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The Devil's Advocate

A New Cold War Cannot Save a Warming Planet

Dr. John Bruni

On a cool Sunday morning, while recovering from a small procedure on my left foot, I was watching YouTube and came across a very interesting debate, posted on October 2021 between Fareed Zakaria and Prof. Niall Ferguson where the central question was:

A New Cold War Cannot Save a Warming Planet.

For those of you who would like to see this debate in full, please watch it [here](#).

Following, I will try to encapsulate as much of the key points presented by the two protagonists below before giving my own views.



Fareed Zakaria:

- A new Cold War (with China) will not allow us to do the things we need to do to combat Climate Change.
- Global challenges such as the COVID pandemic and Climate Change must be dealt with collectively.
- The world has fundamentally changed since the end of the last Cold War.
- During the early Cold War, the US held around 50% of the world's GDP with the Soviet Union around 10%.
- The West, once Europe was rebuilt post World War II, was the absolute dominant player globally, economically, militarily, technologically, socially, and politically.
- 25 years ago, 'emerging markets' constituted less than 5% of global GDP. Today they account for some 45% of global GDP. The single largest country in this group is the People's Republic of China (PRC).
- 25 years ago, the PRC accounted for around 1% of global GDP. Today it accounts for 15% of global GDP.
- Today, China is the largest trading partner of a plurality of the world's nations.
- We therefore must find a way to work with the PRC on global problems despite our differences. After all, we cooperate with Saudi Arabia, a country that does not share the West's values.



Niall Ferguson:

- Geostrategic competition with the PRC is the only way to save a warming planet.
- Cooperation with the PRC over COVID-19 did not go particularly well. Beijing covered up the origin of the pandemic for weeks on end allowing it to spread internationally.
- Are we in a new Cold War? Yes.
- Chinese premier Xi Jinping is nostalgic for Maoism.
- Its only through Cold War strategies that we are going to be able to pressure the PRC over Climate Change.
- Since the birth of Greta Thunberg in 2003, global coal consumption has risen by 39%. The PRC accounts for 93% of that increase.
- Nearly all the increase in coal consumption since 2003 has been by the PRC.
- Global carbon emissions have risen by two thirds since 2003, the PRC accounting for 64% of this increase.
- If you charge your Tesla EVs with coal-generated electricity, it's not

- going to save the planet. The planet's going to burn.
- The lesson of the Cold War is that when the West focusses and realises the nature of the threat from a communist regime, its technological innovation accelerates and the only way we're going to save the planet is through precisely the sort of technological innovation that will come from geopolitical competition with the PRC.

Altogether, this was a very lively debate and both Zakaria and Ferguson made some valid and interesting points. However, as with most debates like these the truth to a situation as complex as this lies somewhere in the middle.

Zakaria was correct in his observations about contemporary geopolitics.

Today's world is not the same as it was between 1947-91. Indeed, it shares very little commonality with that world.

The Soviet Union economically speaking and at its height was a very pale shadow of the People's Republic. It was an extremely poorly run command economy governed by a cruel, hypocritical, and viciously repressive communist elite which seemed more focussed on shuffling the national economic goods of the Soviet state into its own pockets rather than redistributing economic welfare to the Soviet people - as per its avowed doctrine.

The USSR posed an international threat by supporting the expansion of its communist doctrine into Africa, Asia, and Latin America, violently overturning any Western-aligned regimes by its extensive use of proxy forces, and occasionally



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bumping into Maoist revolutionaries along the way. The Kremlin's success in this strategy against the West was often because Western-backed regimes in many developing world countries were themselves extremely cruel, repressive, and badly run. No prizes for the West there.

Today's People's Republic is different from this Cold War model.

The marriage of Western investment to low-cost Chinese labour made the PRC the world's industrial powerhouse. Dirty industries in the West that found living with ever-tightening environmental regulations, the high cost of domestic labour and intrusive labour laws packed up and made for the greener pastures of the People's Republic where they were warmly welcomed by Deng Xiaoping after his 1978 opening of the Chinese economy to foreign investment.

This single act, coupled to international recognition of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) sovereignty over all of China, inclusive of Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan through its One Country, Two Systems artifice, created a geopolitically stable and harmonious environment whereby Beijing could quietly work on modernising its industries and economic base. In the West there were plenty of scholars who welcomed this development and who wrote copious papers that China's exposure to Western capitalism, lifestyle and opportunities would have a net positive effect on its internal politics.

By 1989 and the Tiananmen Square Massacre, China was already too big and too integrated into Western economies for the West to meaningfully sanction it for human rights abuses. Western

investment in China accelerated apace from 1991 onwards, turbo-charging Chinese economic development and putting it on a short-cut to great power status. Those scholars I previously mentioned with their rose-coloured views of the CCP kept at them. Once 'critical wealth' was achieved it was only a matter of time before Beijing would soften its grip on power and capitalist-led political evolution would have its way, they all claimed. These scholars were only quietened by the arrival of Xi Jinping in 2012 who took the CCP down an even more totalitarian path, using capitalism as its ultimate enabler.

Today, the PRC is seen as a monolithic behemoth. Highly integrated into the global economy and yet a politically totalitarian state. The CCP imported Western capitalism to lift the country out of poverty but also to buy local political support. So long as everybody in China understood that the 90-million-strong CCP would dominate internal Chinese affairs, people would be allowed to make money. This arrangement largely guaranteed the silence of China's 1.4 billion people. Silence to crimes committed by the CCP against Tibetans, Uyghurs, Hong Kongers, and a raft of religious, political, and other minorities. Despite its trappings of modernity and outward signs of material extravagance and wealth there is no freedom within the PRC. The internet is regularly censored, there is no free press, the CCP controls every aspect of political and social life. If you are rich, famous, and apolitical, this is no guarantee the state will leave you alone. Even the wealthiest of China's elite are routinely purged from the system in anti-corruption campaigns, while the inner circle of the CCP 'ship-of-state' sails on.



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The CCP does not export communist revolution like it used to during the Cold War,¹ but it is, through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), attempting to create a continent-spanning rail, road and pipeline network connecting all parts of the world to China. Debt trap diplomacy, cyber warfare, influence operations, disinformation and economic coercion are the tools of choice for modern China.²

Modern China constitutes a different sort of threat to the international order to that of the USSR.

The 1917 Bolshevik Revolution that led to the formation of the USSR was largely a Russian-based affair³ having its roots in the trauma of centuries of oppressive Tsarist rule. The CCP on the other hand did not find its path to economic growth on its own volition. Deng's opening to Western investment made the founding of modern China possible. Corporate greed and Western political opportunism creating ties of high Sino-Western interdependency did the rest, creating a geopolitical Frankenstein's monster in today's CCP.

We cannot control or influence the CCP.

It's only Achilles' heel appears to be the suspected brittleness of its internal finances and banking system which may in time collapse, potentially leading to unforeseen power struggles at the top of the CCP hierarchy or even the collapse of the CCP itself. Historically, when the Chinese political centre fails, the internal chaos and carnage are cataclysmic. There is no denying that this would also be the

case should the CCP fall apart. Global markets, so tied to the CCP's vision of internal Chinese stability has no 'plan B' to replace the Chinese market with. This is a problem we are currently grappling with as Western governments attempt to redevelop national sovereign capabilities, post-COVID, and move away from Chinese supply chains.

Can we in the West trust the CCP to cooperate on issues like COVID and Climate Change?

Logic may say that a collective effort with the PRC is the only way we can solve these global problems. But this would mean that we'd have to turn a blind eye to Communist Party rule and its growing surveillance state capabilities.

And hypothetically speaking, what if the closer we cooperate with the PRC, the more the West imitates it, subconsciously corroding what's left of its own democratic and liberal values for the sake of the global commons? Is this a price worth paying?

Furthermore, the West is arguably at its weakest historical inflection point. Post-Trump America is not 'post-Trump'. The former US commander-in-chief imagines himself a presidential candidate for 2024. Trump supporters still work the floors of the Federal and State Houses and even while investigations continue to beleaguer team Trump, they are not close to derailing him or his supporters from the American political process. In the West's most powerful country, the United States, political divisions have been sharpened by

¹ Sometimes in cooperation with but also in competition against the USSR

² See: (eds.) Bruni J., Olney D.J., Jain P.C., Ludwig J.Z., Tyrrell P.J., [The strategic implications of changing dynamics & regional](#)

[partnerships on major power competition in the Indo-Pacific](#), Ovato Press, Melb., 2020 pp.71-73

³ Though it was the German High Command which favoured exporting an exiled Lenin to Russia for him to instigate Russian unrest against the Tsar



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the Trump experience and this reality has washed over the Biden administration.

Across the Atlantic, the United Kingdom has left the European Union. Tensions are now escalating across the English Channel between the UK and France over fishing rights and it doesn't seem likely that unity will come to Europe again in the same way as it did during the Cold War. European countries do not agree on the threats posed by Russia and China and due to the experience of Trump are unsure of American strategic commitments to Europe's defence through NATO.

This is hardly an international picture that favours the West or the unity of Western governments.

Zakaria, however, is wrong that the CCP is like the Saudi state and so therefore if we cooperate with Riyadh we can cooperate with Beijing. The Saudi state sells the West oil and gas. But it is not a country that the West is heavily intertwined with socially, economically, and technologically. Nor do the Saudis *overtly* seek to overturn its position in the Gulf. The PRC does not share the West's values and *overtly and covertly* seeks to overturn them when presented with an opportunity to do so. While the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia does not share the West's values it is happy to be left to its own devices, so long as its status quo position is not threatened.

This then leads to Ferguson's points.

To tackle existential threats as large and complex as COVID and Climate Change trusting the CCP as a partner during a time of geostrategic Sino-American

competition in the Indo-Pacific might not be the best idea.

The fact that the PRC leadership at best 'dithered' in its initial approach to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic allowing it to become the life-altering, business-destroying global disease it has become, certainly broke any remaining trust between the PRC and the West. Too many lives have been lost and too much economic damage wrought. And while COVID has affected the Chinese population as much as the world population at large, this fact has not tempted the West to reach out to Beijing on cooperative measures. The West holds China responsible for the COVID outbreak and the Chinese leadership under Xi is outraged by this. As the two sides won't be coming together anytime soon, without one having to apologise to the other and losing face, realism dictates that the PRC and the West will have to go it alone to come up with their various solutions to COVID and Climate Change.

But is this a problem?

Détente or Competition?

Arguably human ingenuity thrives in a competitive environment. Faced by the Soviet Union's superior ballistic missile and space programs in the 1950s, the United States mobilised the necessary national resources and placed astronauts on the Moon by 1969, thereby beating the Soviets in the space race. Qualitatively US ballistic missile technology also took huge strides in the 1960s with Washington justifiably claiming it had far more efficient and accurate intercontinental and intermediate-range missile forces than the USSR by the 1970s. In a conversation I had earlier this year with



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American space journalist Leonard David where I asked whether human endeavours in space would be better off with Sino-American cooperation, he, having witnessed Cold War US-Soviet competition for much of his professional life argued strongly for cooperation and collaboration, using the Apollo-Soyuz Mission (1975) as the exemplar of Détente between the two superpowers.⁴ And yes, pooling resources between two technologically developed states can bring down the costs of innovation especially were the two countries in question to be the prime beneficiaries. But in an atmosphere of mistrust and heightened political tensions the idea of cooperation and collaboration is mere fantasy. For collaboration and cooperation between the West and China during COVID, a face-saving way would have to be found for the West to forgive the PRC and the CCP's shambolic handling of the COVID pandemic's opening phases and then for China to accept this and move on. We might get there 10 years from now, but certainly not while the wounds of COVID are still fresh in people's minds and the economic havoc from the disease persists.

But saying this leads to the fact that should the West and China launch into Cold War 2.0, a competition to see which political system is morally, technologically, and economically superior might well accelerate science and research and development on either side of the Red Curtain to solve both COVID and Climate Change. If we look at how Chinese espionage has taken Western civil and military technology only to copy these successful designs on the Chinese mainland, geostrategic competition and a

good deal of Chinese IP theft might well get us to a far happier place than we are now. Of course, the occasional great power proxy war and period of brinkmanship might have to be the price we all pay for the outcome we hope for. But remember, the better angels of our nature won out during a time of nuclear confrontation and world-wide proxy war between the US and USSR. So perhaps Ferguson made the far more compelling case for values-based realism in which case were we to go down this road, it may well lead to our mutual salvation.

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⁴ Bruni J., Host, "[Is Sino-American Co-operation in Space Possible?](#)" The Focus, Episode 3, Auscast Network, 31 Aug. 2021