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**Geopolitics Background Paper**

Following on from our November 23 meeting “Are we now in WW3”, this article has been published just at the right time to make a useful follow-up discussion topic:

**'Our world is on a dangerous trajectory - without serious intervention it will be at war again', says Tobias Ellwood**

By [Tobias Ellwood](https://www.gbnews.com/authors/tobias-ellwood)

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Henry Kissinger once said ‘If you don't know where you are going, every road will get you nowhere.’ Perhaps that crudely sums up the difference between China and the West today. For Beijing is on a mission. 2049 will mark 100 years since that Communist victory in China’s civil war and a mission began - to make China great again. Yes, Chairman Mau had this idea long before Donald Trump.

To understand why the world’s newest superpower has come to reject Western standards, despite gaining a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, firstly there’s the obvious. Modern democracies demand transparency, accountability and of course free and fair elections. None of which are regular in China and President Xi has no intention of changing this.

Secondly, China is all too aware that its recent gargantuan economic rise might have come a century earlier had it not been for Western interference not seriously impeding its advance. By early 1800’s the mighty Qing Dynasty was on a cultural artistic and economic roll - responsible for a full third of the world's GDP.

But the opium trade changed all this. Attempts to control imports led to wars with Britain, France, Russia, and Japan resulting in unfair peace treaties (including ceding Hong Kong to the UK) and significantly diminishing China's sovereignty and global standing and internal division that would last for decades.

And finally, that permanent seat at the UN was initially granted by the West to the losing side of China’s civil war in 1949 (who had done a runner to Taiwan). A decision not rectified until 1971.

How different the world looks today. Perhaps, punch-drunk after the fall of the Berlin Wall in defeating (Soviet) Communism, the West was too presumptuous, too complacent. With the Cold War finally over, our ever-connected world had landed a model of democratic global governance we could all agree on. As Russia (at that juncture) had finally seen the light why would China not come on board?

That was certainly the collective Western view including Prime Minister David Cameron’s when he shared a pint in the Plough Pub, Buckinghamshire with President Xi back in 2015. It took China’s cover-up of the COVID outbreak for the world to seriously appreciate that China's intention of embracing capitalism and democratic reform as well as equal access to Chinese markets were a complete bluff.

Instead, China wielded its colossal, economic, technological and military heft to exploit the weakness of our dated global order. It is, arguably, the only nation today with a clear long-term grand strategy. One intent on pioneering global influence by luring other like-minded nations into its One Belt One Road programmes. The scale of which casts a long shadow over the new Global South.

Today domestic and global distractions hide the obvious. Our world is on a dangerous trajectory as the West’s threshold and indeed appetite for managing regional flashpoints is tested ever more frequently.

Beijing’s alternative global order vision involves divorcing trade from human rights, supporting leaders unfettered by free and fair elections and on entrenching surveillance technology which enhances state control over every aspect of life. No doubt this is what attracted Putin to pivot East instead of looking West and has helped Iran (thanks to massive oil deals) ensure Western sanctions did not sink the regime.

China’s quest is to be perceived as a peace-loving giant, championing the neglected parts of the world against Western dominance, quietly emphasising economic advancement and poverty alleviation over civil liberties and human rights. With over two thirds of the world subject to authoritarianism this will find an audience.

Look up. Our fragile global landscape is already splintering into competing spheres of influence. As the cyclical nature of history illustrates; agreed ‘global norms’ rarely last beyond a couple of generations. Enough time for the horrors of war to sadly be forgotten and for a challenger to emerge wanting to re-write those rules. Without a serious intervention our world will be at war again. Yes, World War Three – but not like One or Two. A world with many wars, conflicts and disputes much of which will take place in the grey zone or through proxies.

The question of "What should we do?" looms large. But similar to the 1930’s we lack the bandwidth to look three or four chess moves ahead. Moreover, in this era of global interdependence, economic and technological ties with China cannot be simply severed as some are calling for.

We require a grand strategy to upgrade our dated global order with modernised international institutions to hold errant nations to account. The difference between the last cold war and today’s is China’s reliance on international trade. This should be a starting point. Together, the G7 and EU represents over half the world’s GDP. That offers serious leverage in re-invigorating trade standards that support rather than by-pass our universal values. All sides need an off- ramp if war is to be averted. The goal should be to foster a global environment where cooperation and competition can coexist. China is not going away. And importantly, our differences are with Beijing and not the Chinese people.

We cannot deny this will be China’s century. The path forward is neither blind engagement nor complete decoupling. It requires a strategic approach that balances realpolitik with principled diplomacy. By harnessing smart power, the international community can navigate these turbulent waters, avoiding a descent into conflict and fostering a more stable, multipolar world order. The return of David Cameron, this time free from the Commons daily demands, provides Britain with an opportunity to continue levering the same soft power that has seen us lead Europe in supporting Ukraine and host summits on COP, AI, food security and most recently trade.

Kissinger recently remarked on China/ Western relations “Both sides have convinced themselves that the other represents a strategic danger,” he says. “We are on the path to great-power confrontation”. There is more statecraft be done.

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Wikipedia note on Tobias Ellwood: Tobias Martin Ellwood VR is a British Conservative Party politician and soldier who has been the Member of Parliament for Bournemouth East since 2005. He chaired the Defence Select Committee from 2020 to 2023, and was a Government Minister at the Ministry of Defence from 2017 to 2019.

Footnote from Rik:

Interesting that he had a similar military career to mine in some ways – he was commissioned into the R Green Jackets, I into the R Signals, ten years earlier. I avoided politics 😊

**Questions for us to consider for our December meeting:**

* What, if any, of Tobias’s article do we AGREE with? Evidence?
* What do we NOT agree with? Why? Evidence?
* As Tobias says: “What should we do”?
* What alternatives can we think of? Which are politically more or less likely?
* When he speaks of the “International Community”, who is he referring to, and who might be expected to take a leas or coordinate a response?
* What would be the best outcomes for the a) the planet b) the world population c) the UK?

Prepared by Rik for Southwell u3a Geopolitics Group

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