

Challenges of the International Agenda 2018 Humanity needs to strengthen the multilateral system

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The international order that emerged in 1989 left the United States as the sole global power, which has since then been making itself felt by asserting hard power: political, economic and military. However, the current international scenario and the complexity of the interests of the great powers, as well as the so-called 'regional powers', are causing a process of mutation or readjustment of an international scene influenced by new threats to security that have alarmed the inhabitants of the big cities throughout the globe. The conflict zones are where these interests intersect, and the International Organizations are where diplomatic battles are being fought.

Trump's break-in

The administration of President Donald Trump has inaugurated a sort of "new foreign policy" that has perplexed the diplomatic and international world. He has announced measures contrary to what has hitherto been the globalizing vocation of his country. He began office by indicating that he would not join the Trans Pacific Partnership. The TPP had already been negotiated and was widely expected to stimulate and liberalize trade and investments in the Pacific basin, which is likely to be the most dynamic region during this century.

Subsequently, Trump proceeded to abandon the Conference on Climate Change known as COP-15 or the Paris Agreement, signed by 195 countries in 2015. He hinted that the idea of global warming was a deception, and denied that the planet will be affected [1]. This was followed by his announcement of the withdrawal of the United States from UNESCO, immediately emulated by Israel. All this has contributed to weakening the multilateral system, especially as regards social agendas. Furthermore, President Trump is going ahead with his project of raising a wall with Mexico and threatening to end NAFTA, the North America Free Trade Agreement, which has been in effect between the United States, Mexico and Canada since 1994.

This President created dismay when he recently announced that he will move his embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, igniting the protest of virtually the entire Muslim world. Even the US's closest allies, such as the United Kingdom and most of the EU countries, rejected this initiative [2].

The new Tsar

The Russian Federation led by Vladimir Putin has managed to reawaken a strong nationalist sentiment that has enabled it to occupy an important place on the international stage, as we have seen in the wake of the crisis in Syria. Other factors that have contributed to strengthening

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Russian nationalism seem to be the progressive installation of NATO bases on its borders and the permanent invitation to the former Soviet republics to join the Western military pact. Moscow now has the Chechen terrorism stirred up by Wahhabism under control and is successfully ignoring the international rejection of its annexation of the Crimea, which seems to be irreversible. Putin, according to public opinion polls, enjoys high popular support [3], and even though the country has failed to achieve a substantial economic growth, Russian national pride has actually been reinforced by the sanctions applied by the United States and the EU. The Russians are proud of being winners of the Second World War and of being the first to send a human being into space, among other successes. Furthermore, for a country that lost 26 million inhabitants in the war - of whom almost 9 million were soldiers - it is hard to imagine that it will be defeated by this type of measure. Rather, they seem to be paving the way for Putin to obtain a new mandate enabling him to govern until the year 2024.

The Awakening of the Asian Dragon

The People's Republic of China is consolidating itself every day as a global force due to the power of its economy and its growing, unchallenged military might. Moreover, President Xi Jinping, since the XIX Communist Party Congress, has acquired something of the mythical status of Mao Zedong. Nobody would have imagined a couple of decades ago that this poor, backward and overpopulated country would practically dispute the supremacy of the United States. The strength of its economy, which between 2000 and 2016 has grown at an average rate of around 10% per year, has led to a steadily-expanding internal market together with strong foreign direct investment, which in 2015 reached its maximum with 135 billion dollars invested [4]. Naturally, these come mainly from western companies, which accumulate hundreds of billions of dollars and generate thousands of jobs while stimulating the flow of trade worldwide. Vested interests seem to be the best guarantee against any external threat to their security. Or, as the Romans said: "Trade brings peace".

Europe in a labyrinth

For its own part, the European Union, traditionally aligned to the United States on the multilateral and military level, has progressively weakened due to the growing divergences between its members and its inability to be a leading actor in times of crisis [5]. Its greatest achievement in recent years has been the nuclear agreement with Iran, which the United States has already threatened to break. Of the 28 countries that make up the EU only 6 have more than 20 million inhabitants, and it is largely under the hegemony of Germany and France. The United Kingdom is in the process of withdrawing and the so-called Višegrad group, consisting of the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary and Slovakia, is moving further and further away from Brussels. To this we can add, among the rest, the tensions between Poland and Germany, the arrival of a hard-right government in Austria, Catalan separatism [6] and the border disputes between Croatia and Slovenia [7].

The idea of European integration is threatened by economic asymmetry between its members, but it is also eroded by cultural differences. The EU has recognized countries like Kosovo, whose future is uncertain and whose subsistence depends on its entry into the EU. Serbia, Turkey, Albania, Montenegro, Bosnia, Macedonia and other countries from the former Soviet orbit have expressed their desire to join the EU. But the existence of a single currency, with all its advantages, continues to work against the weakest economies in the absence of a common monetary policy. As a result it has been suggested that a "two-speed" EU could be established. All these factors contribute to weakening its claim to be a major player in an international crisis. Local stresses, global effects

Regional powers such as India, Pakistan, Israel, Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, have acquired considerable geopolitical importance in that they have become the potential ‘triggers’ for possible future crises. North Korea deserves special mention here: it has given evidence of its nuclear capacities and is now threatening to jeopardize global stability. The Middle East remains the ‘hottest’ zone, where skirmishes or armed conflicts are likely to break out. In addition to the war in Syria, a civil war has been under way in Yemen since 2014 causing the population great suffering and leaving thousands dead. It is being waged between religious sectors supported mainly by Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Nor can we forget the situation in Palestine and Israel, where the failure to reach an agreement to establish two independent states has above all undermined the legitimacy of the international system. Neither international law nor the resolutions of the United Nations have been respected. The right of the United States to veto the Security Council has provided support, among other things, for the expansion of settlements in territories considered by the international community as belonging to the Palestinian nation [8].

This shifting international reality and the actions of its players has led many countries to re-examine and modify their relations with Washington given the growing threats to international order. This is especially evident in the European Union as a result of security threats from terrorism that has struck several cities, of immigration, of the risk of nuclear conflict and of an economic crisis that has dragged on for years in most of the member countries. The internal divisions of the EU and the different perceptions of international reality, as well as the national interests of each member country, are making it difficult to build a single agenda. The long negotiation for the withdrawal of the United Kingdom is giving countries like France, in the hands of President Emmanuel Macron, a chance to exercise leadership along with Germany, where Chancellor Angela Merkel’s government has been weakened by the migration crisis. Three months after the elections, there is still no agreement for the formation of a government, much to the dismay of its own citizens and European public opinion. In addition, Germany’s sole negotiating power is that it is the strongest economy in Europe. Not being a member of the Security Council or possessing a nuclear arsenal means that it is left out of many of the big decisions.

A new order

The world is thus undergoing a reordering on a global level, haunted by old, re-emerging ghosts like populism and nationalism, especially in Europe where the two world wars that humanity has known both originated. The crisis of politics in general and of social democracy in particular, has opened the way to conservative forces and has strengthened xenophobic, racist and populist movements, which are steadily increasing their presence in the political scene of most European countries. National agendas must face these new challenges and confront them in the multilateral field, which is where important battles for the future of humanity will be fought. Unfortunately, the legitimacy of the international system as expressed in the behaviour of the main actors in United Nations organizations seems no longer to be meeting the demands of citizens because of its inability to resolve the humanitarian crises to which we now seem to have become accustomed. The United Nations is the main stage for negotiations and should seek to respect the international legality created by its members. The current structure and distribution of power have turned the latter into a chimera.

It is crucial to strengthen the international system in order to achieve the 17 Sustainable Development Goals agreed in 2015 by the United Nations in the so-called 2030 agenda [9]. Climate change is here to stay and if effective measures are not taken in the short and medium term, we will endanger human existence, because global warming can only aggravate major problems like population growth, water shortage, poverty and hunger.

Although human beings have made extraordinary progress in science and technology, expanding the frontiers of knowledge, today 2.1 billion people live in poverty and more than 815 million people in the world go hungry [10]. The elimination of these scourges are thus the first two objectives of the 2030 agenda. The prospects are even bleaker and more dramatic if we consider what the world will be like by the year 2050 if nothing changes. Some figures: there will be 9.730 million human beings, two thirds of humanity will live in urban areas, around 50% of forests will have disappeared, groundwater sources will have decreased considerably. Agriculture will need to produce 50% more than it produced in 2012 to meet demand, and arable land, water, forests, fisheries and biodiversity will decrease under the impact of climate change, among other problems. Humanity needs to strengthen the multilateral system, since this is the only space where rich and poor countries, large and small, can solve their problems. Democratizing institutions and respecting international legality through compliance with United Nations resolutions should be the duty of all. Unfortunately, the reality is different: powerful countries are exploiting the weapon they reserved for themselves when creating the United Nations: the Security Council. The 5 members with the right of veto are ultimately the controllers of an international order created in response to the world that emerged at the end of the Second World War but which ceased to exist with the fall of the Berlin Wall.

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Notes

[1] https://elpais.com/internacional/2017/06/01/estados_unidos/1496343144_186083.html. President Trump said in 2012 that “The concept of global warming was created by and for the Chinese to make non-competitive manufacturing in the United States.”

[2] https://elpais.com/internacional/2017/12/11/actualidad/1513019006_124306.html.

[3] 82.1% of Russians approve of Putin’s administration, according to the Russian Public Opinion Research Center in last May. Of these, 55.8% supported the government and 32% were critical.

[4] <https://es.portal.santandertrade.com/establecerse-extranjero/china/inversion-extranjera>

[5] At the celebrations for the 70th anniversary of the creation of the European Union today, its leaders highlighted having “70 years of peace in Europe”. They forgot to mention the Yugoslav civil war at the beginning of the 90s that left an estimated 200,000 civilians dead throughout the territory of the former Yugoslavia and 2.7 million displaced. The Muslim population of Bosnia was the most affected.

[6] It is interesting to observe the reaction of the EU to the unilateral declaration of independence of the Catalan Parliament. With certain differences, the Parliament of Kosovo did the same in 2008, but was immediately recognized by the United States and most of the EU countries.

[7] <http://www.lavanguardia.com/internacional/20170630/423774044808/conflicto-eslovenia-croacia-bahia-piran.html>

[8] On December 16, 2017, 14 of the 15 members of the Security Council voted in favour of a resolution condemning the decision of the United States to move its embassy to Jerusalem. For the first time in 7 years Washington used its right to veto, and the US Ambassador warned that they would not forget the actions of these countries. Even the United Kingdom, the most faithful ally of the United States, joined in this condemnation. For his part, President Trump said: “They take our money and then vote against us. We will be observing those votes. The votes against us will save us a lot. We do not care”. https://elpais.com/internacional/2017/12/20/estados_unidos/1513796002_536422.html

[9] <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/es/2015/09>

[10] Source: Intended Nationally Determined Contribution (INDC) of Chile to the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, 2015 National Strategy on Water Resources 2012-2025