

## **BIPOLARITY OR MULTIPOLARITY?**

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Today, in terms of international relations, the discussion is around whether the world is heading towards a new bipolarity or a multipolar world. Those who support the former see the dimension and conflict between the United States and China as the basis for a new bipolar conflict, like the one that occurred during the Cold War. In this scenario, the competition between the two powers will grow in terms of trade, technology, space, and the military, leaving no room for alternative leadership at the global or regional level. So far in the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the trend seems to have taken this direction. The relationship between Washington and Beijing has worsened in the last three years. Trump and Biden, with different priorities, ranked China as the main threat. In the last three years, discursive criticism, first in the United States and then in both countries, has increased. American rhetoric focused, especially under Biden, on the difference in "values", putting liberal democracy as the distinguishing note in the struggle with China. The US President opened an annual conference on democracy, in which the Heads of Government of more than a hundred countries participated, that is, half of those that exist in the global arena. This conference is an attempt to mark the different fields and had a definition by the United States regarding which government is democratic and which is not. This was altered by strategic interests: Pakistan was invited to the conference, when at the same time international standards consider it a country with low democratic quality. China responded with its policy of non-interference in the internal problems of other countries, in a reformulation of the doctrine of sovereignty that dominated international relations during the 19th century and most of the 20th.

Competition and rivalry are concepts that arise in international relations to express the situation in which multipolarity is possible and the war between the US and China is avoidable. Competition is a concept borrowed from economic language. For the West it implies that two subjects, operating with the same rules, can develop a healthy bid. If one of the two loses, this does not alter the relationship in the international field. Rivalry, on the other hand, is a rather political concept. It reveals that there is a struggle for influence and that national prestige plays a role. But it is a type of situation in which the so-called "soft

power" occupies a more relevant role than "hard power". The first includes the political system, culture, lifestyle, well-being, sports, etc. They are fields of this rivalry. In the second, the economic factor is transformed into a weapon of pressure and military power marks the critical scenario and the risk of mutual destruction. This is what happened in the first decade of the 21st century. Already at the beginning of it, the concept of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) emerged as an economic idea focused on the future, but not as a political, military and ideological threat. This corresponded to a world in which security had Islamic fundamentalist terrorism as a common threat, both to the United States and Europe, as well as to China and Russia.

But the concepts of challenge and threat correspond to a bipolar world, in which international relations are dominated by the struggle between the two dominant powers. These terms are increasingly used by Western powers in conferences and documents. At the NATO Summit in Madrid, held in 2022, Russia was considered the main threat and China the most important challenge. The first concept has to do with something that is happening right now, such as the war between Russia and Ukraine. The second refers to the conflict that can break out between Washington and Beijing in their capacity as powers that are already fighting for global hegemony. In Western strategic thinking, it is beginning to be assumed that the war with China will be inexorable, given its manifest policy to reach 2049 as the military power with the capacity to challenge the United States for global hegemony. The idea that, in the past, generally, the struggle between two powers always led to war, lies behind this perception. Among NATO heads of government, this idea of threat and challenge posed by Russia and China in the third decade of the 21st century seems to predominate. But within the NATO countries, and particularly in the United States, there are voices that question the idea of the inexorability of the war. Such is the case of Henry Kissinger, who in his recent visit to Beijing advocated a dialogue that avoids such a situation. At the same time, the US Joint Chief of Staff, General Mark Milley, has publicly said that the world is multipolar and that the war with China is neither inevitable nor inexorable, even though bilateral relations are at their worst for the past years.

Meanwhile, in fact, a trend towards bipolarity coexists in the world with a reality that develops in a multipolar world. The war between Moscow and Kyiv shows a cohesive West in the military field of NATO, but which represents

approximately 18% of the world population and slightly more than 40% of the GDP. Faced with this, a broad bloc appears -they condemn the invasion, but reject the unilateral economic sanctions- that adopts a position that is actually neutral. But China and India are economic supports of Russia through trade. The first with a solid strategic alliance and the second avoiding political and military commitments with Moscow. In Africa, Latin America and Asia, varying degrees of neutrality prevail in a vast majority of countries. The thirty-two NATO members reach fifty with their extra-zone allies and the circumstantial ones for the war in Ukraine. They are one fifth of the nations, but together they have the largest economy, the greatest military power and scientific-technological capacity. While the G7 has so far a cohesive position vis-à-vis Ukraine, the BRICS do not. But the world shows signs of multipolarity. The military coup in Niger shows that influences in Africa are diverse and that Russia, despite the war, maintains the ability to influence Africa politically and economically. In Asia, in Pakistan, a group affiliated with the Islamic State carried out a serious attack with fifty deaths and more than one hundred injuries, recalling that Islamic terrorism has not ended by far. The burning of copies of the Koran in the Nordic countries is generating violent reactions in countries like Iraq. The dormant war in Syria is reactivated with actions by Russia and its allies, such as Iran, against the militias that confront the Assad government. Moscow deepens its alliance in Latin America with Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua.

In conclusion: in terms of international relations, the discussion today is around whether the world is heading towards a bipolar scenario between the United States and China or a multipolar one with relevant regional powers. This second scenario corresponds to the concepts of competition and rivalry, in which the war between Washington and Beijing is neither inevitable nor inexorable. Instead, the bipolar scenario corresponds to the concepts of threat and challenge with which the current Western leadership seems to identify, which is preparing for an open conflict with China. Finally, while hindsight shows a tendency towards bipolarity, the global reality shows many signs of multipolarity.