

The International System Trapped by Its Past Repeating What It Forgets

José Luis Valdés-Ugalde*



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Win McNamee/Reuters

The three main protagonists on the world scene after September 11.

The consequences of recent events in the United States—including the most serious attack ever suffered by a Western country in times of peace, attacks that shook the entire world—are still unclear and difficult to pinpoint in the long term of world history. They also left a lot of thinking to be done. The 9/11 attacks left the international system circumscribed even more clearly to a complex dynamic with little room for manoeuvre. We also encounter important elements that should be taken into account in defining the world's new issues. Among them: a) the historic relationship between globality and conflict; b) the lack of a balance of power and the preeminence of a single pole of power; c) the non-definition of the relationship of order to justice; d) the absence of interna-

tional institutionalization in accordance with the times; e) the conflict with regard to the civilizing mandate; f) regional instability as a new focus of conflict; and g) the absence of self-criticism regarding our relations with the United States. I will try to develop some of these elements.

I.

The new globality did not bring with it new ways of resolving or conciliating old problems that the Cold War left to the international system and the world. From the seventeenth century and probably from the time of the Renaissance, an overriding principle for preserving “order” in a chaotic, anarchic international system, particularly in Europe and later in the rest of the world, was the “balance of power.”

* Director of the CISAN.

This principle was at its zenith during the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as a response to the problem of order in the European system and became a centerpiece for the definition of international policies and theory. Realists, idealists, neo-realists, Marxists, post-modernists and structuralists all conceived of this principle not only as a pillar of the international system but also as a guarantee of each country's internal stability. It is a historic fact that war and conflict have accompanied this principle in its chaotic journey, which certainly has not been able to guarantee international order, an international order subjected to the hard facts of the struggle for power and the prevalence of hegemonic aspirations that come from the very center of the international system itself, with no apparent solution and increasingly with critical problems as new as they are unresolved. To a great degree, this makes for the need to rethink the international system and the role that the state and the weight of politics have or should have in the solution of the crises that the system accumulates and does not resolve as diligently as was originally thought.

II.

If the balance of power has not guaranteed order, this is probably due to a contradiction of origin that Martin Wight points to when he says that balancing is comparing weights. The word "balance" has completely lost its meaning of equilibrium.¹ In effect, it would seem that the problem is one of the distribution of force and power on a global and regional level. Without

force there can be no order or security. Without order and security, force cannot be acquired or exercised. Thus, force and its use in the international system is a permanent factor present in the process itself in which it materializes and becomes ongoing. Force in the name of order can condense both force and order at the same time. In this analysis, a policy of balance of power (following Nicholas Spykman)² is, in the first place, a policy for the great powers. Unless they can join together successfully, small states are only "weights" (known as "buffer states") on a scale used by others.

Thus, force can be countered to the extent that its exercise loses the equilibrium that would give order its reason for being. The end of the Cold War abolished with the stroke of a pen the precarious equilibrium that maintained order through a fragile regimen. When the Soviet domain came to an end and its area of hegemony fell apart, fundamentally in Europe, the classical bipolar exercise of power began to disappear and the factors of international power changed substantially, voiding old arrangements that—for better or worse— aided in containing some regional and international conflicts that identified in some way with the objectives and sense of one of the two power blocs. A vacuum was created that had been filled in the past by short-term—if negative— solutions that continue to be polemical today. It is paradoxical that in the war against the Soviets, the Taliban who controlled Afghanistan and presumably an international terrorist network such as the world had never seen, were praised by Reagan as freedom fighters and, of course, supported by the U.S. government in order to beat Moscow in its war of interven-

tion. It was, if not a negotiated solution between the two powers, who did sometimes come to good agreements, an exacerbation of "the other." The Soviets accepted the defeat and Washington obtained territory and access to significant resources, without thinking that it was an arrangement that would backfire mightily, as we see today. The force with which Washington achieved relative order in time and effectiveness was the force—in its most grotesque expression—with which it was responded to on September 11: it was the force used by fundamentalist messianism that broke the precarious order maintained until now with little sense of history.

The past was forgotten and repeated in its worst form, perhaps to ensure that nothing remains the same in the international order, perhaps to inaugurate a new stage of domination and therefore of conflict that could include the exercise of a new single U.S. pole, but now with a more profound messianic meaning: in the struggle of good against evil, the absence of the real "other," and therefore, the symbolic construction of the apparent—and usually non-existent—"other," will more than ever be necessary as a reason of state. The absence of the Soviet challenge left the United States and the world alone face-to-face with themselves in the midst of a new form of theological rhetoric that has always permeated Washington's evaluation of reality and decision making. We should note that given this situation, the international community has not provided itself with realistic institutional mechanisms with which to even partially recover the precarious equilibrium that the existence of two superpowers offered.

III.

The Russian philosopher Mijail Bajtin says, “When we look at each other, two different worlds are reflected in our pupils.”³ This is about placing value on difference from the standpoint of similarity, and of the risk involved in not assuming it with a sense of history. The United States has almost always been an insular nation. Its governments have imposed theological meaning on their policies. There are the theology of security, the theologies of democracy, of free trade, of the market, etc. The civilizing notion of the world goes hand in hand with the exceptional opinion it has of itself and its sense of mission. As Gertrude Stein said, it is the oldest nation in the world because it was the first modern one. It is a nation, in brief, with great power for construction and destruction, and even though it sometimes has a provincial view of the world, it is technologically, economically and systemically very modernized.

Nevertheless, the concept of dominant civilization prevailing in the West has been constructed in the United States with great mastery. The conflict—which becomes a tragedy—has been conceived with an ability seldom seen and the U.S. ability to overcome has been evident. I agree with several recent analyses that say that despite the messianic content of its discourse and action, the United States has become a power that has maintained domestically—and has transferred to many other nations—a complex society in permanent movement and economic and political growth. It is a society that has successfully magnified the highest values of liberal democracy. By contrast and to the detriment of its allies including Mexico, its generally

polemical foreign policy is today facing the destructive power of a concept of civilization that is in the extreme minority like Islamic fundamentalism, which has betrayed the essence of the message of the Koran and its prophet Mohammed, the highest values of whose faith were peace, reconciliation, respect and forgiveness. This is why it is debatable that the answer to the attacks on New York and Washington be followed by a discourse with dual content, leaving to one side the fact that what really matters in this process of recovery of the precarious world order is the new international legality, accompanied by a true re-institutionalization of international bodies that give meaning to the regulations upon which the resolution of conflicts must be based.

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A new international legal system in accordance with the times. In this respect, the United States bears an enormous historic responsibility.

IV.

It is true that the international community never managed to establish a comprehensive order in the post-Cold War world. The absence of the other opponent weighed too heavily. The lack of a counterpart that could avert and, to a certain extent, contain the polarization of regional crises weighed too heavily. The weight of the obligation and the duty of the powers were shunt-

ed to one side. Today, the deadly air attacks in the United States and the different consequences of U.S. retaliations and the probable response by Islamic fundamentalists bring us face-to-face with a new precariousness that could be long and unpredictable. For that reason, the criminal attacks force us to rethink and resolve the paradoxes of the international system to thus aid in resolving the paradoxes and contradictions of the system and the regional systems in a way that allows us to achieve mechanisms to come to solutions appropriate to sovereign national states. We might think that the declaration of a “holy war” would sink the world into a stage of uncertainty and pain. Nevertheless, as scholars of this subject, I think it is necessary to insist

on the development of diagnostic analyses that can enrich the explanations of the new international order at this critical global juncture.

V.

Lastly, it is necessary to mention a few considerations about “anti-Americanism” and the future of U.S. foreign policy in our region.⁴ In the first place, the time has come to make a self-criticism of the intellectual tradition that has predominated in Mexico and Latin America when analyzing relations with the United States. This must be done recognizing that our

national and hemispheric realities are fundamentally our own responsibility, the result of the historic decisions that those governing our countries have made and of the societies that have accepted those decisions. The new U.S. economic and political interventionist propensity that began in 1954 when it overthrew the legitimate government of Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala has been possible thanks to the by-no-means-subtle submissiveness of the national political classes. In Guatemala, palace-coup-leader General Castillo Armas was supported by the United Fruit Company and the State Department as well as by Guatemala's military, ecclesiastic and business elites who saw the modernization begun by Arbenz as a threat to their enormous,

monic interests negotiate, considering its counterpart's dominant national interests and not from a stance of argumentative belligerence that does not offer practical solutions to the main national problems and those of the bilateral relationship.

Certainly, by definition, intellectuals must be critical, but it is not valid to take refuge in this exercise to justify vacuous thinking with no proposals, lacking in political imagination. The danger is that antiamericanism can be just as simplistic and conservative as anticommunism was in the McCarthy era. Instead of referring always to what is "politically correct" beyond any shadow of a doubt and being subject to, as the poet Vicente Huidobro would say, "the slavery of the slogan," what we

the light of consensus and the participation of the national actors, then balance sheets can be drawn and responsibilities established. South Korea, a classical reference point for analyzing the Mexican case, managed to effectively implement macro- and micro-economic measures to rebuild and consolidate its national industry, generate production of its own technological inputs for export and move forward successfully in the context of a development model that was very similar to Mexico's. Why does Mexico not do the same? This is a question that we must respond to ourselves before seeking the solution beyond the Rio Grande. In practice, September 11 has become a historic opportunity for trying to critically review Mexican antiamericanism. It is also an opportunity to implement proposals that will lead us not only to completely understand our relationship with the United States, but also to reformulate the terms of that relationship. Mexico's modernization strategy will necessarily be the preamble for making this possible. **MM**

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corrupt political and economic interests. The United States is a world power that has never hidden its interest in hegemony. Why, then, would it aspire to turning it into a dove of peace? At the same time, understanding all our problems in the light of a neocolonial critique is a regrettable strategic error that plunges the intelligentsia and society into a perverse circle of self-complacency that eventually undermines the substance of the national project, which is that of having clear ideas about how to successfully carry out plans for economic development and the modernization of politics. In addition, this would also have to be the way in which U.S. hege-

need is to come up with ways to modernize our political and economic institutions to eradicate corruption, electoral fraud, unhealthy practices by the national business community, unions of all kinds and political parties, and many other national vices. Although there are historic reasons for antiamericanism, the United States is not responsible for those decisions that, for example, have irresponsibly delayed economic development and political modernity due to our political and economic underdevelopment. An economic model of its own and an efficient political system with checks and balances, such as the United States has, is the challenge of all societies. Once this is achieved in

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¹ Martin Wight, "The Balance of Power," Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight, eds., *Diplomatic Investigations: Essays in the Theory of International Relations* (London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1966).

² Nicholas Spykman, *America's Strategy in World Politics: The United States and the Balance of Power* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1942).

³ Mijail Bajtin, *Yo también soy (Fragmentos sobre el Otro)* (Mexico City, Taurus, 2000), p. 33.

⁴ About this, see Paul Hollander, *Anti-Americanism. Critiques at Home and Abroad, 1965-1990* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).