



José Luis Valdés-Ugalde\*

## The Return of the Hegemon

When talking about Trump's withdrawal from the world order, we first have to say that liberal internationalism has historically been the framework within which the United States has defined its international policy. This is a space in which multilateralism and international organizations like the United Nations, created by Washington and its allies in the post-WWII era, tended toward achieving economic, political, and social arrangements that would provide global governance with certainty and equilibrium. At the same time, it would act as containment for the dangers to world peace represented for the West by the actions of the Soviet bloc. That is to say, it was a broad front of the West and at the same time a firm component of the control that the Western nations aimed to have over the dominant bi-polar situation during the entire Cold War. Since that time, regardless of whether the Republicans or the Democrats

were in office, the United States has been a "liberal hegemon." Thus, U.S. domination prevailed the world over, and the *Pax Americana* was the sign of those times, meaning that under its umbrella, relative peace could be maintained.

What happened in 2020? After Trumpism's long night, when U.S. power declined even more, we are once again seeing a United States recovering these instincts that Trump had pushed aside. Whether we like it or not, the United States has been, in Doug Stokes's words, a "structurally advantaged" hegemon, both a creator of systems and the one who enjoys their privileges.<sup>1</sup> It has a privileged position in the international sphere, since it acquires the benefits of cooperation without resorting to coercion—at least not always—, while reinforcing its place in the international community, and it reinvents itself in ways that contribute to prolonging its hegemony. From being a non-liberal hegemon during that stage, now, with Joe Biden, we are witnessing Washington's spirited return, willing to make up for lost time and claim its "right" to domination. At the same time, it will attempt to revert the decline of

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its hegemony vis-à-vis actors like China, Russia, or the European Union. All Secretary of State Antony Blinken's actions point to the return of certain U.S. practices that aim to make its presence felt on the international stage through initiatives that would impose its positions and displace other actors who could potentially disrupt the "American Way of Life."

At least three scenarios exist in which the Biden doctrine seems to be becoming a reality:

1. *Its flirting with Japan and South Korea*, which put China on notice that Washington will not stop considering these two allies in its containment strategy vis-à-vis Chinese power;
2. *The U.S. decision to return to and recover the Iran nuclear deal*. This is a clear sign to the European Union and Russia that it aims to recover stability and world order and contain Iran through intelligent diplomacy; and,
3. *The warning to Russia*, among other things, through the expulsion of Russian diplomats from the U.S. This puts Russia on notice that the United States will not tolerate disruptions in its domestic life and that of that of European countries that are attempting to recover the democratic spaces subjected to autocratic coups backed by Moscow. This latest initiative and the decision to punish President Vladimir Putin for his excesses against U.S. democracy also aim to put a distance between Trumpism and the current administration and isolate it in its crusade—which has not been particularly successful, judging by the Republican rejection of the "America First" caucus's attempts to turn itself into a political current inside Congress and the Republican Party.

To understand what this intention of recovering world preeminence implies, we should look at the diagnostic analysis that the Biden administration published in its "Annual Threat Assessment. Intelligence Community Assessment," developed by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, the head of U.S. political-military intelligence. This document goes point by point through the risks the United States is facing, starting with certain actors (China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea) and continuing with the big issues (COVID-19, climate change, global terrorism, and cybersecurity, among others).<sup>2</sup>

## II

The roads taken over time and in each specific historic and immediate moment by the great powers are both mysterious and challenging. How this behavior and relationship of forces generate an architecture that sheds light on issues and regions the actors might be focusing on in order to consolidate their traditional spaces of power and other new ones also invites analysis. In this geopolitical exercise, certain countries and entire regions may be useful for achieving those objectives. The case of the Ukraine is a recent example of this: Russia, more than anyone, continues to spark reactions in the West (including NATO) by resorting to mobilization of troops along the Ukrainian border, particularly in the so-called "independent" areas, Donetsk and Luhansk. In these two pro-Russian separatist regions, Putin deployed para-military units close to him, threatening Ukrainian sovereignty in order to provoke a reaction from Washington. He got it when Biden telephoned him to agree to a swift meeting, programmed for June 16, even though the issue itself was not mentioned. This happened only weeks after the U.S. president called his Russian counterpart a "killer."

The phone call had its effect, and Putin retreated after achieving his aim of being feared more than loved by the West. Whatever the result of this bellicose-political action, the truth is that the Ukraine continues to be hostage to a conflict begun by Russia and that the West has not been able to untangle.

Now, the aforementioned diagnostic analysis includes a broad variety of actors and issues as pending security matters for the United States. At the same time, they are obstacles for achieving U.S. hegemonic aims: in the section called "China's Push for Global Power," it lays out as the first objective dissuading the Asian giant in order to achieve the new global order that the United States pursues for its benefit. According to Antony Blinken, this is the United States' greatest geopolitical test. While noting that

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China will continue to pressure Washington, it also states that the Chinese leadership will seek out tactical opportunities for reducing tensions with Washington when they are in its interests. The analysis also adds that it will maintain its innovative and industrial policies because the Chinese leaders see this strategy as necessary for reducing the dependency on foreign technologies, making military advances possible, sustaining economic growth, and therefore, ensuring the survival of the Communist Party.

As is clear, the analysis deals with China's economic advancement and the ideological traditions represented to a large degree by local communism that has opted for a centralized state capitalism. The idea is to follow China's initial process for producing what the United States calls an era-making geopolitical change; the aim would be for Washington to counter China's containment measures, the greatest geopolitical test of the twenty-first century. For Blinken, China is the only country with the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to seriously challenge the stable, open international system, that is, all the rules, values, and relationships that make the world work the way U.S. wants it to. "Our relationship with China will be competitive when it should be, collaborative when it can be, and adversarial when it must be. The common denominator is the need to engage China from a position of strength."<sup>3</sup>

In contrast with Russia or the other cases included in the analysis, Washington takes China the most seriously. This is because its economic dynamism poses an enormous challenge for the United States, particularly regarding trade, which in turn gives rise to other challenges that Beijing represents, including the military one.

The difference between Biden's and Trump's presidencies is that, when speaking of China, the former consistently puts forward positions of the rational decision-making center that the Republican left in the dust during his four years of global dis-governance. This will be the most relevant aspect of this strategy for U.S. hegemony, and even

more so if we add that he will carry it out in collaboration with his allies.

### III

Just as the recent Israel/Palestine conflict demonstrates—in a situation that has developed over seventy-three years, which last May 20 came to a shaky ceasefire after eleven days of pyromania by both less and less trustworthy actors—the situation and instability in the Middle East show no signs of diminishing in intensity or complexity. Both this and the ongoing war in Yemen and the frictions between Saudi Arabia and Iran threaten to destabilize the region even more.

Although Biden has tried to be coherent in his Middle East policy, containing China continues to be the central axis of his international concerns. His efforts are doubled down not only due to China's status as a geopolitical rival, but because Beijing is attempting to play an increasingly important role in the Middle East. This can be seen in the ties it has forged with certain countries through its One Belt, One Road initiative and the consolidation of cooperation agreements such as the twenty-five-year investment plan with Iran.

In the current context, when the United States is back and poised to exercise the geopolitical domination it has critically carved out for itself, it is appropriate to ask ourselves how China's growing influence in the region will affect the interests of our neighbor and other actors.

It would seem that Washington's roads cross with those of Beijing, both focused, together with the rest of the UN Security Council countries and Germany, on reviving the nuclear agreement with Iran and attempting to dampen down the regional risks that it represents for U.S. hegemonic policy. The aforementioned "Annual Threat Assessment" sketches out Washington's concern about Iran: in its opinion Iran will represent a continual threat for the United States and allied interests in the region, since it is attempting to erode U.S. influence and support Shia populations abroad, entrench its influence, and project its power on to neighboring states. Although the weakened Iranian economy and its poor regional reputation are obstacles to this aim, Teheran will test out a variety of tools (diplomacy, the expansion of its nuclear program, and military sales acquisitions to Hamas in Palestine and Hizballah in Lebanon,

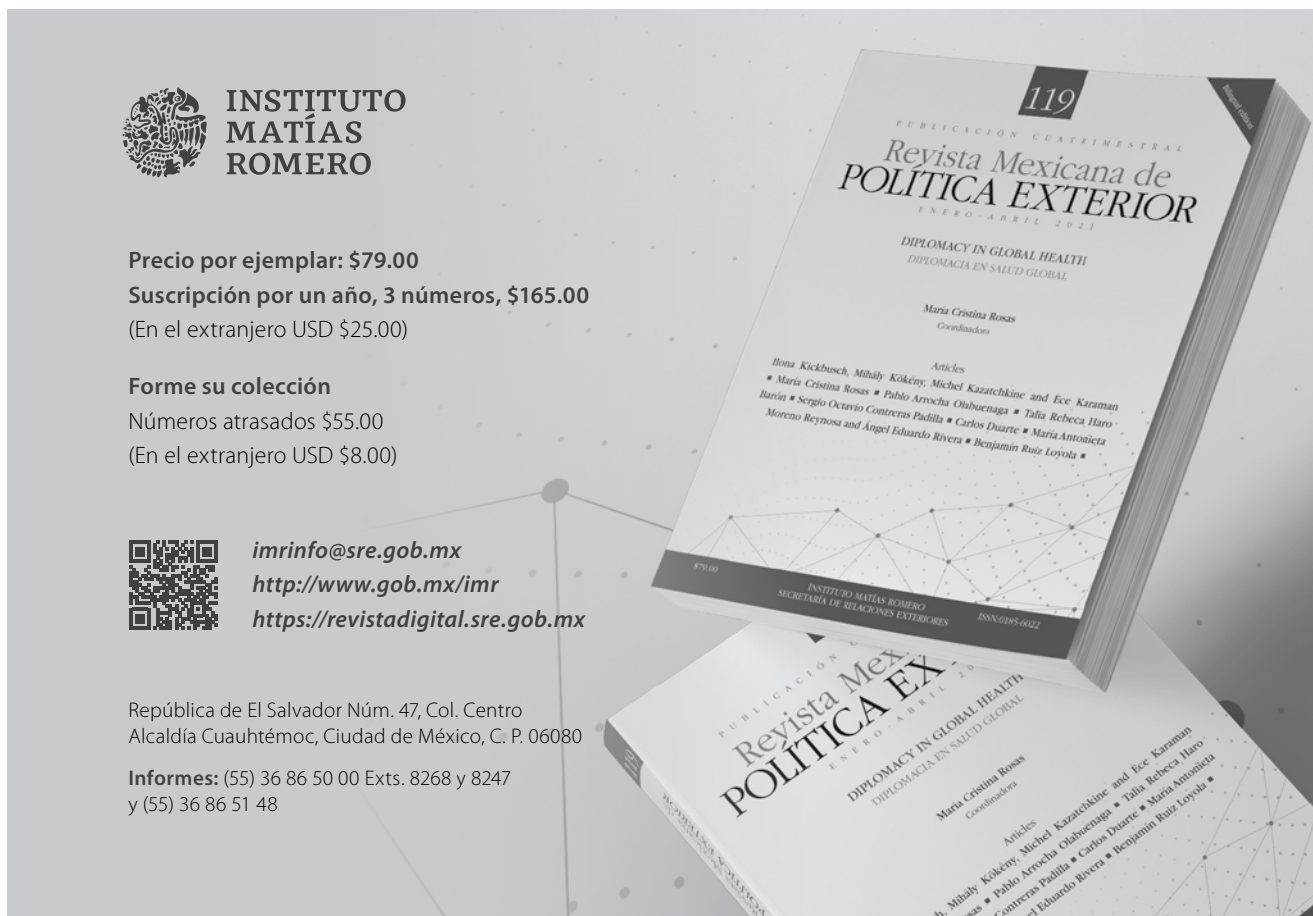
among others) to advance its objectives. And the document states, “We expect that Iran will take risks that could escalate tensions and threaten U.S. and allied interests in the coming year.”<sup>4</sup>

This is the position about the threat Iran represents in political-military terms. The importance Biden is giving to reviving the nuclear agreement, then, should come as no surprise. Bringing Iran back into it would lead to a relative decrease in the threat it poses. Washington already sees Netanyahu as a bull in a china shop who threatens to break the precarious existing consensuses in the Democratic Party and Congress, where a historic change of position regarding Israel seems to be brewing. The viciousness and expansionism of an extreme right-wing ethnic nationalism when dealing with Hamas’s paramilitary intemperance and complete lack of political strategy make it increasingly urgent to placate Iran and avoid having another elephant in the fragile anteroom of the conflict. This would be the most intelligent strategy if the idea is to get the main actors in the conflict to sit down and negotiate

with the backing of Iran and Israel. However, a successful nuclear pact in Iran will have to include an urgent change in Israel’s domestic policy, and that includes Netanyahu and his hawks’ leaving office. ■■■

## Notes

- 1 Doug Stokes, “Trump, American Hegemony and the Future of the Liberal International Order,” *International Affairs*, vol. 94, no. 1 (January 2018), pp. 133-150.
- 2 This document was published April 13, 2021 at <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/newsroom/reports-publications/reports-publications-2021/item/2204-2021-annual-threat-assessment-of-the-u-s-intelligence-community>, accessed in June 2021. [Editor’s Note.]
- 3 The author is referring here to a speech Blinken gave on March 3, 2021, about the document “Interim National Security Strategic Guidance” (Washington, D. C.: The White House, March 2021), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>. [Editor’s Note.]
- 4 Office of the Director of National Intelligence, “Annual Threat Assessment of the Intelligence Community,” April 13, 2021, <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2021-UNclassified-Report.pdf>, p. 12. [Editor’s Note.]



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