the world's largest humanitarian crisis with 3.6 million internally displaced people, 24 million in need of humanitarian assistance and 3.2 million suffering from acute malnutrition. One million people may be left without assistance due to funding problems and 80 percent of the population is dependent on humanitarian aid to survive, according to UNHCR. Since 2014, more than 100,000 have died. The pandemic may increase the damage already caused by poverty, hunger and other diseases. Yemen is the first country in Fund for Peace Fragile States Index, which points to its catastrophic situation, in an area bordering Arabia and the Horn of Africa, a region that is also highly unstable and conflictive.

Conflict between Iranian-backed Shiite Houthis and Arabian-backed Sunnis, plus a separatist movement in Aden supported by the UAE, has been de-escalating and a year ago there was hope that discreet dialogue in Arabia would bear fruit, but by the end of 2020 the situation is more pessimistic. Regional divisions are consolidated. The Houthis believe that Arabia is not working towards a ceasefire and maintain enough weapons to be able to carry out attacks on Saudi territory. Tension between the US and Iran could spill over to Yemen. The opportunity for peace must be seized.³⁰ De-escalation with Iran could begin in Yemen by recog-

³⁰ ICG, "Ten Conflicts to Watch in 2020".

nising its official government, which resides in Riyadh, and gaining autonomy for the Houthis. Guaranteeing maritime security in Hormuz is in everyone's interest.

Ethiopia. ISW notes that a civil war between Ethiopia's central government and one of its regions threatens security in East Africa. Ethiopia is Africa's second most populous state and a reliable US partner. US. In November 2020, Ethiopian federal forces attacked Tigray after attributing armed incidents to the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). There were thousands of casualties, a million internally displaced people and 50,000 refugees who went to Sudan. The security and humanitarian consequences of this domestic conflict have begun to take their toll on already insecure neighbouring regions with long-running humanitarian crises. Fighters have come from Eritrea, creating fertile ground for Al Shabaab jihadists to mobilise and recruit. The TPLF ruled Ethiopia from 1991 to 2018 when a popular movement removed it from power³¹.

More positive are the Ethiopian government's initiatives to encourage political openness, improve relations with Eritrea, release political prisoners, encourage the return of exiled rebels, and renew key institutions. That may be why PM Abiy Ahmed won the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize. Efforts to change, within a very difficult economic and social situation, give wings to nationalism in regions such as Amhara or Oromia – the most populated – and weaken the central government. Inter-regional tension has left hundreds dead and millions displaced. The federal model competes with a centralised model of power to govern Ethiopia.

The escalation in Oromo-Tigray starts a conflict in Ethiopia that threatens Sudan, and stability and security in the region. The UAE supports and arms the Oromo authorities and the TPLF, which has the capacity to enlist external support. The UAE wants to control the coasts of Yemen, and to this end it is useful to support Ethiopia and Eritrea; Turkish presence in the port of Suakin (Sudan) does not please the Emiratis.

Following the construction of the Renaissance Dam by Ethiopia, tension with Egypt and Sudan is evident as it affects the flow of the Nile. The US is pressuring Ethiopia on behalf of Egypt, whose threats to bomb the dam have met with strong warnings from China, Russia, the AU and India.

³¹ ISW, 28-12-2020.

How the situation evolves in 2021 from an internal conflict in Ethiopia to a serious regional conflict remains to be seen, as it is part of the security landscape in the Middle East. National dialogue is essential to restore peace. Another consequence could be the proposal of some border changes as this region of Africa is the only area where new states have been recognised as existing outside the colonial map that is respected throughout the continent. These new states are Eritrea, since 1993, and South Sudan, since 2011. The Fund for Peace Fragile States Index (measuring 12 factors) published by *Foreign Policy* considers two states in this region, Somalia and South Sudan, to be on maximum alert and a third, Sudan, to be on high alert. They rank 2nd, 3rd and 8th in a list of 178, in which Eritrea and Ethiopia are 17th and 23rd respectively. This gives an idea of the great instability in this region if one looks at the factors considered by the Fund for Peace: security threats, economic decline, human rights violations, refugee flows, lack of provision of basic services, criminality and corruption, intervention of external forces or lack of sovereignty in national territory.

Somalia. War has been raging for fifteen years with no end in sight and with African Unity peacekeeping forces facing funding problems. The upcoming electoral landscape is complex. There are also strong regional tensions, such as in neighbouring Yemen and Ethiopia. Jubaland and Puntland have the classic problems of the periphery with the centre over the sharing of power and scarce resources. Jihadist group Al Shabaab is still going strong and is of greater concern in the region than internal Somali problems. By the end of 2021, the Somali government should take over the defence of its territory against Al Shabaab, but this may be complicated.

Territorial divisions in the Horn of Africa and Yemen, coupled with poverty and Islamist radicalism in various guises, present a very dangerous and complicated picture.

Conclusion

In the various conflicts affecting this region we see the presence of the US, as President Trump's era ends and President Biden's begins. Some expect major changes, and some do not. It is difficult to judge, but foreign policy is often more constant than is sometimes thought, and major changes take a long time.

No major changes are expected in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and Congress will have a small Democratic majority.

The US withdrew from the JCPOA in May 2018 and has pressured Iran with sanctions. No immediate changes are expected, although Biden is obviously more in favour of negotiating with Iran than Trump. The US will most likely accept what it has done so far and propose changes as long as Iran complies with the JCPOA. Biden is mindful of the limits of the JCPOA and how Iran has increased its negative influence in the region and in the international community. Biden will encounter an Iran that has given a moderate response to what it has seen as US affronts but continues to act with its expansionist policies and militias. A return to the JCPOA and good management of relations with Arabia and Israel could open doors for regional dialogue, but a new Iranian hardliner could be elected in June 2021.

Trump has taken into account all of Israel's strategic interests except when he withdrew US troops from northern Syria. Biden might change or nuance some issues, but he will not oppose Israel's new agreements with Arab states. Under Trump, Jerusalem was recognised as Israeli capital (perhaps Biden will recover the US Consulate General in Jerusalem), Israel's annexation of Golan was recognised, the legality of Israeli settlements in the West Bank accepted, the PLO office in Washington closed (it will probably reopen), funding for Palestinian Authority activities has been stopped on the grounds that they could lead to terrorism (it looks like some funding will resume) and funding for UNRWA has been greatly reduced (it is unclear how it will return unless there is a major reform of the Agency).

Daniel Kurtzer³² believes the Biden administration will face a Middle East full of challenges and few opportunities. There are American isolationist arguments for leaving the region, but they may underestimate the challenges of counterterrorism, counter-proliferation and ongoing conflicts that may provoke the return of the US, which has vital interests to protect there.

It has become clear over the past two decades that the US cannot or is failing to transform the region. Most of the challenges there, such as poor governance, lack of transparency and accountability, corruption and sectarian tensions, are beyond US capacity.

Without a commitment from those who live and govern the region it will be difficult to bring about real change. The dire economic situation will also condition the Biden administration's chances.

³² Daniel Kurtzer, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 14-12-2020.

The US is likely to continue to reduce the human and financial costs of its engagement in this region and justify this by a decline in its strategic importance.

It is easier to see what another major international actor in the region, Russia, intends to do. Russia has been consolidating its projection, although this is not accompanied by great economic strength. ISW has long been investigating Russian activity in the region³³. Russia has nuclear weapons, military capability and a large adjacent area, energy, a veto in the UNSC, tools of social control and projection in the former USSR. Russia is also capable of exporting narrative and ideas and of being a relevant actor in international relations. In its relationship with the West it seeks to demonstrate that it is a great power, that it deserves to have a sphere of influence, that it can negotiate on global issues and that it is immune to sanctions.

The relationship between Russia and Turkey raises questions. During 2020, tensions between the two have been high in Syria, Libya and the Caucasus, where they have been supporting different approaches to armed conflicts. Russia wants to be strong in the Mediterranean and so does Turkey, and they often coincide in the areas where they both want to be influential.

Meanwhile, the EU has an interest in political stability, political openness and economic and trade exchanges. None of this has anything to do with war.

³³ ISW, "The Kremlin's Projection of Russia", 25-9-2020.

Chapter Five

The populist degradation of the United States

Pedro Rodríguez

Abstract

This chapter analyzes the impact of Trumpism on U.S. politics and its international influence. The study covers from Donald Trump's presidential landing in the 2016 elections, with a form of campaigning based on reality shows, to the assault on the Capitol in Washington perpetrated last January 6, 2021. An explosion of political violence symbolizing the populist degradation suffered by US politics after an overdose of lies, alternative facts, disinformation, conspiracy theories and post-truth. All this machinery of falsehood, unprecedented in U.S. politics due to its technological amplification, has managed to raise the traditional political polarization of the American giant to levels of tension and sectarianism incompatible with a democratic system of reference for the rest of the world.

Keywords

United States, Donald Trump, White House, trumpism, populism, political polarization, disinformation, conspiracy theories, social networks, Fake News, Fact Checking, Wedge Issues, Reality Politics.

Introduction

In 1959, the great journalist Richard Rovere warned with incredible prescience of the danger of extreme trivialisation in US politics: "We have been, on the whole, fortunate in having few national demagogues but there is no guarantee that our luck will hold [...] For a nation which has known a good deal of plebeian government and which – in its devotion to public liberties – makes crowds easily accessible to demagogues, we have had, I think, remarkably good fortune in having so few problems"¹.

Populist persuasion in the United States is not exactly a phenomenon that began and ended with Donald Trump. You don't have to be blown away by the musical *Hamilton* to appreciate that from minute zero of this freedom-obsessed pioneer republic there have always been unscrupulous characters willing to abuse the democratic system for their own benefit.

At least the 19th century American populist tradition goes back to the seventh President Andrew Jackson². And with different outbreaks, usually associated with deep economic crises, it reaches as far as Senator Joseph McCarthy, the instigator in the 1950s of anti-communist hysteria precisely when journalist Rovere was predicting the end of America's good fortune in the face of demagoguery. Vietnam and Watergate would have been the great turning point in America's temporary group immunity from the virus of populism.

During his four years in office, Trump has multiplied the gap between America's ideals and its more questionable realities. And that estrangement would have succeeded in generating three Americas beyond the historical American tradition of binary polarisation: the Democrats (more united than ever despite their great internal differences); the classical Republicans (in the minority) trying to defend the great political legacy of their party from Lincoln to Reagan; and the illiberal America vertebrated around Trump³.

¹ Rovere, R. H. Senator Joe McCarthy, New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1959, p. 259.

² Schlesinger, A. M. The Age of Jackson. New York, NY: Little Brown, 1945.

³ Ebsall, T. B. "The Whole of Liberal Democracy Is in Grave Danger at This Moment". The New York Times, New York, NY, 2020: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/22/opinion/liberals-conservatives-trump-america.html>.

As historian Robert Dallek asks in asking how Trump has come to be, the big question of the moment is whether the United States, along with other Western democracies, is going through a moment of surmountable anxiety⁴. Or whether we really face an existential threat to democracy, pluralism, tolerance and the minimum consensus required to overcome all these old and new accumulated problems.

'Reality TV' and 'Reality Politics'

During Donald Trump's presidential term, the United States would no longer be recognisable to the rest of the world. From its international policy to its domestic policy to its catastrophic management of the pandemic, a visible discontinuity has materialised with respect to previous administrations, Republican or Democrat. This profound, even grotesque, disfigurement has coincided with Donald Trump's extraordinary ability to monopolise – always to his advantage – public attention and control the national conversation. This personalistic overloading of public opinion, as if the United States had gone from #MeToo to #OnlyMe⁵, has been key to the political communication of Trumpism.

Before and during his time in the White House, Trump has contributed to the reproached *spectacularisation* of politics with a *reality politics* strategy. In fact, Trump's pre-campaign consisted of starring in his own *reality show* on NBC: *The Apprentice*. A popular contest, supposedly based on the search for business talent, which Trump used to popularise the imperative slogan: "You are fired!"⁶. In addition to this remunerated notoriety, Trump used the occasion to present himself to a massive audience as a fantasy of himself: an entrepreneurial leader at the head of a global empire, a self-made billionaire who, perfectly made up, lit

⁴ Dallek, R. *How Did we Get Here? From Theodore Roosevelt to Donald Trump*. New York, NY: Harper, 2019.

⁵ This unhealthy narcissism is reportedly contagious even among his staunch supporters, as illustrated by the volume of selfies and videos of the assault on Congress distributed on social networks to the point of facilitating FBI investigations with thousands of compromising images: [<https://www.fbi.gov/wanted/seeking-info/violence-at-the-united-states-capitol>].

⁶ A particularly dysfunctional slogan for operating in the complex political game in Washington, where the president cannot fire anyone under a constitutional system of checks and balances that forces both conflict and constant compromise.

up and sitting behind a desk, made decisions, even if they were on totally banal matters⁷.

If it is said that every election campaign is an effort to visualise the corresponding candidate occupying the desired position of responsibility, Trump had fourteen seasons to be visualised at least as a gyrfalcon. As James Poniewozik, chief television critic of the *New York Times*, explains, the key to Trump's television projection was precisely to use a genre that allowed him to present himself as an anti-hero:

"Reality shows appealed to a thirst for authenticity – though their set-ups were contrived and their stories edited – and promised a glimpse of realities more exciting than one's own. But they also, unusually for television, featured protagonists who were not conventionally likable – who echoed the notion, reverberating throughout the culture, that this was not a world made for nice people".

In the wake of the 2016 Republican primaries, Trump began by transforming the entire orderly, exemplary and democratic process of selecting candidates for the White House with the help of the popular vote into something more akin to a *reality show*. The gradual calendar of primaries, especially crowded when it is not a president aspiring to a second term⁸, implies a necessary sifting backed by polls of voting intentions. In practice, this means that in order to be invited to successive debates it is necessary to have the approval of the audience, a dynamic that Trump managed to equate with the process of eliminating television contestants through the verdict of the audience⁹.

The political rhetoric used by Trump has also perfectly matched the banal and coarse tone that characterises the content of *reality shows*. In this sense, President Trump has significantly multiplied a worrying trend of degradation in White House rhetoric. According to political scientist Elvin Lim, it can be empirically

⁷ Morgan, I.; White, M. "The Presidential Image: A History from Theodore Roosevelt to Donald Trump". London, UK: I. B. Tauris, 2020, pp. 232-234.

⁸ In the 2016 primaries Trump began competing for the 1237 delegates required for the Republican presidential nomination against Florida's Bush, Walker, Huckabee, Carson, Cruz, Rubio, Paul, Christie and Kasich. The field was so exceptionally large that Fox News had to do an additional debate outside of prime time to give a minimal chance to a second tier of candidates with lower profiles in the polls. The so-called 'little children's table' included Perry, Santorum, Jindal, Fiorina, Graham, Pataki and Gilmore.

⁹ Marcus, S. "Even the Internet Hasn't Really Changed How Being Famous Works. Here's Why". Time. New York, NY 2019: <https://time.com/5613761/celebrity-evolution/>.

demonstrated that there is a steady decline during the 19th and 20th century with respect to the levels of intellectual complexity present in presidential messages and communications. With an inclination towards simplification of content, syntax and grammar, as well as media messages in the form of *sound bites*¹⁰ increasingly succinct in tune with the growing collective attention deficit. While US presidents ironically talk and communicate more than ever before, their speeches are formally poorer than ever when it comes to including argument, reasoning and deliberation¹¹.

In addition to appealing to the lowest common denominator, Trump also played on another element widely exploited on television: nostalgia. In the 2016 election cycle, levels of disaffection with the political *status quo* in the United States were so profound that the then Republican candidate got it right by offering a return to bygone but supposedly superior times, both economically and culturally. The slogan "Make America Great Again"¹², besides a questionable historical interpretation, was an offer to join a voyage to a longed-for and far superior destiny. As Professor James W. Ceaser, a renowned political scientist at the University of Virginia, has explained, Donald Trump got it right by articulating not so much an *ism*¹³ as an ideological alternative but a *mood*¹⁴ of frustration and score-settling with which he was able to connect with many voters in search of a candidate without any political experience¹⁵. Especially with large sections of the white working class, known by all sorts of pejorative terms¹⁶ and cornered in the lowest and suffering part of the US social structure despite the American egalitarian tradition¹⁷.

Perhaps the most insightful diagnosis of this disturbing transformation of the US political process into a *reality show* was made by Jeb Bush, the failed Republican candidate who aspired to con-

¹⁰ Fragment of speech.

¹¹ Lim, E. T. "The Anti-intellectual Presidency: The Decline of Presidential Rhetoric from George Washington to George W. Bush". New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 4-16.

¹² "Make America Great Again".

¹³ 'ism'.

¹⁴ 'mood'.

¹⁵ Kranish, M.; Fisher, M. *Trump Revealed: The Definitive Biography of the 45th President*. London, UK: Simon & Schuster, 2016, p. 318.

¹⁶ Offscourings, boggrotters, rascals, rubbish, squaters, crackers, clay-eaters, hillbillies, rednecks and white trash.

¹⁷ Lozada, C. *What Were We Thinking: A Brief Intellectual History of the Trump Era*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2020, pp. 18-19.

tinue the political dynasty initiated by his father and seconded by his older brother. In announcing the end of his unsuccessful campaign after the South Carolina primary in February 2016, Bush came to acknowledge that he was withdrawing from the primary because he had been voted out of the island¹⁸.

In this televised struggle for the White House, the *Prairie House* ended up degenerating into the *Big Brother* house. As a word shark, Trump did not hesitate to break with the traditional tone and parameters of political rhetoric in the United States¹⁹. With its extemporaneous and insulting statements, constant gesticulations and the creation of a very particular subplot, the series of Republican debates during the 2015 primaries became the closest thing to *The Donald Trump Show*, a format extended to four years after his electoral victory in the White House.

In his successful scripted political career, Trump has tapped into the competitive dynamic of *reality TV*, whereby the contestant who best connects with the audience through the most genuinely *freaky* pose tends to win. With the aggravating factor of confusing impoliteness with sincerity. Even when the tycoon was reluctant to act, his silence ended up being the big news in the succession of debates that punctuate the primary process. In this sense, Trump as a virtuoso of self-aggrandisement must be understood as part of the evolution of the concept of fame in the 21st century. That is, the famous person who in the absence of any other discernible merit is famous only for being famous²⁰.

Among the typical elements of the *reality shows* incorporated by Trump into his political plot are the permanent confrontation, the ranting that is as degrading as it is banal, the insults, the morbid content and the exaltation of profanity. In short, this popular TV sub-genre is characterised by a depressing lack of respect and civility, permanently appealing to the worst – and most emotion-

¹⁸ Stokols, E. "Jeb Bush drops out of White House race". Politico, Washington D. C., 2016: <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/02/breaking-news-jeb-bush-is-suspending-his-presidential-campaign-219564>.

¹⁹ Reston, M. "No one eclipses Donald Trump at GOP debate". CNN.com, 2015: <https://edition.cnn.com/2015/08/07/politics/donald-trump-republican-debate/index.html>.

²⁰ O'connor, B. "What does Trump's rise mean for the past, present and future of celebrity politics?", 2016: <https://theconversation.com/what-does-trumps-rise-mean-for-the-past-present-and-future-of-celebrity-politics-65159>.

al – instincts of the audience²¹. This constant public display of disaffection will be incorporated by Trump throughout his political communication in the White House, attempting to redefine what is and is not acceptable for a US president.

By stimulating the worst instincts of his frustrated audience with the *status quo* and the *establishment*, Trump has encouraged levels of confrontation, and even violence, that are incompatible with the intense but generally orderly competition for political power in the United States. Fights, aggressions and altercations have become an integral part of their rallies, already overloaded with misogynistic or xenophobic statements. He has even publicly committed himself to defraying the costs incurred by his followers involved in any of these forced brawls²².

With this transformation of politics into a *reality show*, Trump has also managed to formulate a parallel reality²³, just like these popular TV formats. In this parallel reality, he acts as the sole protagonist, heroic and winning. Early on in his White House tenure, *The New York Times*²⁴ reported that President Trump had insisted to his aides that each day in the White House be framed as an episode of a television show with a corresponding conflict and happy ending (i.e. Trump's constant victory over his rivals and critics). In an average day during his term of office, the former president has consumed at least four hours of television a day, and often twice as much. Sometimes without sound, but fully engaged in the endless battles and controversies that fuel 24/7 cable television in the United States.

'Ratings are power'

Donald Trump himself confirmed his strategy of media overexposure in the now famous feature published by *Time* magazine

²¹ Bockowski, P.; Papacharissi, Z. *Trump and the Media*. Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2028, pp. 79-85.

²² Finnegan, M.; Bierman, N. "Trump's endorsement of violence reaches new level: He may pay legal fees for assault suspect". Los Angeles Times, Los Angeles, CA, 2016: <https://www.latimes.com/politics/la-na-trump-campaign-protests-20160313-story.html>.

²³ This parallel reality is illustrated by the gold-plated lift used by Trump to reach his cot on the 66th floor of his Manhattan skyscraper, which in reality has only 58 floors.

²⁴ Haberman, M.; Thrush, G.; Baker, P. "Trump's Way: Inside Trump's Hour-by-Hour Battle for Self-Preservation". *The New York Times*, New York, NY, 2017: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/09/us/politics/donald-trump-president.html>.

during the first week of March 2016²⁵(VON DREHLE, 2016) . According to the then presidential hopeful, the powerful key to power in a televised democracy like the United States is ratings: "It's not the polls. It's the ratings"²⁶. Regardless of whether that coverage, especially television coverage, was negative, positive or even neutral. The important thing was to take centre stage in the public debate.

During Trump's travels during the primaries, on the eve of the decisive *Super Tuesday*, journalist David Von Drehle explained how the then contender for the Republican Party's presidential nomination unabashedly indulged in his media narcissism:

"Trump enters and climbs to the end of his booth, picks up the remote control and starts switching from one news channel to another. What happens next is simply extraordinary. During the entire one-hour flight from Virginia to southern Georgia, almost every minute of every broadcast is focused exclusively on him. Sure, he's rich. But how is it possible that this guy, a slightly portly *go-getter* from a suburb outside of downtown New York with a head for numbers and a gift for gab, is the only news in the world? [...] 'The media all over the world are covering Trump'. Turning to me on the sofa, he points to the screen and comments with satisfaction: The key word is "cover". So much exposure comes at a price. As he watches, Trump maintains a quiet but constant criticism of 'dishonest' and 'inaccurate' statements. He would like to 'open up the laws' on defamation to protect people like him, he says – but adds with a shrug: 'I don't know exactly what it means to do that, or exactly how it works'. Nor does it matter to him, because what matters more than accuracy is the mere fact of being covered. Own the airwaves, own the campaign, own the world. 'You see what this is, don't you? It is the audience. I go to one of these programmes and the ratings [*sic*] double. They triple. And that gives you power. It is not the polls. It's the ratings'"²⁷.

However, Donald Trump's relationship with the American media has not only benefited the president. Rather, it would have been mutually beneficial. As well as a big TV consumer, the whole Trumpism saga has been a ratings bonanza for the US media, especially the big brands. It was no joke, when the president in

²⁵ VON DREHLE, D. "Donald Trump's Wild Ride", Time, 2016.

²⁶ "No son las encuestas. Son los ratings".

²⁷ Von Drehle, D. "Donald Trump's Wild Ride". Time. 2016.

his home stretch told correspondents outside the White House that they and their companies would be the first to miss him²⁸.

Trump's multiple scandals and ongoing brawls during his presidential term have helped many journalists to raise their professional profile and sign lucrative contracts as commentators or authors of books about the president, starting with Bob Woodward's two *bestselling* volumes *Fear* and *Rage*²⁹ international *bestsellers*. Between 2017 and 2020, a dozen Pulitzer Prizes have recognised journalistic coverage of the Trump administration, including investigations into his taxes, his ties to Russia and payments to silence lovers ahead of the 2016 presidential election³⁰.

At the corporate level, there have been many media outlets over the years that have managed to benefit from the extraordinary ratings generated by the so-called orange factor. This benefit, exploited above all by Rupert Murdoch's Fox News until its last-minute break with Trump³¹, has coincided with the existential threat to the business model of traditional media in the United States, especially in the face of *online* competition and the advance of alternative media. At the same time that the American media industry has benefited from the Trump phenomenon on its bottom line, his four years in office have also served to vindicate the fundamental public service essence of journalism when it is exercised independently and aggressively against abuses of power and threats to democracy.

In a media context of transformation, desperate struggle for survival and revaluation of journalism, Donald Trump has from the outset posed an ethical dilemma for journalistic coverage of the US presidency. Until literally the end of his term, the television networks would not have had the courage (or the responsibility)

²⁸ Nazaryan, A. "I Was an Enemy of the People: Without quite meaning to, Trump reminded journalists that their relationship to power should be adversarial". The Atlantic. Washington D. C. 2021: <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/02/i-miss-thrill-trump/617993/>.

²⁹ Publishing sales success.

³⁰ Farhi, P. "Trump predicted news ratings would 'tank if I'm not there'. He wasn't wrong". The Washington Post, Washington, D. C., 2021: https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/media/media-trump-bump-slump/2021/03/22/5f13549a-85d1-11eb-bf-df-4d36dab83a6d_story.html?utm_source=morning_brew.

³¹ Grynbaum, M. M. "As Trump Reels, Fox News Has a Message for Viewers: Stick With Us". The New York Times, New York, NY, 2021: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/09/business/media/fox-news-trump-tv.html>.

to pull the plug on a president who has become the main source of disinformation on the pandemic and the outcome of the 3 November elections. Both generalist *networks* and specialised news channels have struggled to reclaim the factual authority of journalism in the face of a Trump that has always generated more viewership and additional advertising revenue. To the point of allowing him to personally choose the presenters who would interview him or to allow him to do something as untelevised as intervening by telephone in programmes for the small screen³².

With or without Trump in the White House, and even beyond the deep economic crisis associated with the coronavirus pandemic, the media is facing what many critics, both academics and journalism professionals, do not hesitate to describe as an existential crisis that goes far beyond the bottom line:

“Not only is its financial model precarious, but its legitimacy is in question. Politicians, marketers and meme-makers are taking advantage of media incentives to manipulate their agenda. Meanwhile, long-standing commitments to objectivity and an obsessive belief that they can determine what is newsworthy prevent many news organisations from being able to see the game in which they have become a pawn”³³.

Of course, Trump has also been the great beneficiary of the media’s calamitous situation and mutually self-serving coverage. According to an analysis of figures gathered by the agency mediaQuat³⁴, during the 2016 primary cycle alone, Donald Trump’s candidacy has garnered the equivalent of \$1900 million in free coverage³⁵. Ted Cruz, his closest competitor within the Republican Party, until the Indiana results were known, received a mere \$300 million. Meanwhile, on the Democratic side, Hillary Clinton fell short of \$750 million.

From the beginning, it was clear to Donald Trump that what really mattered was to be talked about, badly or well, and that the

³² Thompson, D. “Donald Trump Is Helping the Very Media Organizations He Despises: How the president’s war on the press has benefited some of the nation’s biggest news outlets”. *The Atlantic*. Washington D. C. 2017: <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2017/05/donald-trump-media-enemies/525381/>.

³³ BOCKKOWSKI, P.; PAPACHARISSI, Z. *Trump and the Media*. Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2020, p. 55.

³⁴ CONFESSORE, N.; WAKABAYASHI, D. “How Russia Harvested American Rage to Reshape the U.S. Politics”. *The New York Times*, New York, NY, 2017: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/09/technology/russia-election-facebook-ads-rage.html>.

³⁵ Earned media as opposed to paid media.

maximum impact on public opinion was achieved not through paid publicity but through free press coverage for him:

"Sometimes they write positively, sometimes they write negatively. But from a purely commercial point of view, the benefits of being written about have far outweighed the drawbacks. It is very simple. If I take out a full-page ad in the *New York Times* to publicise a project, it can cost \$40,000 and, in any case, people tend to be sceptical of advertising. But if the *New York Times* writes a one-column article, even a moderately positive one, about one of my businesses, it costs me nothing, and it's worth a lot more than \$40,000"³⁶.

As media critic Jim Rutenberg has explained, the benefits that different US media outlets have reaped from Trump are as questionable as they are spread out, from newspapers to online media that have benefited from a lode of clickable stories³⁷. Not to mention the interest of all kinds of audiences interested in getting content anywhere, anytime and at lightning speed. According to the *New York Times* analyst:

"It's been the perfect reduction of the problematic symbiosis between Trump and the media. There is always a mutually beneficial relationship between candidates and the media during presidential election years. But in my time it has never been so concentrated on a single candidate. And financial interests have never been so intertwined with journalistic and political interests. Of course, the situation is unique because Mr Trump is unique. Its pedigree, its demagoguery and its inscrutable platform [...] make it a giant story"³⁸.

As a testament to the *boom* that the Donald Trump phenomenon has brought to the ailing US media industry, the *New York Times* began his presidency with 3 million paying subscribers and ended with an unparalleled 7.5 million subscribers. Meanwhile, during Trump's four years in office, the *Washington Post* tripled its subscribers to 3 million. Similarly, CNN posted its best ratings ever in 2020, attracting more viewers aged 25-54 in the last quarter than rivals Fox News and MSNBC. Figures that seem unrepeata-

³⁶ TRUMP, D. J.; SCHWARTZ, T. "Trump: The Art of the Deal". 2016 ed. London, UK: Arrow Books, 1987.

³⁷ Online content that generates a high volume of traffic.

³⁸ Rutenberg, J. "The Mutual Dependence of Donald Trump and the News Media". The New York Times, New York, NY, 2016: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/21/business/media/the-mutual-dependence-of-trump-and-the-news-media.html>.

ble with Joe Biden in the White House and his 9-5 presidency that can't remotely compete in *ratings* with the levels of drama and tension posed by Trump³⁹.

Alongside this mutually beneficial dynamic, Donald Trump has maintained throughout the years a permanent offensive to delegitimise the US media. Without hesitating to describe them as *fake news media*⁴⁰ and *enemies of the people*⁴¹. In addition to fomenting public clashes such as the grab with CNN White House correspondent Jim Acosta just after the November 2018 midterm elections⁴².

President Trump's ongoing rant against the media was aimed above all at mobilising his base and spreading the prejudice that the US media were not only highly unreliable, but part of the anti-American *establishment*. Already during his presidential campaign, Trump himself explained his populist obsession with the press in these terms to veteran CBS correspondent Lesley Stahl: 'I do it to discredit and denigrate you all, so that when you write negative stories about me, no one will believe you'⁴³.

Donald Trump has never been particularly accurate when it comes to making predictions. Although when the president predicted in 2017 to the *New York Times* that the ratings peaks reached by America's mainstream media would suffer if he did not win re-election, he was absolutely right (SCHMIDT; SHEAR, 2017). Just two months after Trump's temporary exile in Florida, the *ratings* bonanza enjoyed by all kinds of US media has been significantly eroded according to the *Washington Post's* analysis of data gathered by specialist companies ComScore and Nielsen⁴⁴.

³⁹ Farhi, P. "Trump predicted news ratings would 'tank if I'm not there'. He wasn't wrong". The Washington Post, Washington, D. C., 2021: https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/media/media-trump-bump-slump/2021/03/22/5f13549a-85d1-11eb-bf-df-4d36dab83a6d_story.html?utm_source=morning_brew.

⁴⁰ 'Fake News Media'.

⁴¹ 'Enemies of the people'.

⁴² Acosta, J. El enemigo del pueblo: Un tiempo peligroso para decir la verdad. Madrid, España: HarperCollins Ibérica, 2019.

⁴³ CBS. Lesley Stahl: 'Trump admitted mission to 'discredit' press". CBS News, 2018: <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/lesley-stahl-donald-trump-said-attacking-press-to-discredit-negative-stories/>.

⁴⁴ Farhi, P. "Trump predicted news ratings would 'tank if I'm not there'. He wasn't wrong". The Washington Post, Washington D. C., 2021: https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/media/media-trump-bump-slump/2021/03/22/5f13549a-85d1-11eb-bf-df-4d36dab83a6d_story.html?utm_source=morning_brew.

Between President Biden's inauguration and 15 March 2021, CNN has lost half of its *prime-time* audience⁴⁵ in the coveted 25-54 viewer segment. In the same trend, unique visitors to the *online* edition of the *New York Times* have been reduced by 17 percent between January and February 2021. During the same period, traffic to the *Washington Post's* website fell by 26 percent. In response to the *Trump slump*⁴⁶, the *Post* is hiring more journalists and the *Times* is experimenting with more sustainable content⁴⁷. In 1986, in the pages of what passes for his most candid book, Trump already laid out the key to his mutually beneficial relationship with the press:

"One of the things I have learned from the press is that they are always eager for a good story, and the more sensational the better. It's in the nature of the job, and I understand that. The point is, if you're a bit different, or a bit outrageous, or if you do things that are daring or controversial, the press will write about you. I've always done things a bit differently, I don't mind controversy, and my offers tend to be a bit ambitious. Besides, I achieved a lot when I was very young, and I chose to live in a certain style. The result is that the press has always wanted to write about me"⁴⁸.

The normalisation of lies

The turning point that Trump represents in US political communication is not limited to breaking with all the conventions of public affairs professionals or his ability to connect with the disaffection of many Americans. It has nothing to do with his ability to cultivate a populist image of authenticity despite having changed party jackets at least four times. By far Trump's main and most dangerous impact has been his attempt to normalise lying with the help of his presidential megaphone and to challenge with conspiracy theories⁴⁹ and disinforma-

⁴⁵ Prime time for television and also the most sought-after time for advertisers.

⁴⁶ 'Trump recession'.

⁴⁷ Farhi, P. "Trump predicted news ratings would 'tank if I'm not there'. He wasn't wrong". The Washington Post, Washington D. C., 2021: https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/media/media-trump-bump-slump/2021/03/22/5f13549a-85d1-11eb-bf-df-4d36dab83a6d_story.html?utm_source=morning_brew.

⁴⁸ Trump, D. J.; Schwartz, T. "Trump: The Art of the Deal". 2016 ed. London, UK: Arrow Books, 1987.

⁴⁹ Muirhead, R.; Rosenblum, N. A Lot of People are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019.

tion⁵⁰ (RID, 2020) the minimum public trust required by any democratic system.

Since his inauguration as president, the *Washington Post* has been at pains to identify, debunk and count all the lies accumulated by Donald Trump over the past four years⁵¹. All this show of verification has yielded a total of 30,573 lies during his presidential term. With the particularity that this analysis, by discarding opinionated questions, has focused only on all those little and big lies aimed at realising the totalitarian propagandistic principle that 'nothing is true and everything is possible' and breaking what Hannah Arendt called "the fabric of reality"⁵². With the great danger that citizens unable to distinguish between truth and lies tend to become the perfect audience for authoritarian leaders.

The systematic incorporation of lies into White House political communication has grown exponentially with Donald Trump as President of the United States. As Glenn Kessler, author of the Fact Checker column for the *Washington Post*, has explained, during his first year in office, Trump's average number of falsehoods rose to half a dozen per day. During the second year in office, it rose to an average of 16 lies per day, 22 per day in the third year, and 39 per day in his last year. According to these calculations, it took 27 months in the White House for Trump to reach the 10,000 lies mark. And another 14 months to reach 20,000 falsehoods. A spiral of mendacity that allowed him to reach and surpass the record of 30,000 lies in a matter of only five months⁵³.

In terms of the content of all these lies, Trump's falsehoods serve to draw a link between his obsessions and news cycles. When the president has felt challenged, he has usually responded with a two-pronged strategy: the construction of an alternative reality aimed at his supporters and brutal attacks on his critics. As for Trump's favourite channels for disseminating his lies, half of the falsehoods counted by the *Washington Post* were communicated

⁵⁰ Rid, T. *Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare*. London, UK: Profile Books Limited, 2020.

⁵¹ Kessler, G.; Rizzo, S.; Kelly, M. *Donald Trump and his Assault on Truth: The President's Falsehoods, Misleading Claims and Flat-Out Lies*. New York, NY: Scribener, 2020.

⁵² Hannah, A. *Los orígenes del totalitarismo*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 2006, pp. 474-501.

⁵³ Kessler, G.; Rizzo, S.; Kelly, M. "Trump's false or misleading claims total 30,573 over 4 years". *The Washington Post*, Washington D. C., 2021: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/01/24/trumps-false-or-misleading-claims-total-30573-over-four-years/>.

at his campaign rallies or via his now-suspended Twitter account: @realDonaldTrump.

Trump's drive to normalise the lie has been so intense as to overwhelm the *fact-checking* of the Washington newspaper of record, with difficulties in keeping up with the accounts of this casual relationship with the truth. Trump's last year as president in particular is unlike any other of his predecessors. Months ahead of the November 3, 2020 presidential election, the challenger has been discrediting the US electoral process in order to build his *big lie*⁵⁴ of electoral fraud on the basis of his delusive prophecy fulfilled. During his 6 January 2021 speech, in which he incited his supporters to patriotically storm the Capitol and forcibly stop the Democrats' "theft", Trump included a total of 107 false or misleading statements, mostly about the outcome of the election.

As historian Timothy Snyder has explained, the profound epistemological crisis generated by Donald Trump in the United States requires a hyperbolic credulity in the face of an alternative reality so far from plausible:

"The strength of a big lie lies in its demand that many other things must be believed or disbelieved. Making sense of a world in which the 2020 presidential election was stolen requires distrust not only of reporters and pundits, but also of local, state and federal government institutions, from poll workers to elected officials, Homeland Security and even the Supreme Court. This brings in, of necessity, a conspiracy theory: imagine all the people who must have been in that plot and all the people who would have had to work on the cover-up"⁵⁵.

Although, as veteran correspondent Andrew Higgins pointed out, one of the keys to success in the art of political deceit is that the bigger the lie, the more it is believed. Citing examples ranging from the Soviet Union to Machiavelli's intrigues:

"In a cable sent to Washington in 1944, George F. Kennan, counsellor to the US Embassy in Stalin's Moscow, warned of the hidden power of lies, noting that the Soviet government 'has demonstrated some strange and disturbing things about human nature.' Most importantly, he wrote, for many people, "it is possible to

⁵⁴ 'Gran mentira'.

⁵⁵ Snyder, T. "The American Abyss: A historian of fascism and political atrocity on Trump, the mob and what comes next". The New York Times Magazine. New York, NY 2021.

make them feel and believe almost anything". No matter how false it seems, he wrote, "for people who believe it, it becomes true. It attains validity and all the powers of truth". Kennan's vision, generated by his experience in the Soviet Union, now has a disturbing resonance for the United States, where tens of millions of people believe in a 'truth' invented by President Trump: that Joseph R. Biden Jr. lost the November election and became president-elect only through fraud.

"Lying as a political tool is by no means new. Niccolo Machiavelli, writing in the 16th century, recommended that a leader should try to be honest since lying rather than truth would 'put him at a disadvantage'. People do not like to be lied to, Machiavelli observed, but 'he who deceives will always find those who allow themselves to be deceived'"⁵⁶ (HIGGINS, 2021).

Trump himself, in his book *The Art of the Deal*, considered the foundational text of Trumpology, attempted a quarter of a century ago to whitewash his lies by describing them as "truthful hyperboles"⁵⁷, which were a necessary part of his creative business model. By his own admission, if you want to fantasise (or lie), it is better to go big if you want maximum profitability:

"The last key to my way of promoting is cockiness. I play with people's fantasies. People may not always think big, but they can still get very excited about those who do. That's why a little hyperbole never hurts. People want to believe that something is the biggest, greatest and most spectacular. I call it truthful hyperbole. It is an innocent form of exaggeration, and a very effective form of promotion"⁵⁸.

The problem is not that there are many people willing to believe a compulsive liar like Donald Trump. By far the most dangerous legacy of Trump's toxic political communication is that we all end up not believing anything. So much deception threatens to generate devastating levels of cynicism and disbelief in US society, politics and culture. Neither universities, nor the media, nor political parties, nor governments, nor the economy can function in

⁵⁶ Higgins, A. "The Art of the Lie? The Bigger the Better". The New York Times, New York, NY, 2021: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/10/world/europe/trump-truth-lies-power.html>.

⁵⁷ 'Truthful hyperbole', an essentially contradictory expression.

⁵⁸ Trump, D. J.; Schwartz, T. *Trump: The Art of the Deal*. 2016 ed. London, UK: Arrow Books, 1987, p. 58.

this way. With so many lies, even the best coronavirus vaccine risks failure.

The ubiquity of Twitter

The great tool for transforming in less than twelve years all the witticisms and outbursts of a *reality TV* star into the alternative reality shared with 88 million followers by the 45th president of the United States has been the social network Twitter. The New York mogul went public on 4 May 2009 as @realDonaldTrump promoting an upcoming appearance on David Letterman's popular *show*⁵⁹. Until his permanent suspension materialised⁶⁰, Trump produced a total of 57,000 *tweets*⁶¹ as part of a strategy of permanent provocation, transgression and ubiquity. On particularly intense days, such as during the two *impeachment* proceedings in Congress, he would exceed a hundred *tweets* to the point of appearing to do nothing else during his working days as President of the United States. Often tweeting in the early hours of the morning and always with an overdose of authoritarian monosyllables, insults, capital letters and multiple exclamations (!!!!!!!!!!!). In fact, his latest messages focused precisely on encouraging the assailants to storm the federal congressional building, just as his defeat in the November 2020 presidential elections was being certified⁶².

Donald Trump's Twitter account was permanently terminated on 8 January 2021, just twelve days into his term in the White House, and he had amassed 88.7 million followers. According to the arguments put forward by the company on its official blog, which has been adding warnings about the veracity of the president's *tweets* since the pandemic, Trump had abused the regulations governing the social network by publishing multiple diatribes whose content glorified violence:

⁵⁹ First tweet: "Be sure to tune in and watch Donald Trump on Late Night with David Letterman as he presents the Top Ten List tonight!" (4 May 2009 - 2:54:25 PM EST), with 939 likes.

⁶⁰ Latest tweet: "To all of those who have asked, I will not be going to the Inauguration on January 20" (8 January 2021 - 10:44:28 AM EST), with more than half a million likes.

⁶¹ Trump-Twitter-Archive. Trump Twitter Archive V2. 2016: <https://www.thetrumparchive.com/>.

⁶² Madhani, A.; Colvin, J. A. farewell to @realDonaldTrump, gone after 57,000 tweets. Washington D. C.: Associated Press 2021.

"After carefully reviewing recent tweets from the @realDonaldTrump account and the context surrounding them – specifically how they are being received and interpreted on and off Twitter – we have permanently suspended the account due to the risk of further incitement to violence.

"In the context of this week's horrific events, we already made clear on Wednesday that additional violations of Twitter's rules could lead to this same course of action. Our public interest framework exists to allow the public to hear directly from elected officials and world leaders. It is based on the principle that the people have the right to hold power to account in public.

"However, we have made it clear for years that these accounts are not above our rules entirely and that they cannot use Twitter to incite violence, among other things. We will continue to be transparent about our policies and their implementation"⁶³.

Donald Trump's immediate reaction was to insist that he would not be silenced and that he would find an alternative so that he could continue to connect with his followers after the permanent cancellation of his Twitter account. Trump's silencing in the final stretch of his presidency also extended to Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitch, Spotify and Shopify, sparking significant controversy – inside and outside the United States – over limitations on free speech in a country with minimal constitutional tolerance for any form of censorship. However, even in the United States, freedom of expression as a fundamental right is not considered a blank cheque to promote violence. Nor is there any sacrosanct right to publish on a social network, since it is essentially a relationship based on a contractual relationship between a private individual and a company with stipulations that in no case include a guaranteed right to publish without restrictions⁶⁴.

Reappearing from exile in Florida for a Republican Party donor conference on 10 April 2021, the former president insisted that he was enjoying his life "off Twitter"⁶⁵, glad that his increasingly

⁶³ Twitter-Inc. "Permanent suspension of @realDonaldTrump". 2021.

⁶⁴ Gelber, K. "No, Twitter is not censoring Donald Trump. Free speech is not guaranteed if it harms others". The University of Queensland, 12 January: <https://theconversation.com/no-twitter-is-not-censoring-donald-trump-free-speech-is-not-guaranteed-if-it-harms-others-153092>.

⁶⁵ 'Off Twitter'.

lengthy press releases were much more elegant than his *tweets*. Beyond this supposed aesthetic satisfaction, Trump's ability to influence political debate in the United States – despite his unquestioned control of the Republican Party and his sporadic appearances on Fox News and other conservative media – has receded significantly, at least during the first hundred days of Joe Biden's presidency. According to Google's *ranking* of most popular searches, the word 'Trump' has dropped to the lowest level recorded since 2015. Data that would have aided a necessary detoxification process for US public opinion. As historian Douglas Brinkley has noted, "where once he was accustomed to firing off tweets like Zeus, which were received like thunderbolts from on high, now they are little musings from the mouse at Mar-a-Lago"⁶⁶.

Regardless of the loyalty or rejection that President Donald Trump was able to generate via Twitter, his messages were rather impossible to ignore. His diatribes were repeated, analysed, praised or ridiculed not only on the internet but also in all media, generating a kind of addiction that ironically was shared by his detractors and critics alike. In this sense, Trump's ability to reach directly into the American psyche and drive everyone out of their minds would also have generated a kind of collective post-traumatic stress. As Dr Seth Norrholm, Professor of Psychiatry at Wayne State University School of Medicine, explained, Twitter has provided Trump with a permanent soapbox to express his contempt and anger, and every time he launched his invective in all capital letters it was like "a bully shouting derogatory expletives"⁶⁷ (LYALL, 2021).

All this impact confirms Trump's ability to appreciate and use the power of social media to his advantage far better than any of his rivals during his entry into US politics. Completely ignorant of the workings and workings of the American government, the businessman had accumulated extensive experience as a salesman: from casinos to skyscrapers to fraudulent university courses, meat to vodka. When he started @realDonaldTrump, Trump dedicated his Twitter account to the self-promotion efforts that

⁶⁶ Colvin, J. "Trump addresses GOP as power to shape national debate wanes". Washington D.C.: Associated Press, 2021.

⁶⁷ Lyall, S. "100 Days Without Trump on Twitter: A Nation Scrolls More Calmly". The New York Times, New York, NY, 2021. Political Memo: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/17/us/politics/trump-twitter.html>.

eventually made it possible to transform his surname into a profitable trademark⁶⁸.

Long before he entered politics, Trump was already using lies as a business tool. He boasted that his iconic skyscraper in the heart of Manhattan, Trump Tower, was 68 storeys high when in fact it was only 58. All that really mattered was business. And as a genius first of advertising, and then of propaganda, he was acutely aware of the commercial importance of fictitious ubiquity through pseudo-events and repetition: "He understood that frequent repetition of simple, easy-to-remember slogans served to embed the merchandise (and his name) in the minds of potential customers"⁶⁹. However, from the moment Trump seriously contemplated his presidential candidacy, his account became something far more momentous than a misleading teleshop.

His Twitter presence, despite being plagued by grammatical and lexical errors⁷⁰, became a permanent and ubiquitous political soapbox. His contents were aimed at satisfying a triple objective: attacking its rivals, pressuring its allies and formulating its platform of national-populism⁷¹. To the point of constructing a whole alternative reality accepted as true by many of his followers⁷². His most popular tweet as president, and the one that arguably put him furthest away from being re-elected for a second term, was posted on 2 October 2020 announcing that both he and his wife Melania had been infected by the coronavirus. The message almost instantly received 1.8 million *likes* and almost 400,000 retweets⁷³.

Once in the White House, in addition to announcing withering dismissals of his government team subjected to unprecedented levels of turnover, Trump turned Twitter into his main channel for disseminating misleading, malicious or simply false con-

⁶⁸ Madhani, A.; Colvin, J. A farewell to @realDonaldTrump, gone after 57,000 tweets. Washington D. C.: Associated Press 2021.

⁶⁹ Kakutani, M. The Death of Truth. London, UK: William Collins, 2018, p. 81.

⁷⁰ His most talked-about gaffe on Twitter was the non-existent word 'covfefe', the meaning of which has never been revealed.

⁷¹ Bockowski, P.; Papacharissi, Z. Trump and the Media. Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2028, pp. 151-157.

⁷² Robertson, D. "How @realDonaldTrump Changed Politics - and America". Politico Magazine. Washington D. C. 2021: <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/01/09/trump-twitter-ban-suspended-analysis-456817>.

⁷³ Factbase. "Donald Trump - Flagged Tweets". factba.se. 2020-2021.

tent, as quantified by the verification project carried out by the *Washington Post*⁷⁴. In the last few months of Twitter activity, 471 of Trump's messages were challenged by the company and *flagged*⁷⁵. And indeed, when the accounts of the president and his main allies were permanently suspended by Twitter officials, the analytics firm Signal Labs estimated that misinformation about the alleged election fraud had been reduced by 73 percent. According to this study, conversations about the non-existent theft of the presidential elections went from 2.5 million mentions to 688,000 in different social networks in the space of a week. With a significant drop also in *hashtags* and expressions common in QAnon's conspiratorial rhetoric⁷⁶.

A significant portion of the torrent of *tweets* generated by Donald Trump's political career was devoted to questioning the mainstream media. According to the analysis carried out by the US Press Freedom Tracker group, a coalition defending press freedom in the United States, for the past five and a half years, Trump tweeted negatively about the media once a day. Of the total 2520 anti-press messages, 515 included insults against journalists and 810 against specific media outlets. Their most frequent targets were CNN and its professionals, followed by the *New York Times* and MSNBC⁷⁷.

All these efforts at quantification⁷⁸ have served to illustrate the influence that can be generated and accumulated by a perfectly integrated disinformation ecosystem, which in Donald Trump's case consisted of himself, a group of high-profile *influencers*⁷⁹ and legions of followers willing to repeat the messages provided, which ultimately fed the TV talk shows. Regardless of what the controversy of the day was about, which he himself forced

⁷⁴ Kessler, G.; Rizzo, S.; Kelly, M. "Trump's false or misleading claims total 30,573 over 4 years". The Washington Post, Washington D. C., 2021: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/01/24/trumps-false-or-misleading-claims-total-30573-over-four-years/>.

⁷⁵ Labelled as fake.

⁷⁶ Timberg, C.; Dvoskin, E. "Misinformation dropped dramatically the week after Twitter banned Trump and some allies". The Washington Post, Washington D. C., 2021. Technology: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/01/16/misinformation-trump-twitter/>.

⁷⁷ McCudden, K. "Trump's Negative Tweets About the Press (Living Doc)". U.S. Press Freedom Tracker 2015-2021.

⁷⁸ Quealy, K. "The Complete List of Trump's Twitter Insults (2015-2021)". The New York Times, New York, NY, 2021: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/01/19/upshot/trump-complete-insult-list.html?action=click&module=RelatedLinks&pgtype=Article>.

⁷⁹ 'Influenciadores'.

by taking advantage of the lists of *trending topics*⁸⁰, Trump has been able to build a powerful resonance chamber capable of dominating, and even monopolising, the *online* conversation in the United States. With the great comparative advantage over television, which is increasingly inquisitive with tough questions, Twitter was a medium that Trump could control 100 percent. As evidenced by the fact that instead of using the official White House account -@Potus⁸¹ - he preferred to continue using his personal account @realDonaldTrump⁸². Ever mindful of building his personal brand, Twitter offered Trump the chance to express himself without the minimal filters associated with the US presidency. Although in the height of irony, Sean Spicer, in view of his privileged experience as President Trump's first press secretary, has acknowledged that his White House boss's favourite social network is much more useful for destroying than for building, more effective at confusing than at debating priorities: "The problem [...] is that Twitter is not glue. It is solvent. It is breaking us apart"⁸³.

In fact, Twitter has also been the ideal platform for Trump to elevate his personal impulsivity to the level of government strategy, taking advantage of the dimension of social networks as a means of instant gratification. In the light of his unparalleled experience of having written about 20 percent of US presidents, Bob Woodward believes that this combination of radical incompetence and ubiquitous influence has shattered the fundamental expectations of any occupant of the White House:

"For almost fifty years, I have written about nine presidents, from Nixon to Trump, 20 percent of the 45 presidents of the United States. A president must be willing to share the worst with the people, the bad news with the good. All presidents have a great obligation to inform, to warn, to protect, to define objectives and the true national interest. It must be a truthful replica to the world, especially during crises. Instead, Trump has enshrined personal drive as a guiding principle of his presidency. When his performance as president is considered in its

⁸⁰ Topics of the moment.

⁸¹ POTUS is an acronym for President of the United States.

⁸² Haberman, M. "Stripped of Twitter, Trump Faces a New Challenge: How to Command Attention". New York Times, New York Times, NY, 2021: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/10/us/politics/trump-twitter.html>.

⁸³ Spicer, S. "The Briefing: Politics, the Press, and the President". Washington, D. C.: Regnery Publishing, 2018, p. 242.

entirety, I can only come to one conclusion: Trump is the wrong man for the job”⁸⁴.

Conspiracy theories and disinformation

The polycrisis in the United States has health, economic, social, cultural, racial and political dimensions. All these simultaneous imbalances are related, and all are based on an overdose of mistrust and emotionality that have surpassed epidemic levels of irrationality⁸⁵. As the assault on the Capitol in January 2021 illustrated, the country is suffering a dangerous deterioration in the definition of such basic questions as truth, facts and the very reality that Americans share.

On this so-called epistemological gap – referring to the branch of philosophy that examines the foundations of knowledge creation⁸⁶ – the proliferation of conspiracy theories and misinformation has contributed to its widening to dangerous proportions. This whole offensive of post-truth, alternative facts and parallel realities has ended up cementing a climate of national deception that fuels not only political division and hatred but also violence and the risk of domestic terrorism.

The torrent of nonsense conspiracy theories that have come to occupy a central position in US public discourse is reminiscent of the *cogito interruptus* coined half a century ago by the master Umberto Eco. In his classic *Apocalyptic and Integrated*, the great Italian intellectual explained that this way of not thinking belongs to those who see the world as full of signs, symptoms or even omens. Within this taxonomy of incongruity proposed by Umberto Eco, the thought transmitted through the complicity of the nudge and the wink is practised by apocalyptics who “see in the events of the past the symbols of a remarkable harmony, and in those of the present the symbols of a fall without salvation”⁸⁷.

⁸⁴ Woodward, B. Rage. London, UK: Simon & Schuster UK Ltd., 2020, pp. 391-392.

⁸⁵ Brooks, D. “The Rotting of the Republican Mind”. The New York Times, New York, NY, 2020: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/26/opinion/republican-disinformation.html>.

⁸⁶ Rediehs, L. “Our Epistemological Crisis”, 2017: https://www.huffpost.com/entry/our-epistemological-crisi_b_9905086.

⁸⁷ Eco, U. *Apocalyptic and integrated*. Barcelona, Spain: Editorial Lumen, 1968, pp. 384-385.

In the 21st century, in the heat of a media and community relations ecosystem so fractured by the internet and social media, conspiracy theories function as a popular intellectual shortcut. In the face of overwhelming events such as the current coronavirus pandemic, there is an inclination to stop thinking critically and a willingness to assume explanations that are as far-fetched as they are false in response to an overdose of uncertainty⁸⁸. Conspiratorial logic insists that certain events or situations are the result of secret manipulation by powerful forces with harmful intentions. Whether it is George Soros' self-interested quest for world domination, Bill Gates' chips, 5G technology, vaccines developed by the pharmaceutical industry or the sinister origin of COVID-19 in China. There always seem to be apocalyptic terra-planners willing to disbelieve that Lee Harvey Oswald killed President Kennedy.

In the past, conspiracy theories functioned as a compensatory mechanism in societies with minimal freedoms, where citizens were unable to act independently, plan their destiny or make their own decisions. The great paradox is that precisely advanced democracies like the United States, where citizens are supposed to be responsible for their political decisions, are becoming theme parks for conspiracy theories focused on questioning the 'official version' of events. In fact, according to a study published by the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania, one in three Americans believe that the Chinese government deliberately engineered and spread the coronavirus responsible for the pandemic, while another third are convinced that CDC specialists⁸⁹ have exaggerated the severity of COVID-19 to undermine President Trump⁹⁰.

For authors such as Quassim Cassam, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Warwick, conspiracy theories "are first and foremost forms of political propaganda. They are designed to denigrate specific individuals or groups or promote a political agenda. [...] If conspiracy theories are political propaganda, that should

⁸⁸ EC. "Identifying conspiracy theories". Brussels, Belgium: European Commission 2020: https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/coronavirus-response/fighting-disinformation/identifying-conspiracy-theories_en.

⁸⁹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the leading public health science institution in the United States.

⁹⁰ Carey, B. "A Theory About Conspiracy Theories". The New York Times, New York, NY, 2020: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/28/health/psychology-conspiracy-theories.html>.

do away with the popular notion that they are harmless. They are as harmful and dangerous as the causes they promote"⁹¹. This conspiratorial incarnation of political propaganda, according to Cassam, has been used by both the extreme right and the extreme left⁹². Although the acceptance of conspiracy theories at the consumer's pleasure is linked to individual predispositions and ideological inclinations. In any case, the great common ground in this cross-cutting use of conspiracy theories would be the *marketing* of seductive explanations for major events in order to promote a particular political agenda and influence public opinion.

Professors Russell Muirhead and Nancy L. Rosenblum have coined the term 'conspiracy without theory'⁹³ to define the latest phase in the accelerating and intensifying evolution of conspiracy theories⁹⁴(MUIRHEAD; ROSENBLUM, 2019, pp. 19-41). In his view, conspiracies without theory are characterised precisely by offering nothing more than insults without any trace of evidence; they are magnified and disseminated through social networks; they are more frequent in the far-right part of the political spectrum; and they find validation in their mere repetition without attribution of sources. Hence, the nebulous formula 'A lot of people are saying...'.⁹⁵ which precisely serves as the title of his book on the new conspiracy-mongering and the assault on democracy.

According to Muirhead and Rosenblum's analysis, the proliferation in frequency and intensity of these theory-free conspiracies has a very serious effect on democratic systems. Conspiracism, taken to extremes comparable in its appeal to a cult, feeds a kind of polarisation that is very difficult to overcome. It mixes superiority with the complicity that comes from knowing something that the rest of society ignores. For these reasons of questionable epistemology, it is almost impossible to reach consensus with conspiracy believers without theory, to persuade them of the falsity of what they believe to be true, or even to reach basic agreement to disagree. In addition to imposing a dynamic of delegitimization of

⁹¹ Cassam, Q. Why conspiracy theories are deeply dangerous. New Statesman. London, UK: Agora Series 2019.

⁹² As Professor Quassim Cassam recalls, in line with Hannah Arendt's masterly argument, both Hitler and Stalin were intensive promoters of conspiracy theories.

⁹³ Conspiracy without theory.

⁹⁴ Muirhead, R.; Rosenblum, N. A Lot of People are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019, pp. 19-41.

⁹⁵ 'Many people say...'

democratic institutions, starting with political parties, and generating a totally distorted reality without verifiable facts⁹⁶.

By far the most dangerous of these conspiracies would be QAnon because it has managed to transcend from the most paranoid corners of the internet to being considered by the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security⁹⁷ as a terrorist threat to national security⁹⁸. Originally, a source identified as Q began in 2018 to speak out through restricted internet forums to denounce the existence of a secret international satanic cabal, implicated, among other things, in paedophilia and cannibalism. To lend credibility to these lucubrations involving mostly Democratic Party figures, Q presented himself as a senior government official with access to official secrets and used jargon that implied military or US intelligence experience⁹⁹.

As QAnon has evolved into a menacing mass phenomenon¹⁰⁰, President Donald Trump has taken on increasing prominence as a hero in the fight against a vast cabal of anti-American saboteurs with ramifications in the federal government, the bureaucracy of key government departments, big business, the media starting with the Hollywood industry and all manner of public institutions in the United States¹⁰¹ (THE ECONOMIST, 2020). The movement has taken on an increasingly apocalyptic tone, concentrating on the dissemination of false information about the COVID-19 pandemic, the *Black lives matter* protests and, of course, the last presidential election cycle that culminated in the storming of the Capitol¹⁰².

⁹⁶ Muirhead, R.; Rosenblum, N. *A Lot of People are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019, pp. ix-xii.

⁹⁷ DHS: Department of Homeland Security.

⁹⁸ Levy, R.; Kesling, B. "DHS Issues Its First National Terrorism Bulletin for Domestic Extremists". *The Wall Street Journal*, New York, NY, 2021: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/dhs-issues-national-terrorism-alert-for-domestic-extremists-11611770893>.

⁹⁹ Bank, J.; Stack, L.; Victor, D. "Explaining QAnon, the Internet Conspiracy Theory That Showed Up at a Trump Rally". *The New York Times*, New York, NY, 2018: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/01/us/politics/what-is-qanon.html>.

¹⁰⁰ A widely commented poll by Ipsos and NPR, published in December 2020, indicates that at least 17% of Americans believe QAnon's central falsehood about the existence of a group of satanic elites who sexually exploit minors and attempt to control US politics and media: <https://www.ipsos.com/en-us/news-polls/npr-misinformation-123020>.

¹⁰¹ The Economist. "QAnon conspiracy theorists could prove awkward for Republicans". *The Economist*. London, UK 2020.

¹⁰² Roose, K. "What Is QAnon, the Viral Pro-Trump Conspiracy Theory?" *The New York Times*, New York, NY, 2021: <https://www.nytimes.com/article/what-is-qanon.html>.

A particularly worrying feature of QAnon has been its ability to break out of the online into the offline world. Followers of QAnon have been involved in violent crimes, including kidnappings, murder plots and even the 2019 assassination of a mafia boss in New York. From the far corners of the internet, QAnon's numerous communities have taken root on popular platforms such as Reddit, YouTube, Instagram, Facebook and Twitter. His supporters have openly participated in Trump campaign events and rallies, displaying flags, hats and T-shirts. In this transition from digital to analogue, the new federal Congress elected in November 2020 has two prominent QAnon supporters with seats in the House of Representatives: Marjorie Taylor Green for Georgia and Lauren Boebert for Colorado. Donald Trump and his allies have made multiple nods to this untheorized conspiracy to the point that the president went so far as to state that QAnon believers "basically believe in good government"¹⁰³.

The worrying QAnon phenomenon is linked to the disinformation campaign that the United States has suffered over the past five years. Professor Thomas Rid, in his history of this effective tool of political warfare, insists that we are currently living in a golden age of such malicious manipulations, ranging from the theft of confidential information for later leakage to the online stirring of political passions in order to aggravate existing divisions and conflicts in Western democracies. According to the Johns Hopkins University scholar¹⁰⁴, there are four major phases in the contemporary evolution of this increasingly sophisticated and powerful form of information manipulation for political purposes.

The first phase of the modern era of disinformation began in the 1920s as an art and science, to be used both against the United States and to attack the fledgling Soviet Union. This resource of weak international actors will be developed with a great deal of innovation, twisting and conspiracy-mongering. Its genesis coincides with the inter-war period, when literally the lights of the world seemed to go out simultaneously in the face of the rise of Soviet communism, German Nazism, Italian fascism and Japanese imperialism. This initial period coincides with the devastating economic crisis of the Great Depression, which will test the viability of both market economies and liberal democracies them-

¹⁰³ Villasenor, M. "2020 in Review: The Year Disinformation Went Mainstream". Net Politics. New York, NY: Council on Foreign Relations 2021.

¹⁰⁴ Rid, T. *Active Measures: The Secrecy History of Disinformation and Political Warfare*. London, UK: Profile Books Limited, 2020, pp. 6-8.

selves. Not to mention the profound transformation that journalism underwent during those turbulent years with the emergence of radio as the first true medium for mass communication.

The second stage in this evolution will materialise after the Second World War and will involve an effort to professionalise disinformation campaigns. US intelligence services will gain an important advantage in the challenge of organising highly aggressive and unscrupulous operations at the start of the Cold War. It was precisely the CIA¹⁰⁵ who coined the expression 'political warfare'¹⁰⁶ to denote its practices of true leaks, falsehoods and subversion against the communist adversary. While the Eastern bloc will opt for the expression 'disinformation'¹⁰⁷ to designate the same objective shared by these clandestine activities: to multiply the existing tensions and contradictions of the adversary. The time of greatest intensity and lethality was during the 1950s, just before the construction of the Berlin Wall.

The third phase came in the late 1970s when disinformation operations became an effective and well-resourced machine. It is then that disinformation will rise to the level of operational science of global proportions, reflecting the hegemonic struggle between Moscow and Washington around the world. The term 'active measures'¹⁰⁸ will be coined by the Soviet Union and used by its satellites within the communist bloc. From the 1960s onwards, these measures – understood as a combination of disinformation, propaganda, deception, sabotage, destabilisation and espionage by the big intelligence bureaucracies – would be increasingly active and to the advantage of the Eastern bloc until the Soviet collapse.

The fourth phase of the modern era of disinformation will gradually begin to reach its peak around 2005. By then, such manipulations with geopolitical undertones will be reborn and gain new impetus thanks to the development of interconnected computer networks, new digital technologies and internet culture. In this current period, disinformation is not only fooling minds but also machines. The old, painstaking art of psychological influence on the ground has accelerated and become a remote practice that

¹⁰⁵ Central Intelligence Agency, founded by the Truman Administration in September 1947.

¹⁰⁶ Guerra política.

¹⁰⁷ "Desinformación".

¹⁰⁸ 'Medidas activas'.

will require very little skill. In the latter period, the so-called active measures will be even more active, but also unrestrained and therefore much more dangerous.

It is in this last stage, characterised by the multiplier effect of online, that everything that has happened in terms of disinformation with Trumpism is framed. For Professor Thomas Rid, the assault perpetrated over the past five years of post-truth, alternative facts and fake news in the context of a 24/7 news cycle represents a dangerous threat to the very essence of Western democracies, starting with the United States: "Disinformation corrodes the foundations of liberal democracy, our ability to evaluate facts on their merits and to self-correct accordingly"¹⁰⁹(RID, 2020, pp. 7-8) .

One of the big problems with sophisticated disinformation is that when it is practised accurately, it is difficult to identify to the point that in some cases it goes unnoticed. Disinformation does not mean simply disseminating false information. As Professor Thomas Rid specifies in defining disinformation in its current practice, the most sophisticated operations are not the result of more or less spontaneous political lies but of the systematic production of large bureaucracies dedicated exclusively to generating all these active measures. That is, disinformation is normally the responsibility of intelligence services that employ professional criteria, continuous improvement and generally employ these missions against foreign adversaries. All so-called 'active measures' contain elements of disinformation, from manipulated content to the use of fake social media accounts. Although the ultimate goal is none other than to discredit and weaken the adversary¹¹⁰.

It is within this international dimension of disinformation that the intensive campaign of Russian interference suffered by the United States must be understood. This offensive, with a clear political intent based initially on Vladimir Putin's hostility towards Hillary Clinton, began during the 2016 presidential campaign. During that election cycle, American voters who used the online world to inform themselves were subjected to a sustained effort of toxic fake news and forced pro-Trump crisscrossing. As Jonathan Albright, director of research at Columbia University's Tow Center for Digital Journalism, has pointed out: "This is cultural

¹⁰⁹ Rid, T. *Active Measures: The Secrecy History of Disinformation and Political Warfare*. London, UK: Profile Books Limited, 2020, pp. 7-8.

¹¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 9.

hacking. They are using systems that were already created by these platforms to increase engagement. They are fuelling outrage, and it's easy to do, because outrage and emotion is what motivates people to share"¹¹¹.

The most widely used channel for Russia's pro-Trump disinformation effort has been the social network Facebook. The company created by Mark Zuckerberg himself had to admit in the framework of the investigations opened by the US Congress to what extent it had been used and manipulated by the Internet Research Agency (IRA)¹¹² of the Kremlin. In total, this Kremlin operation bought provocative Facebook ads that were seen by 126 million Americans¹¹³. In addition to this business to directly disseminate inflammatory Kremlin propaganda, Facebook also shared private information on more than 78 million American voters with Cambridge Analytica, a company hired by the Trump campaign¹¹⁴.

The accumulation of evidence about the Russian disinformation campaign proved impossible to ignore despite the White House's retracted denials. At the beginning of the second year of Donald Trump's presidency, the Department of Justice, after an extensive investigation conducted with the help of a grand jury in the District of Columbia, indicted thirteen Russian nationals linked to the Internet Research Agency for creating fake profiles of Americans and stealing identities of real people and groups 'for the purpose of interfering in the American political system' in a strategy that included 'supporting the presidential campaign of then candidate Donald J. Trump [...] and smearing Hillary Clinton"¹¹⁵.

In the run-up to the presidential elections on 3 November 2020, Russia's disinformation interference is no longer a sophisticated

¹¹¹ Confessore, N.; Wakabayashi, D. "How Russia Harvested American Rage to Reshape the U.S. Politics". The New York Times, New York, NY, 2017: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/09/technology/russia-election-facebook-ads-rage.html>.

¹¹² The trollfarm in the service of the Russian government, based outside St. Petersburg, specialises mainly in exploiting conflicts or divisions in Western democracies through social media.

¹¹³ Kang, C.; Fandos, N.; Isaac, M. 'Tech Executives Are Confronted About Election Meddling, but Make Few Promises on Capitol Hill'. The New York Times, New York, NY, 2017: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/31/us/politics/facebook-twitter-google-hearings-congress.html>.

¹¹⁴ Rosenberg, M.; Confessore, N.; Cadwalladr, C. 'How Trump Consultants Exploited the Facebook Data of Millions'. The New York Times, New York, NY, 2018: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/17/us/politics/cambridge-analytica-trump-campaign.html>.

¹¹⁵ Indictment U.S. v. Internet Research Agency et al., 16 February 2018: <https://www.justice.gov/file/1035477/download>.

operation, but a kind of *cut & paste*¹¹⁶. Instead of bothering to dig into the bottom of America's barrel of bigotry and prejudice, going so far in 2016 as to deploy three Russian agents from the Internet Research Agency to deep America to find fractures that could be exploited, the disinformation campaigns in 2020 have instead been limited to amplifying President Trump's own false statements, especially his efforts to delegitimise the American democratic system and insist on the fraudulent nature of the election. FBI Director Christopher A. Wray himself testified before Congress that the goal in 2020 of the Russian disinformation was none other than to exacerbate American political polarisation and denigrate Democratic candidate Joe Biden. A warning that earned him an immediate rebuke from the still-president Trump via Twitter¹¹⁷.

The irresistible attraction of wedge issues

In his quest to redefine what is acceptable and unacceptable in American public life, Donald Trump has not invented *wedge issues*¹¹⁸ but he has used them particularly effectively to mobilise his base from the very moment he launched his presidential candidacy by appealing to the ironic anxiety about immigration in a country of immigrants. Indeed, for some analysts present at the launch of this exceptional campaign in the atrium of Trump Tower on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan, including Trump's surreal descent down the golden escalator, that 16 June 2015 would have changed forever the way politics is done in the United States¹¹⁹.

In that speech, which was modestly attended despite the fact that the candidate boasted the presence of thousands and thousands of supporters, Trump raised a classic *wedge issue* with thinly veiled xenophobia, presenting the United States as a kind of dumping ground for the rest of the world of human beings who are at the very least problematic:

“When Mexico sends its people, it is not sending its best. They don't send you. They don't send you. They are sending people who have a lot of problems, and they are bringing

¹¹⁶ 'Corta y pega'.

¹¹⁷ Sanger, D. E.; Kanno-Youngs, Z. "The Russian Trolls Have a Simpler Job Today. Quote Trump". The New York Times, New York, NY, 2020: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/22/us/politics/russia-disinformation-election-trump.html>.

¹¹⁸ 'Temas divisivos'.

¹¹⁹ Kruse, M. 'The Escalator Ride That Changed America'. Politico Magazine. 2019.

those problems to us. They bring drugs. They bring crime. They are rapists. And some, I suppose, are good people. But I talk to the border guards and they tell us what we are getting. And it's just common sense. It's just common sense. They are not sending us the right people. It comes from more than just Mexico. It comes from all over Latin and South America, and probably from the Middle East. But we do not know. As we have no protection and no competence, we don't know what is going on. And it has to stop and it has to stop fast"¹²⁰.

From this familiar example, one can define the essence of *wedge issues* as rather bogus controversies with maximum resonance in the public eye¹²¹. The effect of this kind of wedge approach is as irresistible as it is sterile: it forces everyone to speak out and take positions without there being the slightest chance of reaching any agreement. For these debates, usually based on non-existent but highly polarising issues, tend to be couched in the worst terms of intransigence and antagonism. As a result, they are highly effective in dividing and, above all, mobilising¹²².

Wedge issues, although in very few exceptions they can have a positive impact and promote change, are linked to the so-called culture war that the United States has been waging since the turmoil of the 1960s, although it has reached its maximum political expression since the 1980s and has been fully effective up to the present day. As Professor Andrew Hartman explains, this culture war is not a secondary distraction or a mere shouting match or even an exercise in political opportunism. Rather, it is a reflection of the conflict that has taken place in American society over the past six decades in the face of unprecedented social changes in its history¹²³.

A before and after in this culture war, whose trenches have been defined precisely with the help of *wedge issues*, will be the 1973 Supreme Court ruling in *Roe vs. Wade* who decriminalised abor-

¹²⁰ Trump, D. "Donald Trump's Presidential Announcement Speech". Time Magazine. New York, NY 2015.

¹²¹ A good example in Spain would have been the whole controversy around the so-called "parental pin".

¹²² Hillygus, S.; Shields, T. G. "The Persuadable Voter: Wedge Issues in Presidential Campaigns". Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009, p. 67.

¹²³ Hartman, A. "A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars". Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2015, pp. 1-7.

tion in the United States under the constitutional protection of women's right to privacy¹²⁴. Alongside abortion and the death penalty, the toxic list of the culture war, always open to new opportunities for controversy, also includes gun rights, affirmative action, the arts, the interpretation of history, censorship and the cancellation phenomenon, feminism, homosexuality, immigration and other identity issues such as patriotism and national symbols.

According to Hillygus and Shields, professors of political science at Duke University and the University of Arkansas, presidential elections in the 21st century do not exactly fit the traditional two-party dynamic in the United States, with Republican and Democratic candidates moderating their policy positions to appeal to independent voters. In the face of entrenched polarisation in American politics, increasing priority is being given to connecting through *wedge issues* with so-called strategic voters who can be mobilised through internal conflict. In short, with an increasing deployment of divisive issues, US presidential candidates seek not to change the predispositions of potential voters but to mobilise those inclinations that can secure their vote¹²⁵.

The tactic of using such emotionally charged issues to divide and mobilise is rooted in the US two-party system but with a global projection. For, as *The Atlantic* has analysed in detail, this form of politics treats as universal the classic Aristotelian logic principle of the excluded third party¹²⁶ according to which, if there is a proposition that affirms something and another that contradicts it, one of the two must be true and a third option is not possible. Hence the borderless appeal of *wedge issues* couched in terms of black or white:

"If one side of a dilemma is right, the other must be wrong; there is no middle ground. Controversial issues such as abortion, gun control or Confederate statues are polarising and force people to choose sides, for or against. Voters may feel that debates on controversial issues leave no room for nuance. But wedge issues, while sometimes annoying to the electorate, have proven effective in galvanising support in a two-party system"¹²⁷.

¹²⁴ Blackmun, H. A. "U.S. Reports: Roe v. Wade", 410 U.S. 113 Washington D. C.

¹²⁵ Hillygus, S.; Shields, T. G. *The Persuadable Voter: Wedge Issues in Presidential Campaigns*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009, pp. 21-23.

¹²⁶ In Latin: *principium tertii exclusi* or *tertium non datur*.

¹²⁷ Peterson, M.; Fayyad, A. "The Irresistible Effectiveness of Wedge Politics". *The Atlantic*. 2017: <https://www.theatlantic.com/membership/archive/2017/12/the-irresistible-effectiveness-of-wedge-politics/547946/>.

Within the intense reporting used by Trumpism, one of these *wedge issues* stands out for its insidious construction. Within the complex challenge of accepting different identities, conservative groups in the United States with access to the White House during the Trump Administration have been using transgender people and the perceived grievances associated with their social normalisation as a divisive wedge. Although this issue has been used on a number of controversial fronts, from military life to the use of public toilets, in its latest decline it has focused on transgender adolescents and their participation in school sports competitions. With the particularity of mixing prejudice against this minority – less than 2% of US minors but with a disproportionate incidence of suicide – with the reproach of enjoying an unfair sporting advantage. So much so that some EU states have considered legislating as a solution to a non-existent problem of marginalisation of a vulnerable group by cloaking it in a sense of fair play¹²⁸(ORR, 2020) .

To be able to distort US politics to extreme levels of toxicity, it is worth noting how Donald Trump has used the debilitating fracture suffered by the Republican Party over the last decade. When George W. Bush left the White House with historically low approval ratings, the conservative party faced a troubling set of shortcomings: from a vision for America's future to a generational turnover to a lack of enthusiasm among its base. It is in this great vacuum and the ensuing internal confrontation between absolutists and pragmatists, which made Ronald Reagan's unified party unrecognisable, that the opportunistic figure of Trump emerges¹²⁹.

It is precisely in a United States undergoing great social, cultural and technological disruption, together with great social divergence¹³⁰, that the *wedge issue* effect has managed to raise the historical American polarisation to levels of tension and sectarianism that completely distort the exercise of politics¹³¹. The two

¹²⁸ Orr, G. "The Wedge Issue That's Dividing Trumpworld". Politico. Washington D. C. 2020: <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/08/07/wedge-issue-dividing-trumpworld-392323>.

¹²⁹ Alberta, T. *American Carnage: On the Front Lines of the Republican Civil War and the Rise of President Trump*. New York, NY: Harper, 2019.

¹³⁰ Murray, C. "Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010". New York, NY: Crown Forum, 2012.

¹³¹ Kazin, M. *The Populist Persuasion: An American History*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017.

Americas – three if one counts Trump’s illiberal take on moderate Democrats and Republicans – are not merely at loggerheads over ideology or governance, but question each other’s legitimacy by perceiving each other as an immoral and alien threat. This sectarian climate, in which both sides tend to perceive each other as enemies, makes it impossible to reach the consensus required by the US constitutional system, as well as inciting rule-breaking to implement a government agenda or even declare an electoral victory¹³².

All this partisan animosity reflects the deep and irreconcilable differences between the Republican and Democratic parties. During the first two decades of the 21st century, the two major political formations have clashed over issues such as the response to 9/11, the Iraq war, gun rights, health care, taxation and diversity. These clashes would not only have encouraged the more extreme positions of each party but would have segregated the US electorate into blocs linked to race, religion, education level, generational groups and geography¹³³. These blocs, according to political scientist Lilliana Mason, would have served to construct a *mega-identity*¹³⁴ that not only clashes on political issues, but comes to involve a clash between white Christian conservatives against a progressive, multiracial, secular elite¹³⁵.

Drawing on election research, Ezra Klein explains how the tradition of the same voter opting for different parties is disappearing. In the 1970s, voters tended to split ballots between, for example, congressional races and presidential races; in that decade the correlation of the two votes was 0.54. In the 1980s, it rose to 0.65. And now it is 0.97. To the extent that today’s self-proclaimed independent voters tend to vote much more consistently in favour of a single party than partisan voters of the past¹³⁶.

In this sense, Klein argues that Donald Trump is more a vehicle than the cause of America’s sectarian divide. In his view, this is a polarisation spiral in the form of a rather vicious circle. As

¹³² Finkel, E. J., et al. ‘Political sectarianism in America’. Science Magazine, 370, no. 6516, pp. 533-536, 2020.

¹³³ Cohn, N. ‘Why Political Sectarianism Is a Growing Threat to American Democracy’. The New York Times, New York, NY, 2021: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/19/us/democracy-gop-democrats-sectarianism.html>.

¹³⁴ ‘Megaidentidad’.

¹³⁵ Mason, L. ‘Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became our Identity’. Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 2018, pp. 1-16.

¹³⁶ Klein, E. ‘Why We’re Polarized’. New York, NY: Avid Reader Press, 2020, pp. 1-17.

the public has become polarised, in part due to the behaviour of political actors and institutions (including the media), actors and institutions respond by behaving in increasingly polarised ways. This in turn further polarises the public, and so on in a loop based on what Klein identifies as *identity politics*¹³⁷. Turned into a weapon to challenge the legitimacy of the opponent, identities tend to overlap to form mega-identities, which mutually reinforce each other and prevent the slightest challenge¹³⁸.

Among the direst consequences of this irrational political polarisation, taken to the extreme of sectarianism, is its negative impact on the accountability required of any leader in an advanced democracy. In essence, hyper-partisanship in general and Trumpism in particular have become a matter of social identity for many voters that must be protected through rather tribal defence mechanisms, and therefore lacking sufficient critical capacity to demand *accountability*¹³⁹ at the ballot box¹⁴⁰ (LYNN BITECOFER, 2020) . In this regard, it should be remembered that Donald Trump in the November 2020 elections was the second most voted candidate in US history despite his handling of the pandemic and his incitement to storm the Capitol.

Between Hofstadter's paranoia and the Huntington's Gap

Richard Hofstadter, a distinguished American intellectual and historian, published a long and eloquent essay in Harper's magazine in 1964 entitled "The Paranoid Style in American Politics"¹⁴¹. For some time now, this specialist in American populist movements has become an obligatory reference to begin to contextualise Trumpism within a historical tradition that is much older than the radicalised right that crystallised in the 1960s around the figure of Barry Goldwater. Hofstadter's essay has become a particularly useful guide to make sense of and contextualise all the angry disaffection from which Donald Trump has been able to derive so much political mileage¹⁴².

¹³⁷ 'Política de identidad'.

¹³⁸ Ibidem, pp. 49-79.

¹³⁹ "Rendición de cuentas".

¹⁴⁰ Lynn Bitecofer, R. "Polarization and Democratic Accountability in the 2020 Presidential Election". *Society*, 57, pp. 507-510, 2020.

¹⁴¹ "The Paranoid Style in American Politics".

¹⁴² Hofstadter, R. "The Paranoid Style in American Politics". New York, NY 1964: <https://harpers.org/archive/1964/11/the-paranoid-style-in-american-politics/>.

According to a detailed analysis by the distinguished professor at Columbia University: "I call it paranoid style simply because no other word adequately evokes the sense of heated exaggeration, suspicion and conspiratorial fantasy that I have in mind"¹⁴³. According to the Pulitzer Prize winner, this political degradation insists on perceiving the world as a conflict between good and evil. What's more, in the absence of total victory, this paranoia is only spreading.

Hofstadter sees this deep-rooted tradition of paranoid politics as going back to the very founding of the United States and being sustained throughout American history by the anti-Masonic movement, the nativist and anti-Catholic currents, the more extreme abolitionists of slavery, the alarmist opponents of the Mormons, the populist authors of the late 19th century who insisted on a great international conspiracy of bankers, those who denounced the influence of the armaments industry on American involvement in World War I and the more popular publications of the left. To arrive – in Professor Hofstadter's view of multiplying relevance to current affairs in the United States despite the fact that his conclusions about the paranoid style in US politics date back to the 1960s – at the contemporary American right and racial polarisation that share the same conspiratorial obsession.

The common thread running through all these episodes detailed by Professor Richard Hofstadter is the motivation to be fighting for an established way of life but threatened by powerful forces, including the media. According to Hofstadter, in an analysis that seems based squarely on the toxic populist rhetoric of Trumpism and its entire conspiratorial context, the modern US right is bent on rectifying a changing reality that they perceive as destructive and subversive:

"The old American virtues have already been eaten away by cosmopolitans and intellectuals; the old competitive capitalism has been gradually undermined by socialist and communist schemers; the old national security and independence have been destroyed by treasonous plots, which have as their most powerful agents not only outsiders and foreigners as of old, but important statesmen in the very centres of American power. Their predecessors had uncovered conspiracies; the modern radical right sees conspiracy as treason from above"¹⁴⁴.

¹⁴³ Ibidem.

¹⁴⁴ Ibidem.

In Hofstadter's view, the three basic elements of the incarnation of the paranoid style in US right-wing thought can be traced back to the 1930s: 1) There is a sustained conspiracy that would have peaked with FDR's New Deal to undermine the free market economy through federal government interventionism; 2) Key positions in the federal bureaucracy have been infiltrated by leftists who have cunningly and steadily engaged in betraying America's national interests; and 3) America is infiltrated by leftist agents who control the education system, religion and the media in order to paralyse the resistance of loyal and patriotic Americans.

Following the systematic questioning of American democracy instigated since 2016 by Donald Trump, the paranoid style typified by Professor Hofstadter has been distilled into a combination of *deep state*¹⁴⁵ and globalist forces, not to mention the sordid conspiratorial cabal promoted by QAnon. This unlikely combination of forces, allied with the Democrats, conspired, according to Trump's oft-repeated big lie, to rig the electoral process and snatch victory from its rightful winner. Although there is no evidence for this whole plot, more than half of Republican Party voters firmly believe in President Trump's 'lost cause'.

As Edward Luce, editor of the *Financial Times*, has explained, taking on Trump's *big lie* requires a huge leap of faith as it involves believing in a conspiracy without borders that includes among others George Soros, Bill Gates, Antifa, the Bolivarians in Venezuela, the Chinese Communists along with numerous Republican judges and officials overseeing the American electoral process from Georgia to Pennsylvania¹⁴⁶. Or what Professor Hofstadter defined in paranoidly hyperbolic terms as 'a perfect model of malice, a kind of amoral, sinister, omnipresent, powerful, cruel, sensual, luxury-loving superman' endowed with such irresistible powers as to bend the course of history towards evil¹⁴⁷.

Another reference used to explain the political context that has made Trumpism possible is a book published in 1981 by Samuel Huntington under the title *American Politics: Promise of Dis-*

¹⁴⁵ 'Deep state', a reference to the permanent power that controls Washington regardless of election cycles and that Trump says has conspired against him since his arrival in the White House.

¹⁴⁶ Luce, E. "No easy cure for America's 'paranoid style'". *Financial Times*, London, UK, 2020. Opinion: <https://www.ft.com/content/5eb76ab8-f3fe-4abb-8efa-3bf934a7cfa6>.

¹⁴⁷ Hofstadter, R. "The Paranoid Style in American Politics". New York, NY 1964: <https://harpers.org/archive/1964/11/the-paranoid-style-in-american-politics/>.

*harmony*¹⁴⁸. The Harvard professor, also known in international analysis for his theory on the clash of civilisations, argues in advance that disillusionment in the guise of a new political force is actually a recurring factor that materialises in the United States every six decades. In these periods of moralising distrust of organised power, the penultimate manifestation of which before Trump would have taken place amidst the turmoil of the 1960s, the prevailing narrative is that the American giant has lost its way and in order to find the right path it must return to its constitutional roots¹⁴⁹.

The essence of Huntington's paradoxical argument is that America is a nation founded on ideals that cannot be fully realised. All this historical frustration with the gap between reality and ideals in the United States inevitably generates tensions. As Huntington explains: 'In terms of American beliefs, government is supposed to be egalitarian, participatory, open, non-coercive and responsive to the demands of individuals and groups. However, no government can be all this and still be a government'¹⁵⁰.

Huntington identifies this whole mismatch between ideals and institutions as the "IvI gap"¹⁵¹, short for "ideals versus institutions"¹⁵². And in his view¹⁵³, that gap is diluted in a cycle of cynicism, complacency and hypocrisy. Although, according to the Harvard professor, every six decades, the IvI gap generates a passionate body of doctrine dominated by an overdose of passion, moralism, heightened conflict, reform and political realignment leading to extreme situations reminiscent of the recent US election crisis that culminated in the storming of the Capitol in Washington D.C.¹⁵⁴.

The main sixty-year cycles in American political history suggested by Huntington – who died in 2008 but not before having foreseen in a premonitory way the anti-establishment paroxysm in

¹⁴⁸ Huntington, S. *America Politics: The Promise of Disharmony*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981.

¹⁴⁹ Drutman, L. "This 1981 book eerily predicted today's distrustful and angry political mood". Vox.com 2016.

¹⁵⁰ Huntington, S. *America Politics: The Promise of Disharmony*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981, p. 41.

¹⁵¹ 'Brecha IvI'.

¹⁵² 'Ideales frente a instituciones'.

¹⁵³ Huntington, S. *America Politics: The Promise of Disharmony*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981, p. 39.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 130.

the United States in recent years – are four: 1) Around 1770, coinciding with the American Revolution and the revolt against the British Crown; 2) Around 1830, when Andrew Jackson's first populist impulse drives a revolt against banking; 3) Again during the transition from the 19th to the 20th century, with Theodore Roosevelt leading the progressive movement against vested interests and the system; and 4) Throughout the turbulent 1960s when left-wing activists fight against the so-called military-industrial complex.

All these moments coincide, according to the Harvard scholar, with a significant coincidence of rapid changes, both economic and social (starting with new forms of communication), which tend to strengthen the role of ideology in politics. In all, Samuel Huntington details fourteen general characteristics that serve to identify both the context and the foreseeable consequences of these defining periods in US political history:

- Dissatisfaction was widespread; authority, hierarchy, specialisation and experience were widely questioned or rejected.
- Political ideas were taken seriously and played an important role in the controversies of the time”.
- The traditional American values of freedom, individualism, equality, popular control of government and openness of government were emphasised in public discussion.
- Moral outrage over the IvI gap was widespread.
- Politics was characterised by turmoil, excitement, commotion, even agitation, far beyond the usual routine of conflict between interest groups.
- The hostility to power (the anti-power ethic) was intense, and the central question of politics was often defined as ‘freedom versus power’.
- The media exposure of the IvI gap was a central feature of the policy.
- Movements dedicated to specific reforms or ‘causes’ (women, minorities, criminal justice, temperance, peace) flourished.
- New forms of communication appeared, significantly increasing the influence of the media in politics.
- Political participation broadened, often taking on new forms and often expressing itself through hitherto unusual channels.

- The main political divisions of the period tend to cut across the economic class, with a combination of middle and working class groups promoting change.
- Major reforms of political institutions were attempted to limit power and reshape institutions in line with American ideals (some of which were successful and some of which were long-lasting).
- There was a basic readjustment in the relations between social forces and political institutions, often including but not limited to the political party system.
- The prevailing ethos promoting reform in the name of traditional ideals was, in a sense, both forward-looking and backward-looking, progressive and conservative .

In light of the last four years of national-populism in the White House, the characteristics formulated forty years ago by Samuel Huntington serve as an updated checklist perfectly applicable to the Trump phenomenon's multiplied gap between ideals and reality in the United States. However, the main optimistic conclusion from Huntington's 'promise of disharmony' is that a difficult juncture such as the current one in the United States can provide an opportunity for positive change, substantial improvements and forward-looking reforms.

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