

Ménage à trois¹

United States, China and Russia in a dispute for world supremacy

Fernando Ayala*

The rivalry between the great powers is best appreciated by examining them based on their respective power and in relation to how their political or moral actions are evaluated at the international level. What is considered good, ethical or morally acceptable may be so for some, but not necessarily for others, and this is influenced by diverse factors, including cultural ones, in the way of conceiving societies as well as the international order.

The practice and exercise of power by the major players show us that the national interest remains the sole principle on which States act. Actions considered “moral” can strengthen or weaken the presence of a country on the world stage, as we have seen in the case of Venezuela, where various actors – some motivated by supposed moral principles, others by international law - have sought to attack or defend what happens there.

Upon reviewing history, we can examine different periods and see the paradigm changes in the acceptable concepts on what is ethical or moral. Slavery can serve as an example. For thousands of years, it was accepted and considered normal to have slaves and/or enslave the defeated after a war. Until very recently it was legitimate for the European powers to hunt, commercialize and export human beings from Africa, duly regulated by laws and market prices, just because they were black, which allowed the birth of fortunes that continue to exist until today in countries like the UK.

Anti-Semitism was state policy in almost all of Europe, and communities of Jews were often forced to live in ghettos, with a ban on certain jobs, frequently murdered or expelled from civilized Christian countries, up until the extermination caused by Nazi Germany. That the Palestinians have been stripped of their territories, live in refugee camps in third countries, or that Israel continues to extend its settlements in contravention of international legality, is assumed as part of reality and considered almost normal.

No one punishes Israel with an economic, financial or commercial boycott. The

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same thing happened when the Jews did not have a country of their own and few claimed for one, as is the case today with the Kurds. The racial segregation in South Africa was maintained for centuries and legally formalized in 1948 until its abolition in 1992. It included the prohibition of sexual relations between races. Only a few countries broke diplomatic relations with Pretoria and instead, Israel established a close friendship with the racist regime after the Yom Kippur War in 1973.

In Guantánamo, more than 40 prisoners - some without being tried or accused - have been waiting 15 years to be processed and to determine if they are guilty. Russia formally annexed Crimea in 2014, without asking anyone, just as the United States decided to invade Iraq in 2003 and start a war with false evidence and without consulting the Security Council. The same has been done in Syria, bombing Damascus in 2018. It was never known how many Chinese students were killed in Tiananmen in 1989, nor what happened to the student who confronted the tanks.

The NATO bombed civilians in Belgrade in 1999, leaving around 5,000 dead, including 88 children and three Chinese diplomats. Nobody sanctioned them. When it comes to talking about human rights and democracy, many countries immediately tend to condemn Cuba, but they keep silent and protect Saudi Arabia, where neither one nor the other is respected. The powers accepted the kidnapping and murder of a Saudi journalist who walked into his consulate in Istanbul and was tortured, dismembered and made disappear.

Nobody criticizes the Egyptian regime, where in 2013 a general overthrew a democratically elected president. This type of actions that for the public opinion can be morally blameworthy, are judged by the governments depending on the glass with which one looks, that is, they are judged based on the national interest.

The hostility of the United States in relation to Russia or the commercial war with China that is just beginning and that no one knows where it will end up, essentially responds to power. Weakening Russia became an obsession for Washington, neglecting the growth and global expansion of China that is increasingly close to dispute the supremacy. In 1972 the world was surprised when President Richard Nixon shook hands with President Mao Zedong in Beijing. It was the national interest that acted on both sides: to weaken the Soviet Union for the Americans, and for the Chinese to seek a powerful ally in case of conflict with Moscow.

Today things have changed, and over the last six years President Vladimir Putin has met 30 times with Chinese President Xi Jinping, noting that they coincide on all global issues. It is the answer to the coercive measures of the United States and of the European Union versus Russia that began in 2014, and since last year also against China and which end up generating the opposite effect. In addition, they stimulate patriotism in those countries that have lived for centuries with material deficiencies.

Chinese cities today are unrecognizable to the previous generation. The same happens in Moscow, where visitors are struck by the cleanliness of the streets, the growth of the automotive park, the renovation of the facades of the buildings and the monumental museums that recall the defeat of Nazism. The Russian capital is today the exact opposite of one of the most beautiful cities in the world, Rome, flooded with

garbage.

While there was a bipolar world, and during the years of the Cold War, the fear of the Soviet Union was understandable. It was thought that the situation would relax with its disappearance in 1991, the unification of Germany, the democratization of the countries of Eastern Europe and especially with the dissolution of the military alliance known as the Warsaw Pact. None of this has happened; on the contrary, NATO, led by the United States, continues to expand its forces and build military bases to encircle Russia. Whilst NATO had 16 member states at the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall, today there are 29 full members.

While Washington was dedicated to building military bases, China invested in infrastructure, participation in European companies and in generous loans in Europe and elsewhere, especially in Africa. Even more difficult to understand is the obsequious pursuit of this policy against Russia by the large countries of the European Union that, pressured by Washington and often against their own interests, end up endorsing it, despite being aware of their uselessness. There are many examples, but it should be enough to point out the case of Kosovo, in which the United States pressured their allies for its recognition as an independent State – a decision which many countries today regret when finding out that it is a failed state. The policy designed by the American power organs and applied by the European Union seems to indicate that membership in the EU with membership in the military pact is practically indissoluble¹.

Although the political body of the alliance, i.e. the NATO secretaries-general, have rotated exclusively between the founding partners of the EU and the United Kingdom, until today all supreme commanders have been generals of the United States.

The differences between the United States and Russia are gigantic in almost all quantifiable planes, except in the extension of territory and nuclear power. The population of the first reaches 320 million approximately, while the second ones are around 150 million inhabitants. The US-economy is 12 times larger than the Russian economy, spending on education is 14 times higher, while defense spending is almost 10 times higher². The nuclear inventory of both countries, according to figures provided by the Swedish agency SIPRI, indicates that Russia has a total of 6,850 nuclear warheads against the 6,450 in the United States. If we remember that only two “small” bombs, compared to the current ones, devastated Hiroshima and Nagasaki to force Japan to surrender in 1945, it does not take much imagination to think that the current nuclear arsenal can erase a large part of the human beings and species that inhabit the planet Earth.

To understand the proportion of nuclear weapons stored by the two powers - of a total of 9 countries that possess these weapons - it is enough to point out that France, which follows them in number, has “only” 300 nuclear warheads, whereas China has 280³. These figures can help to understand the European fears regarding Russia, because, in an eventual conflict between the two powers, the first bombs will fall in Paris, Berlin or in London rather than in Washington, New York or San Francisco.

The apprehensions of the United States and the Europeans have their roots in the Russian history. Since the imperial era of the czars, Russia has always had an excuse to seek expansion, but particularly in the twentieth century fears were stirred by the Soviet

Union and the division of Europe agreed upon in Yalta, when the Second World War was ending. The Cold War began immediately upon the partition of Germany in 1945 and aroused Western fears along with the need for defense due to the expansion of socialism in Eastern Europe and the triumph of the Chinese revolution in 1949; the Korean War (1950-1953) that divided the peninsula into two, the collapse of colonialism with the liberation struggles in Africa and Asia along with the triumph of the Cuban revolution in 1959, only 90 miles from the United States. At the same time, the extraordinary economic growth of the United States ended up maturing and breaking into the world, thus imposing a way of life that consolidated it as the first undisputed worldwide power and guarantor of the security of Western Europeans.

The question today is whether it is justified to continue encircling Russia with NATO bases in circumstances that the rival who threatens the hegemony of the United States is China. The Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014 and its conflict with Ukraine has certainly contributed to maintaining fears, but in the same way the expansion of NATO, punitive measures and isolation, feed Russian fears and contribute to stimulate nationalism in a country to which history has also shown twice what it means to be invaded and the costs involved, first with Napoleon in 1812 and then with Hitler's armies in World War II.

Undoubtedly, the Soviet period left a negative image and contributes to today's actions of Russia being judged very differently from those carried out by the United States. One would have to wonder how the world would react if Russia had initiated wars without authorization from the United Nations Security Council or based on false evidence such as that of Iraq in 2003; or if they held prisoners for years without any trial like in Guantanamo, or carried out bombings as NATO did in Belgrade in 1999 and in Damascus in 2018, together with France and the United Kingdom. Clearly, there is no single moral by which to act or judge.

The weight of cultural factors must also be observed carefully. China is being asked to act according to the cultural pattern of the Western democratic political system in circumstances where it has never known democracy in its history. Its international policy has been and is guided by the principles of peaceful coexistence, where it is essential for them not to interfere in the internal affairs of other states. For the Chinese, economic and social rights precede the political rights of their citizens. If we observe China's actions on the international level, we see that it is a country that practically without making use of military force has gained an international presence and a development that brings it closer and closer to the United States. If in 2005 the US economy was 5.7 times bigger than China's, in 2016 the gap had been reduced to only 1.6 times⁴. By 2030, some studies estimate, China will be the first economy in the world surpassing the US in size, followed by India, while the United States would be in third place. By then, Russia will be only the eighth economy⁵.

National interest continues to be the engine that moves the international world. Unfortunately, multilateralism has not been able to consolidate in all its dimensions, and the advances achieved today are diminished whenever the powers decide to ignore the fragile international legality. A world without order and without legality favors the law

of the strongest that only benefits the most powerful countries. The future has always been uncertain and will continue to be so. We can clearly see the role played by the leader of a country and how it can change its foreign policy.

The case of President Trump could become a case study: in only three years he has managed to antagonize his neighbors - Canada and Mexico - on trade and immigration issues. He has hit the scientific community, multilateralism and the United Nations by denying climate change and withdrawing his country from the COP, UNESCO, the Human Rights Council and the United Nations Agency for Aid to Palestinians. In view of the disbelief of its EU allies, he abandoned the nuclear pact with Iran that contributes to the detente in the region and was one of the few achievements of its foreign policy.

Contravening United Nations resolutions, he recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel; threatens with the withdrawal of his country from the WTO, increases the controversies with his European allies by demanding to raise the military budget, which means they must buy more weapons from the United States. He cancels the nuclear agreement with Russia on medium-range missiles (INF) that gave security to Europe. He starts a trade war with China and recently threatened Mexico with a progressive tax on its exports if it does not slow down emigration. That is to say, the main power of the world does its best to weaken multilateralism, its institutions and the international order that was largely built by the United States.

The question that needs to be asked is whether President Trump's decisions have the support of the State Department, the Pentagon, the CIA, the large financial groups and other institutions that represent US power. The vacuum left by the United States in international organizations seems contrary to their interests and will undoubtedly be filled by China, which is already the second financial contributor to the United Nations and will help consolidate its global power. If both the Russian and Chinese leaders discreetly use the so-called smart power, that is, the combination of hard and soft powers in the already classic categories, President Trump definitively abandoned soft power and is using a kind of arrogant power that weakens the image of his country before its allies and the world, together with seriously eroding the international system. The American president acts like the braggart of the class proclaiming whenever he can, to be the strongest at military level. The German head of government, Angela Merkel, declared before the European Parliament:

The days when we could trust unconditionally in others, are gone. This means that we Europeans must put our destiny in our own hands if we want to survive as a European community⁶.

It seems that we are still observing reality with the eyes of the Cold War. For some time now, socialism has ceased to be a threat to the capitalist system that dominates the world. The struggle for global hegemony today is about the control of cyberspace, robotics, artificial intelligence and space conquest, which is where the United States is confronting China. Russia is somewhat further away, but it has defined who its ally is. The applications derived from these advances in economy and science will also find a place in the military industry that flourishes today in a way it used to during the best times of the Cold War, with hundreds of billions of dollars allocated to it. Who cares

about hunger and poverty in the world.

In Moscow, an ambassador pointed out to me that a distinguished European colleague had told him that it did not matter whether there was evidence to blame Russia for the supposed poisoning of a Russian ex-agent in London. It was all about blaming Moscow because “one had to take sides”. In Rome, a European ambassador told me that, if the global communications system was going to be intervened, she preferred this to be done by the United States and not by China. To put it in the words of political realism, as long as the international system continues to operate based on national states, national interest will continue to have the last word on the world stage. What is forgotten is that no single power can face the major imminent challenges such as safeguarding human life and the planet. This is why we must redouble efforts to strengthen the multilateral system, its institutions, the cooperation and respect for international legality as the only way to guarantee peace.

¹ The exception has been Sweden, a country with more than 200 years of neutrality and which, being a member of the EU, is not formally a member of NATO, although it has carried out joint maneuvers. In addition, the Treaty of Lisbon of 2007 establishes the obligation of the EU members to help and assist with all their means any other member under attack.

² See: Comparar economía países: Rusia vs Estados Unidos.

³ See: Sipri Yearbook 2018.

⁴ World Bank. Quoted from Yan Xuetong in *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers*. Princeton University Press, 2019. Pag. 83.

⁵ See: *These Could Be the World’s Biggest Economies by 2030*.

⁶ See: *Merkel Joins Macron in Calling for a European Army ‘One Day’*.