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## A Soft War in an Imagined Future

*The world is stumbling into a war that is neither hot nor cold. Written from the vantage point of the late 2020s, this essay in future history describes a “Soft War” that was precipitated by the geopolitical contest between an incumbent superpower and a determined challenger.*

**S**oftly, softly we went to war.

It is easier to see today, looking back on the decade that started with the spread of a virus which infected 300 million people and killed nearly five million. The war did not start with the virus but warmongering spread with the ferocity of COVID-19. Even as politicians disavowed war, they acted in warlike ways, and experts lined up to discount the possibility of a descent into open and unrestrained conflict.

Well, in a sense they were right. There are no bombed-out cities, images of body bags, prisoners of war, or conscription programs.

That would have been the “hot war” everyone was warning against and which the guardians of military power proudly declared to have avoided. There was also no “cold war” because—historians reminded us—the cold war was defined by circumstances unique to the forty-year period following the Second World War. Globalization, interdependence and economic parity made the idea of a new cold war in the sense of mortal threats between two antagonists a non-starter.

“If we are not in a cold war and have been able to avoid a hot war,” the soothing logic went, “we cannot be at war.” As category errors go, this one was a whopper. It went unnoticed because collectively, we could not bear the idea of either a hot war or a cold war and were happy to define away a version of war that was neither hot nor cold. The problem was exacerbated by leaders who saw it in their interest to stoke conflict that produced a state of warring while plausibly denying that we were in either a hot war or a cold war.

And so, without a missile being fired, the world stumbled into a war that was neither hot nor cold. The wonder is that it took so long for the shapers of global opinion to acknowledge that there was a serious conflict underway, and that the soft war was no less significant for the impact that it was having on lives and livelihoods in battlegrounds dispersed around the world, and casualties consisting mostly of non-combatants.

For much of the last decade, euphemisms have distracted us from the grim reality we are in. “De-coupling” was, at worst, an acrimonious divorce between incompatible systems; “de-globalization” was a welcome corrective to excesses of previous decades; “techno-nationalism” was spun as healthy competition. Nobody wanted war, but many vested interests were content with a climate of warring that could be glossed over by language.



If there was a first shot fired in the war, it was from the barrel of techno-nationalism. Responding to years of discrimination against foreign companies in the second largest consumer market in the world, the dominant world power launched a series of actions to thwart the success of upstart companies flying the wrong national flag—forcing the sale of their assets, arresting their executives, and blacklisting them as business partners.

The clarion call of “reciprocity” provided cover for these actions. There was a logic to the argument that we should deprive the other side of what the other side deprives of us. But this way of thinking overlooks the benefit of openness, even without reciprocity. Before the first shot was fired, capital, talent, and technology flowed overwhelmingly in the direction of the more open economy. The less open economy could not attract the same volumes and caliber of people and businesses precisely because of restrictions on their ability to operate freely. What started as a strategy based on the principle of reciprocity quickly descended into an exercise in exacting punishment on the other. This led to orders of divestment and prohibitions on doing business based on which side you were on. Penalties were even imposed on third parties that had the audacity to choose the wrong side in a dispute that became broader, more nebulous, and hence more difficult to manage.

The other side perceived the systematic assault on its national technology champions and fledgling global companies as an existential threat, and—perversely—made it more difficult for their enterprises to operate freely abroad. They responded in exactly the opposite way that was intended, by making it less easy for foreign entities to gain a foothold in key sectors and redoubled their efforts to develop indigenous technologies to outcompete their adversary. Global

companies that tried to operate in both systems had to contort themselves to conform to the legal (and national security) requirements of each side—often in contradictory and self-defeating ways. Citizens, in the meantime, were as opposed to the small number of dominant technology and media giants harvesting information on their consumption behavior as they were of a Leviathan state tracking their physical movements.

We are by now familiar with a world of fractured technical standards and the need to navigate different technology ecosystems as we cross into different geographies, but this was not the way the world was heading prior to 2020. Back then, there was asymmetry in the availability of digital applications in the two major markets, but cosmopolitans from both sides (including students, migrant workers, and activists) found ways to communicate on common platforms through the use of virtual private networks, overseas accounts, and platform ecumenicalism. That all changed with the stigmatization of the “wrong” digital platforms in the early 2020s, forcing a rupture in social and discussion networks that were so vital in keeping communications channels open across different divides.

The assault on channels of communication which began at the start of the decade was fueled by fears of foreign interference and the scourge of online fake news. By far and away, the problem of disinformation in both of the warring countries was from domestic sources, but it was much easier to focus on the drip in the ceiling coming from outside than to fix the corroding pipes within that were causing rot in the foundations of the building. This was as true for the authoritarian state with its near-total control over media and its instinctive recourse to blaming foreign agents for domestic unrest as it was for the liberal democracy that had allowed a different kind of



monopoly control over media—one which aided and abetted the spread of false information, conspiracy theories, and hate.

Even if there is now the begrudging acceptance of a world at war, the human cost of this conflict is not yet well understood. It does not help that most of the casualties are not to be found in the populations of the two belligerents, but in theatres of conflict far removed from them. The most immediate victims are those who have died of Coronavirus, even after safe and effective vaccines were developed. True to form, both sides succumbed to vaccine nationalism and prioritized the delivery of life saving medicine to their own citizens and “friendly nations.”

There was, of course, ample rhetoric on international cooperation and contribution to global vaccination efforts, but the lower priority given to developing countries and the resulting delay in the roll-out of vaccination programs in much of Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and South America meant a continuing loss of lives directly and indirectly due to COVID-19. This is not well understood given that major news networks stopped reporting on the global case count and death toll as the number of infections and fatalities in the places that matter began to drop sharply with the roll-out of vaccination programs. But the number of infections and deaths in the rest of the world continued to rise, compounded by economic dislocation that will have health and social impacts well after attainment of the fabled global herd immunity. Those of us who rely on a certain body of media will remember the global death toll peaking around 2.5 million, but that was simply the point at which media decided COVID-19 was no longer an interesting news story and hence did not see a need to provide regular updates on global case counts and deaths.

## The Pointy End of War

It is not just that vaccine nationalism led to the delay of immunization programs in less well-off countries, and hence greater numbers of deaths and economic hardship. It is also that the intense rivalry between the belligerents held back the prospect for meaningful international cooperation on vaccine development and distribution and forced third countries to take sides in the vaccine wars. This was reminiscent of the cold war where small countries had to align themselves diplomatically with one side or the other, resulting in political and economic consequences that went well beyond who you voted with in the United Nations. It did not help, either, that national rivalries (and domestic politics) led to the championing of certain vaccines while casting aspersions on rival products, which only created confusion and skepticism in the general public, making widespread vaccination even more difficult.

Vaccine nationalism was the pointy end of the war we stumbled into, but there was much more in its wake. A tidal wave of popular sentiment, aided and abetted by leaders on both sides, began to frame many of their country's challenges as emanating from the actions of their rival. Unemployment, ill health and addiction, and industrial decline were blamed on the other, as were mass street protests, domestic terrorism, and separatist sentiment. There was a cavalier abuse of history, from dodgy maps to Whig teleology. It was perhaps inevitable that a collective psychology would set in, where it became increasingly comfortable to explain every internal problem by reference to the external adversary.

At a national level, lying to oneself in this manner hurts the domestic body politic, but great powers often find solace—even unity—in national myths and collective untruths. The greater damage,



however, is that when two powers indulge in distortions about both themselves and their rival, there is harm inflicted on their relationships with other nations. This is the case not only in the old cold war sense of being rewarded or punished for taking the wrong side in the contest, but more so because of the insidious effect of great power capriciousness and cynicism spreading to the global body politic.

At the start of this decade, the term used for what we feared would become more commonplace over time was “strong man populism.” What has in fact emerged is more evolved and more diffuse than populism centered on a strongman. We see instead a kind of “everyman populism,” where populist policies everywhere—spiced by a heightened nationalism—have produced a political culture in which there are more bogeymen to fear, more conspiracies to investigate, more traitors to expose, and fewer compatriots to trust.

It is hard to pinpoint where it all started going wrong. Was it when the last strongman of the authoritarian rival declared that he would be even more of an authoritarian by engineering the end of limits to his leadership term? Or was it when the status quo power declared that it was the very system of governance on the other side that was the problem, and that everything which emanated from that system would be deemed suspect? In any case, at some point in those early years of the decade, both parties settled on the E word and declared—softly, softly—that the other side is an *Enemy*.

The act of branding the other as an *Enemy* compels one to treat the other as an enemy, which made it so much easier to feed the collective psychology that has now largely bought into this idea. When a senior official at the end of the last decade cryptically described the rival as a “whole of society” problem, most compatriots did not understand what he meant. The E word makes it clear.

The whole of society approach to fighting the enemy has led to organized efforts at ferreting out enemies in the whole of society. This has led to the development of crude litmus tests of one's patriotism, trustworthiness, and credibility. Some of the standard markers include ethnicity, social networks, business affiliations, consumption choices, and having the wrong opinions. These assaults on liberty have been repulsed somewhat by constitutional protections in places that have such protections, but we have seen everywhere the more expansive use of "national security" as a reason (without giving reasons) for discrimination and violence against citizens.

It will be hard to tally the casualties of this war because they are mostly the poor, who are spread out across the globe and who have become victims not because of bombs but because of bad policy by the main belligerents. For this reason, pedants will dispute that we are in any kind of war. But it is a mark of human progress that we now understand that suffering caused by willful policy actions (or neglect) is not much different from the suffering caused by missile attacks. This is a signature finding of the recently completed Global Commission on COVID-19, which makes a direct comparison of COVID-19 fatalities with deaths caused by recent wars and points the finger at leaders who failed their citizens in responding to the pandemic of a lifetime. Whether there will be a monument to the millions slain by Coronavirus, as there are monuments to the war dead or to victims of terrorism, is left to be seen.

Even so, there are more casualties among the belligerents than is widely believed. The distraction of a soft war, and the gross distortion in economic logic that it led to, has set back the health and welfare of their citizens, especially those who were already disadvantaged at the start of this decade. On the one hand, policies to



encourage re-shoring and self-sufficiency have not restored the industrial base, increased employment for the poor, or reduced the current account deficit. On the other hand, the doubling down on national champions and technological sovereignty has been massively inefficient and has meant a drain on state resources that led to a stalling in the fight to eliminate poverty and achieve a “moderately prosperous society.” Social discontent is worsening on both fronts, because of systemic and state-sponsored discrimination, with income and wealth inequality rising. We are still very much in a bi-polar world, and will be for the foreseeable future, but the attraction of either pole for everyone in between is dimming rapidly.

## **The Good Elephant, the Bad Elephant, and the In-Between People**

And how has it been for those in-between? Since the start of the decade, so-called middle powers—individually and collectively—have struggled to manage the conflict between the great powers. The default for most has been to retreat to the safe haven of alliance relationships with the status quo power, but this was made difficult by the status quo power taking actions against allies based on national security grounds and retreating from multilateral institutions. Many embarked on their own soft war with the authoritarian belligerent, sometimes as supporting cast for the main theatre of conflict but also because of tensions unique to bilateral relations with an ascendant power that was acting increasingly like a bully on the international stage.

The middle powers that were most successful in avoiding being trampled underfoot by two fighting elephants were those which understood that there are different parts to each elephant, as in the parable of the blind men who had very different perceptions of the

beast they encountered. Those who settled on the idea that there was a good elephant and a bad elephant quickly found themselves limited in the range of options to address their own national interests. It was not made easier by the fact that both elephants used a combination of bribes, suasion, threats, and punishment to exact the preferred response from an otherwise neutral party.

It is easier to see today than it was at the end of the last decade that the ability of either elephant to cajole and bully middle powers has diminished over the years. That is the logical outcome of the toll which a soft war inflicts on combatants, and of the more fragmented world that has emerged. Middle powers that had the fortitude to pursue a more independent approach to international policy can take solace in their more resilient position today compared with those who quickly settled on the dichotomy of a good elephant and a bad elephant.

Elephant watchers have struggled for years now to come to terms with what seemed like an immoral equivalence between an elephant that, while flawed, displayed qualities that were preferable to those of its adversary. The other elephant battled its own, often with wanton brutality, even as it battled the opponent with calculated restraint. It was hard to not take sides in the early years of this savanna brawl, but as the contest morphs into an extended shoving match, it is the smaller animals that are getting trampled—regardless of who they are cheering for. Smaller animals have changed their habits because of the savanna brawl, the wisest of them choosing to better look after themselves and each other rather than trying to change the brawlers.

We do not know how many more years we will have of this soft war, but we are already close to the start of the new decade and there is no end in sight. Unlike the cold war, we are not approaching a denouement where one side collapses under the weight of its



misdirected energies. It is clear, however, that both sides have been diminished in the eyes of their citizens as well as in the hearts and minds of others. War thinkers have long understood that at the core of military capability is economic strength. The soft war has taken a toll on the economic vitality of both sides, even if they remain the preeminent military powers in the world.

## **A Soft War Consensus Couched as Soft Containment**

Which is why a soft war can still become a hot war. We have already had hot flashes in this soft war, including naval clashes, drone strikes, proxy skirmishes, extra-territorial renditions, rogue battles, and cyberattacks on information systems. Most of these incidents have occurred outside the homeland, which insulates the outrage from domestic constituencies. But the temptation to strike harder and deeper increases as the frustration of a debilitating stalemate grows. Those who still fear a hot war should not be consoled by the existence of a soft war.

We have so far avoided a noisy march to outright military conflict. Looking back, could we have also avoided the hushed steps to a soft war?

The two men who did the most to hurry us along have now left their leadership positions, but the conflict has not abated. It was always too much to assume that their removal would return us to a more placid and less conflictual past. The legacy we are left with, however, is as much a failure which reflects on the “whole of society,” as it is of the doomed policies of two failed leaders. A centuries-old template, in which one great power is threatened by the rise of another, is repeating itself in our lifetime—with not much to show by way of lessons learned.

On the one hand, the domestic politics of the status quo power was riven in so many ways that it became a relief for a demoralized public to rally around a common external threat. Not having to fight over one more issue was preferable to resisting gross generalizations about the external threat, often requiring nuanced argumentation that exhausted voters simply did not have the patience for. This is how a soft war consensus among political leaders was formed, couched as *soft containment*. It was not long before the media, intellectuals, and opinion makers coalesced around this soothing consensus, or found it much more difficult to have contrary views aired. The emergence of groupthink took place with remarkable speed, aided by appeals to national security and the liberal use of Manichean imagery.

On the other hand, the challenger succumbed to a mixture of impatience and grandiosity and gave up on a previously winning formula of keeping a low profile internationally and biding one's time. Emboldened by his success in consolidating power domestically, the authoritarian leader sought to project power abroad as well. He was far more successful in the former than in the latter. Even so, the surprise of recent years is his departure from the scene, despite succession rules that could have had him in power indefinitely.

The early hope and optimism that came with his departure has given way to a more stoic view that the forces of continuity are at least as strong as the pressure for change. It does not help that the new leadership, even if they are seen as moderates, has spent the last number of years dealing with external and internal threats that were fanned by the soft war that began in the last decade. They have been hardened both by the example of their former leader and by pressures from without. There may be a number of things that the new leadership will do differently, but on the question of the country's "rightful" place



in the world, there is not much daylight between them and their predecessor. As the jingoistic slogan goes: the challenger has “stood up”—first as a sovereign nation, then as an economic force, and now as a military power.

Perhaps there was a different path that could have been taken by elites on both sides, and in third countries, to avoid the soft war that we are now in. That would have required some version of a more honest calculation of economic risks, a more nuanced foreign policy, greater trust in multilateralism, and the courage to resist demonization of the other and of one’s own. There are others who are better placed to reflect on how this might have come about. But the simple lesson for the moment—*this moment*—is that we are softly, softly heading to war, and that we need to hear it loud and clear.

### ***Note on the Author***

**Yuen Pau Woo** was appointed to the Senate of Canada in November 2016 and sits as an independent representing British Columbia. Since 2017, he has been Facilitator of the Independent Senators Group, the largest parliamentary caucus in Canada’s Upper House. Senator Woo has worked on public policy issues concerning Canada’s relations with Asian countries for more than thirty years. From 2005–2014, he was President and CEO of the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, and on the Standing Committee of the Pacific Economic Cooperation Committee (PECC). He is Senior Fellow at Simon Fraser University’s Graduate School of Business, and at the School of Public Policy and Global Affairs at the University of British Columbia. He is a member of the Trilateral Commission and on the boards of the Canadian Ditchley Foundation and the Vancouver Academy of Music. He also serves on the Advisory

Boards of the Mosaic Institute, the Vancouver Chinatown Foundation, and the York Centre for Asian Research. Senator Woo is a native of Malaysia and has previously worked for the Monetary Authority of Singapore and the Government of Singapore Investment Corporation. Senator Woo studied at Wheaton College, the University of Cambridge, and the University of London. His publications have appeared in *Asian Economic Papers*, *International Journal*, *East Asian Bureau of Economic Research*, and *China Economic Journal*, among others. He was the founding chair of PECC's flagship *State of the Region* report.