

Multipolar balance or a shift to dangerous bipolarity?

Aymeric Chauprade



International Institute for Global Analyses

Vision & Global Trends. International Institute for Global Analyses
Piazza dei Navigatori 22, 00147 – Rome (Italy)
Analytical Dossier – N. 29/2020 – November 2020

The views and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not represent the views of the Vision & Global Trends. International Institute for Global Analyses unless explicitly stated otherwise.

© 2020 Vision & Global Trends - International Institute for Global Analyses
© 2020 Aymeric Chauprade

First Edition: November 2020

Analytical Dossier – N. 29/2020

www.vision-gt.eu

MULTIPOLAR BALANCE OR A SHIFT TO DANGEROUS BIPOLARITY?

Aymeric Chauprade

Periods of crisis give intellectuals a unique opportunity to gain recognition through original ideas. Each has his own prediction of the “world after” and, as a rule, there is a form of unanimity in believing that nothing will ever be the same again. This has been the case with every crisis, the oil shocks, the American wars, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the shock of the Islamic state and today that of Covid-19. Could the Covid-19 crisis be the famous “black swan” made popular by the brilliant book [1] written by the Lebanese economist Nassim Nicholas Taleb? The “black swan” is the bird that you have never seen and that you do not expect to see one day; the unthought and unthinkable bird, as the symbol of the aberrant event that transforms History, not only because it is aberrant but also because of the tremendous impact of its emergence.

And yet Covid-19 is definitely not the black swan. The impact of the emergence and expansion of this coronavirus is certainly tremendous, but the nature of this event was predictable. Coronaviruses are known and experts have learned, at least since the 2002-2004 SARS crisis in Asia, that an avatar of the coronavirus family would someday lead to a global pandemic. A large number of reports from western intelligence services or from experts in the strategic domain had warned of the high probability of such an outbreak. Asia was prepared; neither China, Singapore nor South Korea gave in to panic.

The proposed plans for mass screening, isolation of infected people, monitoring of chains of contamination and immediate supply of masks to the population have been fully implemented. China, which consumed more concrete for its development between 2011 and 2013 than the United States during the entire 20th century, knew that it would have the capacity to build hospitals, with several thousand beds, in less than ten days. Asia as a whole managed the crisis seriously, as did much of Europe (Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Eastern Europe, Russia). One day History will tell, in the case of France or the United States, what damage the major pharmaceutical companies and their partners in the medical and political spheres will have done by trying to stimulate quasi-religious hopes for a salutary vaccine.

The nature of the “coronavirus threat” was known, even if there was no prior knowledge of the specific characteristics of Covid-19 or of its “timing”. Claiming, as some analysts did, that the ‘surprise’ of Covid-19 makes History more unpredictable than ever, is absurd. The surprise of History is an inherent part of History and humanity has never ceased to be surprised. It was once said that to

govern is to foresee. There is no doubt that Covid-19 has caused major damage to the world economy, with varying consequences depending on the country. For the first time since 1945, globalization, in its “material component”, was stopped dead for several months. Everywhere, borders were suddenly closed and the flow of people and goods was cut off. Immaterial flows, both financial and informational, did not decrease, some even rose. It is therefore wrong to say that globalization has stopped.

Today’s globalization is not the globalization of the Mediterranean world-system as analysed by the historian Braudel. Our globalization is mainly based upon the digital economy. The combined market capitalization of the “top 5” (Microsoft, Apple, Amazon, Alphabet-Google, Facebook) exceeds \$5000 billion, i.e. 20% of the value of the S&P 500 and 50% of that of the Nasdaq-100. By comparison, the capitalization of a group like Airbus is 10 times less than that of Amazon. Thanks to Covid-19, Netflix has developed further. In the post-Covid-19 world, the GAFAs, the American giants of the digital economy, as well as the BATXs, their Chinese counterparts, are emerging stronger. In May 2020, the videoconferencing company Zoom ranked higher on the stock exchange than the world's seven largest airlines (around \$50 billion).

The digital era has thus expanded and the world has not entered into deglobalization. Being global, the pandemic was experienced globally, bringing social phenomena (people clapping from their windows, tributes to health workers...) moving from a country to another, and humanitarian solidarity between many countries. Gulf countries such as the United Arab Emirates and Qatar mobilised to help African countries, while China was the world’s mask production factory. In reality, the dynamics of challenging globalization began long before the health crisis: the crisis of legitimacy of the European Union, of which Brexit is one of the most damaging expressions; the identitarian reactions of European peoples to immigration from outside Europe; the East-West fracture in Europe (also on the subject of immigration); the election of Donald Trump as a reaction to the decline of the United States (deindustrialization, impoverishment of middle classes), or that of Bolsonaro in Brazil as a result of the endemic corruption of the Brazilian elites.

Covid-19 was more a “chemical developer” of already existing trends. First revelation, on a societal level, the confirmation that our occidental societies have a deep-rooted fear of death. This fear is directly linked to a demographic reality: our societies are ageing. We are told that the world gave in to fear on the one hand because the virus was spreading very quickly, and on the other hand because there was a risk of saturation of health systems.

This is all true, but there is an even deeper reason that explains this panic: this vanishing of our spiritual horizon, which goes hand in hand with a perspective of

the immortality that science promises us, made us cowards in the face of death. Michael Levitt, biophysicist, Nobel Prize winner in Chemistry, raised the question on May 25, 2020: «*How can have we been duped to such an extent?*». For a virus that killed less than 98% of its victims, and which mainly caused the death of those who were, in any case, in life-threatening situations without this disease (for reasons of age or co-morbidity), the entire world opted for the scuttling of a world economy already deeply weakened by the disconnection between the real economy and the financial markets, by the extent of abyssal debts, by the progressive leaching of currencies such as the dollar and the euro, resulting from printing money policies. In a world where now, every year, sugar, air pollution and “civilizational” diseases kill more people than wars, we have been able to frighten ourselves with a phenomenon that in fact was killing very little.

This panic fear first affected the most ageing societies and those with the lowest number of children: Europe and China. In recent months, East Africa has indeed been much more worried about Desert locusts threatening to starve its populations than about the coronavirus. Everywhere in the world societies are ageing, except in Africa. By 2050, Europe (including Russia) will account for only 8% of the world’s population, dropping from 761 million to 727 million (a loss of 34 million people). East Asia (including China) will lose 32 million inhabitants. At the same time, North America will grow by 85 million, Latin America by 150 million, South Asia (including India) by half a billion, and Africa by 1.160 billion! The population of Africa will increase by more than double, causing an inversion of the demographic equilibrium. By 2100, three-quarters of all births will actually take place south of the Sahara. The coronavirus crisis is premonitory: it reveals the panic fear of an ageing European world that is witnessing, stunned and powerless, the life expansion of Africa.

The second “chemical developer” of Covid-19 is the civilizational fear of occidental people about the Chinese. It was no coincidence that Trump referred to the “Chinese virus”. What better way to designate the enemy than by assimilating it to a disease? In the United States as in Europe, for five months, the Covid-19 worn the garb of the *yellow peril* with a disconcerting degree of easiness. Some believed that China had endangered the world because of the “filth” of its food traditions and its lies about “the real number of contaminated people and deaths”; for others, it was probably even conducting a secret biological war against the West in order to gain an advantage in the race for power. And yet, Washington identified China as its main rival as early as the USSR’s fall in 1990, thirty years ago. Slowly but surely, over the past three decades, and under both Democratic and Republican administrations, the opposition between the United States and China has been growing. In *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap?* [2], historian Graham Allison reminds us that when an

ascendant power threatens to supplant the established power, the danger is not far away. It all starts with Thucydides' famous sentence: «*The real reason that forced the war was the growth of Athenian power and Spartan fear of it*».

Indeed, China's growth is prodigious. In 1980, its GDP was less than \$300 billion; by 2015, it will reach \$11,000 billion and the Middle Country is already the second largest economy at the market exchange rate. Examples of the phenomenal growth of China's power are numerous: at the beginning of the 2000s, the country built the equivalent, in terms of surface area, of the (present) city of Rome every two weeks! Between 1996 and 2016, China built 4 million km² of roads, including 110,000 km² of motorways, connecting 95% of the country's villages. In the last ten years, the Chinese have developed the world's longest high-speed rail network: 20,000 km of railways providing inter-city connections at a speed of 290 kph.

This infrastructure development combines with the unprecedented rise in the Chinese standard of living: in 1980, the average income per inhabitant was US\$193. It is now US\$8,200. In 25 years, between 1980 and 2005, China took more than half a billion people out of poverty, which is more than the total number of people in the European Union. Such success against poverty has no equivalent in history. Is the West, which gives lessons and distributes prizes for dissent to Uighur opponents, aware of what this incredible achievement means for humanity?

For reassurance, we can continue to persuade ourselves that China is a giant with feet of clay and that its statistics are false. This lack of lucidity prevents us from wondering about the causes of our own decline. The West has taken the lead in the world through its work and scientific and technical creativity since the Middle Ages, and its quick expansion was made possible by the opening of the major ocean routes. The reality is that in just twenty years, the Americans have been overtaken by China in R&D investment, and the Asian rival is becoming the world's leading scientific nation. In the end, Xi Jiping's vision of China is similar to the American dream of prosperity and power; a dream that is not very far from that of Theodore Roosevelt and his *American Century* or Franklin Roosevelt and his *New Deal*. Xi Jiping's objective is that by 2049, a century after the revolution, China will have become the world's leading power, thus re-establishing the dominance it had in Asia before the rise of the West. Several prerequisites are necessary: firstly, undisputed control over the territories of Greater China, in Tibet and Xijiang, where secessionist movements are encouraged by the Americans and Europeans, but also in Hong Kong and Taiwan; secondly, control of its historical sphere of influence, along its borders and in the neighbouring seas.

Unlike the United States, which wants to transform the entire world in its own image while optimising its economic and strategic interests, China is neither expansionist, nor evangelist. China's ambition is to regain the respect it used to

enjoy, as the Middle Country, both among the vassals around the Empire as well as among the *barbarians* (including ourselves, the non-Asian and distant civilizations).

China is already the largest commercial partner of 130 countries out of 195 in the world. It is unlikely that Covid-19 can change this situation. However, in the coming months and years, the attempt to bipolarise the worlds following a fault line China versus United States will accelerate. Almost all French strategic experts now subscribe to this point of view and the elements of language are in place. Here are the main themes.

Since the end of the First World War, the entire American domination effort has been based on the idea of defeating Halford J. Mackinder's prediction in 1919: «*Who rules the World-Island commands the world*» [3]. Taking up the old policy of England, the Americans thus established a supremacy over the seas (according to the doctrine developed by Alfred Mahan), and worked to prevent any attempt to unify the Eurasian continent, whether it came from Napoleon, Hitler, Stalin, or today's Xi Jiping with its Silk Roads. OBOR (One Belt, One Road) launched in 2013 by Xi Jiping, and now called the BRI (Belt and Road Initiative), is a gigantic plan for global connectivity: the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), more commonly known as *the belt*, is made up of six land corridors (roads, highways, railways); the Maritime Silk Road (MSR), also known as *the road*, is built around two maritime routes, since 2013, the China/Malacca Strait/Suez Strait route, and since 2017, the Northern Sea Route, or Northern Route in the Arctic Ocean.

The BRI will not put an end to maritime globalization (illustrated by the indisputable domination of the US Navy over the world's Oceans), but it will complete it with a terrestrial globalization creating a vast unified economic zone from the East coast of China to the Atlantic, to the West of the Eurasian continent: 92 countries, 4.5 billion inhabitants, 60% of the world's economic power, not forgetting Africa, which is involved in this project through China-Africa cooperation and the major Sino-African summits of heads of state. The BRI is the Chinese counter-globalization.

Within the framework of the BRI, the Chinese are deploying the *pearl necklace* strategy which consists in linking Southern China to the Indian Ocean without passing through the South China Sea, the object of conflict between the neighbouring countries; the Chinese are making agreements with Pakistan, Burma, Bangladesh and Cambodia to use their ports to transport raw materials by road or rail, thus avoiding the Malaysian straits (Indonesia and Malaysia). The fear of the Americans is that the Chinese control of the South China Sea would give Beijing the ability to close trade routes through the Malaysian Straits (nearly 2/3 of the world's maritime trade) while keeping the capacity to export its own goods and access Middle East oil precisely through its *pearl necklace* strategy.

Faced with this strategy, the Americans are strengthening their alliance with several Asian regimes or states: Taiwan of course, Japan, but also India, Vietnam, Australia and New Zealand. The Indo-Pacific Initiative proposed by Washington and New Delhi is thus opposed to the Silk Roads.

As a result, in the medium term, it is likely that all the countries along the Silk Roads will be subject to a fierce competition for influence between Washington and Beijing. Political destabilization, even *coups d'état* as well as predation operations will be undertaken in the area.

The conflict in the South China Sea and over Taiwan will also intensify: for the Chinese, reaching the Pacific Ocean thus becoming a major maritime power requires first the reunification of mainland China with island China (Taiwan) as well as control over the South China Sea. The Americans will provide support for all regional competitors that may hinder the expansion of China's sphere of influence in Asia; the Sino-Indian (especially in the Himalayas) and Sino-Vietnamese conflicts are likely to intensify; countries such as Japan and Indonesia may opt for a balanced position between Washington and Beijing. Japan's decision in June 2020 not to adopt the American anti-missile shield appears to be a signal of appeasement with China.

In the field of energy, competition is already well engaged between Beijing and Washington. The Americans want to control China's dependence on hydrocarbons and this is the main reason why the US army was deployed into the Middle East during the 2000s: Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Iran are, actually, the main oil reservoirs of the Middle East, whereas in Latin America, Venezuela is now the world's leading reserve. Chinese and Russians have no interest in seeing, in Caracas, a pro-American government replace the current Bolivarian regime. As a major oil and gas reservoir, Russia will play a major part for China, allowing Beijing to keep on developing its economic and strategic partnership with Moscow.

China is also the reason why Trump undertook the dismantling of the entire arsenal of weapons control inherited from the Soviet-American Cold War. Moscow and some Western countries, such as France, deplore this development, but it is not surprising. Washington is going to get rid of all the constraints that seem to hinder its adaptation to the new strategic situation. The same unilateral policy from Washington is to be expected with regard to international organisations even if most of them were born on the initiative of United States, but are now considered too favourable (understand "not unfavourable enough") to the Chinese. Trump's spectacular decision to withdraw from the World Health Organisation (WHO), blamed for complacency towards Beijing, is in line with this logic.

Rewarded by years of work, discreet and effective lobbying, China is now very much at the heart of the global standard-setting system. In 2008, China became the

sixth permanent member of the ISO Council, the International Standards Organization in Geneva. In 2015, China even took over the presidency of ISO. The West alone does no longer set the standards for globalization; China's role in the domain has become as significant.

The BRI also serves the Chinese as a laboratory for building the international standards of tomorrow.

The consequence is that the Americans are no longer interested in the "normative toy" that they themselves created, and even want to "break the toy". In the years to come, we will hear Chinese and Russians defending international law, international organizations, and international standards, while Americans will increasingly break away from them.

The same confrontation is expected to occur in the 5G area: the Chinese want to secure a dominant position in this strategic market. The Chinese state has massively promoted this technology on its territory and supported the research sector through its *Made in China 2025 programme*.

Finally, among the Chinese monopolies that the United States and the European Union will be fighting is that of rare metals. The digital economy and green energy (wind turbines, solar panels, electric cars...) consume massive quantities of rare metals (including the famous rare earths), which also raises the question of the environmental cost of decarbonation, a mining issue replacing a greenhouse gas problem. The West no longer has any mineral sovereignty. Geopolitics of rare metals will therefore become important, alongside (and not replacing) the current geopolitics of oil and gas. The issue of access to metals will increase the strategic value of both the African continent and the seabed (and therefore sovereignty over maritime spaces).

The world of western globalization is coming to an end. The Covid-19 crisis has certainly not terminated it, but it has undoubtedly accelerated its ending process and the coming of the "great explanation" between the Americans and the Chinese. All the fundamentals of American power, except that of its military power, are running out of breath: the primacy of the dollar as the main reserve currency of central banks and the currency of the oil trade, the world institutional order (UN, IMF, World Bank, WHO...), *American Soft Power*, and scientific domination.

So as to postpone this inevitable moment of change in the world hierarchy, the United States are now following a policy of normative destruction (withdrawal from international organizations and treaties), monetary destruction (the Fed and the ECB's money printing policy) and destruction of its *Soft Power* (trying to secure an exclusive monopoly on a possible vaccine is less dreamy than parachuting food supplies to fighters for Freedom).

In this world, France will have to make a choice: it can make the choice of pure and simple alignment with the United States, encouraging the logic of a clash of civilizations with China. In this case, stating that «*NATO is brain-dead*» [4] does not serve any more than standing next to President Putin for communication purposes. But this choice of an assumed bipolar logic (which has been advocated for years within our military-industrial complex by a strong pro-American neo-conservative current) would in reality leave our nation, France, very little room for manoeuvre, and worse, would harm our industrial export interests and contribute dangerously to the rise of antagonisms.

Yet, another choice is possible and necessary. A choice based upon our history and diplomatic tradition, that of France as a balanced power, that renews links with Russia (in concrete terms, this means getting out of the policy of sanctions against Russia), that assumes its choices in the Arab world (installing an anti-Islamist regime in Libya, a precondition for a real victory in Mali), and that extends the economic and strategic partnership with China. In the service of this fine global policy of balance, France has an irreplaceable asset: its immense maritime space and its ability to dialogue and act on all the world's Oceans.

The world is now at a crossroads: a first possibility is the establishment of a balanced multipolarity between old and new powers. A second possibility, which seems more likely, is the slide towards a brutal bipolarity between the United States and its allies on the one hand, and China and its allies on the other.

It seems obvious that bipolarity presents far greater risks of war than the multipolar situation.

Notes

1. Taleb, N. N., *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*. New York, Random House and Penguin Books. 2007, expanded 2nd ed, 2010.
2. Allison G. *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018.
3. Mackinder H. J., *Democratic ideals and reality* New York: Holt, 1919.
4. The Economist, *Emmanuel Macron warns Europe: NATO is becoming brain-dead*, The Economist, November 7, 2019

Aymeric Chauprade is a French geopolitologist born in 1969. He holds a doctorate in Political Science from the Sorbonne, a graduate of Sciences Po Paris, holder of a license in Pure Mathematics. He has published several landmark geopolitical works, including Géopolitique, constantes et changements dans l'histoire, 3^e éd. 2007, Dictionnaire de géopolitique (avec François Thual), en 1999, and Chroniques du choc des civilisations, a geopolitical atlas published in 2009, 2011, 2013, and 2015.

He headed the Chair of Geopolitics at the École de guerre française for 10 years, and is a visiting professor at several universities around the world. He is also a reserve frigate captain of the French Navy and specialist in maritime geopolitics, a regular contributor to the magazine "Marine & Océans".