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## **RECENSION**

### ***PLAYING CHESS WITH THE DEVIL. WORLD SITUATION IN A NUTSHELL***

*Vicente Gonzalvo Navarro, Lieutenant Colonel of the Marines*

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Thought and doctrine are specific needs of each society. Both concepts carry with them the references on which they are built. That is why internal production should be encouraged, especially at the military level. And at this level, production should be from a strategic point of view, because of its relevance.

Strategic thinking is closely linked to intellectual excellence. It is not easy, because it requires people with credentials and a specific sensitivity that is not innate but is cultivated. Culture comes from the word cultivation.

Developing this particular sensitivity is therefore a strategic necessity. This requires education, humanism, time, specialisation, open-mindedness and an understanding of the environment, in short, a specific professionalism and qualification. Undertaking such an endeavour is only possible as long as it is enjoyable. It is, paradoxically, a cold and dispassionate job that nevertheless demands passion and dedication in its execution.

Art, strategy and geopolitics are intertwined; they have overlapping components. They all deal with an enormous amount of data and factors that leave a remarkable place for intuition in their performance. Art explains the unseen, transcending the specular nature of experience itself, forshadowing signs of where societies are heading, just as, in other fields and mechanics, strategy and geopolitics do.

Geopolitics has seen a sharp rise in public interest in recent years. The simplicity and graphism of its explanations, formed in a visual way through a map, made it dangerous once before; it was a kind of mental weapon that could shape fictions to be achieved and create scientific stories of unquestionable future.

Geopolitics is an intuitive science because it allows proposals to be formulated without spending too much time analysing in detail the factors into which the situation can be broken down. It embodies a kind of alchemy that makes it possible to produce “obvious” formulations to those who are not versed in the intricacies of the problems because, in the name of graphism and clarity, it dispenses with the innumerable nuances that accompany the facts. Geopolitics can thus be said to make one map out of another.

This map establishes the ideological framework for debates which, from the outset and just by acting in this way, have been won for the purposes of the geopolitical author. Laozi noted in *Tao Te Ching* that the wise man, “by placing himself behind, places himself in front” (LI). Power, especially in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is the ability to influence and is related to the right reference.

And, as Byung Chul Han points out, “Feeling precedes thought,” any rational decision necessarily passes through the emotional-cultural sieve, with all that such a procedure entails in terms of the priming of references. All knowledge is emotionally biased.

Thus, it is enough to look at James Bond films to get an idea of the geopolitical evolution of the world from an Anglo-Saxon perspective, while, innocently enough,

giving power and relevance to the political action of the United Kingdom, reinforcing its “special relationship” and quasi-parity with the United States is, fixing its concepts of international relations in its favour and magnifying its power. To recall Hobbes, the fiction of power is power.

By the same logic, it should be noted that many of the internationally accepted rankings of teaching and research quality are made based on US-UK standards, which is not entirely unrelated to the results.

As we have said, strategic and geopolitical thinking involves, albeit implicitly, the sense of what is important, the culture, modes and references of those who elaborate it. It is therefore not a task that should be abandoned or left entirely in the hands of third parties. As a development of this logic, we need a geopolitics made in Spain.

And with good reason. A minimally advanced nation cannot just be a consumer of what others produce, and in bulk. And that is a crime for a nation with a history and culture like ours. Analyses made by third parties always leave us with a bad taste in the mouth because they are used to defend and value what is theirs; and we are competitors, whether we like it or not. Spain’s history is not like that of any average country, which is why it offends.

Today, dominant thinking’s thinking is, in strategic and doctrinal terms is of Anglo-Saxon origin and therefore, logically, tailored to and referenced to it. This is likely to remain so in the short term, not only because they control the field of ideas and set the framework for the debate, but above all, because they have a large distribution apparatus at their disposal, which is very difficult to access successfully.

In this regard, it should be noted that some US think tanks have a budget similar to that of the World Trade Organisation (WTO). The result of their work are real blockbusters with a system for distributing ideas on par to that of Hollywood.

This guarantees the dominance of a certain ways of thinking and references. They are solidly based in themselves and become unquestionable because they are considered commonplace and anything otherwise would be heresy. Other points of views are not banned, they are simply not disseminated or not widely disseminated. This is why they are presented, at best, as “alternatives” to current thinking, if not as mere echoes or scholastic reverberations of it.

English has transformed into the language of science and its institutions also in a court of law that grants the academic label; the quality with which this language is spoken defines in some way the quality of the researcher. And since there has to be an alternative model (like Noam Chomsky’s), its production is also taken over. In this way, national thinking is discouraged and countries are intellectually colonised. In practice, this is a kind of Bulgarian-style cultural monolith. And confronting it requires courage, patience and considerable resources, but also an understanding of the importance of not leaving this logic of thinking to third parties.

Nothing less than breaking with this factual self-reproductive framework is the challenge faced by the work of Marine Lieutenant Colonel Vicente Gonzalvo Navarro, entitled *Playing Chess with the Devil* and published by London-based *Europe Books* in 2022.

The author, in addition to having a full military career up to his current position, which has taken him to different countries, holds a Doctorate in Law and a General Staff Diploma. His step forward into the world of publishing, and doing so in another language, is to be congratulated.

But the harvest is plentiful and the labourers are few. Our country can be—and in fact already is—a kind of intellectual hub, simply because of the global reach of the Spanish language and our cultural forms. This must extend even further into the realm of the strategic and reach out to thinking in broad terms, as this essay does.

This is a book written within academic parameters (citations and references), in English and aimed at those speakers, but it incorporates ideological baggage with an inevitable national bias, even though the bibliography relies mainly on English material. Nevertheless, his implicit assumptions, constructs and assessments are our own. This is, in national terms and beyond its content, one of the main assets of the work.

But it is not only written in English, it is also enjoyable to read and deals with highly topical issues; indeed, the essay was completed in the spring of 2022, at the zenith of a period of particular geopolitical instability. It is not for nothing that the publication is presented as a summary or compendium of the world situation, as foreshadowed by the second part of its title: *World situation in a Nutshell*. This is a challenge in addition to the previous ones, but one that the uncertainties of the situation make it easier to face. In that sense, he had it easy.

The 401-page essay is divided into 17 chapters, which are in turn grouped into three main areas. The first is devoted to the most immediate challenges for international security; the second looks at the possibilities offered by military tools and strategies in the current geopolitical context. And the third is specifically dedicated to certain conflict regions.

The titles of the chapters that make up each one of these parts operate as summaries of their contents and refer to cybersecurity; international relations and geography; Ukraine and Russia, China as the new hegemon; Africa as a battlefield; weak states and international security; migration; Ibero-America as a forgotten continent; special operations in hybrid conflicts; security and conflict in the air (a chapter written in collaboration with Air Force Colonel Miguel A. Saez Nievas); the strategic importance of space; disinformation as a tactical weapon; nuclear weapons; Iran; the Taiwan conflict and its repercussions on global security; Afghanistan and its lessons; and finally, a specific chapter dedicated to world leadership and geopolitics.

For Lieutenant Colonel Gonzalvo, international security is affected by the interrelationships or interactions between all of the above issues mentioned. It becomes a mixture of war, economics and geopolitics. Needless to say, the outcome

goes far beyond the military —the Machiavellianism of strategy too often confuses force with power, and power is much more than force, it is the ability to build— and in practice, the author believes, it represents a clash between China and NATO, an organisation that he sees as acting as an extension of the United States. The outcome of this challenge will determine the model of the world's security system.

However, he sees the 21<sup>st</sup> century as a continuation of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, he notes that international policy is being redefined in a sort of re-edition of the model adopted during the Yalta Conference with three voices: those of Biden, Xi and Putin, to whose personal profiles he devotes a chapter. In any event, he also believes that the geopolitical landscape has changed significantly.

For the author, we are in a period of transition, in an interregnum. And this is a time when the course of the interactions to which we have allude can give rise to much and can provoke some surprises. The West does not have the correct frame of reference of the world situation, which distorts the results of its analysis and, worse still, invokes Ortega's warning that "every ignored reality prepares its revenge".

An example of this is the fact that the UN General Assembly in 2022 condemned the invasion of Ukraine but while only five countries (unsurprisingly) voted against the resolution, 38 others unexpectedly abstained. It seems that the West only listens to itself and is surprised when other discourses are raised from the strategic semi-periphery. In this sense we can conclude that there is a lack of understanding of the environment and that important parameters have been replaced by implicit ones that are, to say the least, highly questionable.

Finally, the ideological background of the essay, as we have seen, refers to political realism, to the interplay of powers. In fact, the author begins the work with a well-known quotation from Machiavelli. And, in this line he makes use of a good ideological-doctrinal apparatus. He quotes all the great classics of this model of political thought as well as some of its most significant current referents, and he even includes an express condemnation of Fukuyama. One might think that this is a classic, very military view. But it is also true that there is innovation in the book.

In short, this essay is a Spanish contribution to the international community of thought, a contribution and another reference to global strategic thinking that does not seek to disdain, supplant, confront or replace any other, for the simple reason that there is room for everyone; and reflections that come from new references are welcome. Reality is multifaceted and admits many different points of view. The more references are taken and the more divergent the references are from each other, the richer and more approximate the result will be.

We are, to use a famous Chinese curse, living in interesting times, which are probably deserving more thought than is being given to them. These are times of great scientific progress, in which technology has become a game changer due to its capacity to impact international relations. But scientific progress is no guarantee of moral progress or even of rationality. And so the nuclear threat has resurfaced, taking

us back to the era of Mutually Assured Destruction, as Lieutenant Colonel Gonzalvo rightly points out in his work.

In conclusion, this book is welcome on three levels: firstly, because it deals with current geopolitics; secondly, because it provides a Spanish vision in a world that, at least in the West, is dominated by an almost exclusively Anglo-Saxon way of thinking; and thirdly, because it is written by a military man. Let us hope that this will stimulate others and serve to broaden what is, in our view, still a very narrow base of military thinkers. Training them requires prolonged education and this, in turn, requires encouragement and role models.

It is just over 100 years since the end of the First World War, a conflict that claimed more than 25 million lives, and whose causes are still being debated. Perhaps it was an attempt to resolve a rivalry by means of a war, which was not the answer. Perhaps, the answer could have been found in international markets if not elsewhere. And leadership failed.

That may have been the case with the war in Ukraine. It is difficult to make political or geopolitical sense of this conflict. Whether the outcome is victory or defeat, either option can mean anything from Russia's isolation to its breaking up. And that is when its natural exit is the West, a civilisation with which it shares culture if not destiny.

Russia is increasingly enveloped—whether by the Arctic or by the Silk Road, which runs through the post-Soviet space—by China, a country that has a 4,000-kilometre border with it, GDP ten times higher than it and whose natural hinterland is Siberia. And that is at a time when the global leadership contest is being fought between the United States and China. Russia, with the geopolitical options afforded by its 17 million square kilometres and its nuclear weapons, is not fit to be a contender in such a contest, however willing it may be. The roar of the cannon can hardly increase GDP.

After all, history never repeats itself—except as farce—but it often rhymes.

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