

From COVID War to Cold War: The New Three-Body Problem

Niall Ferguson

In Liu Cixin's extraordinary science fiction novel *The Three-Body Problem*, China recklessly creates, then ingeniously solves, an existential threat to humanity. During the chaos of Mao's Cultural Revolution, Ye Wenjie, an astrophysicist, discovers the possibility of amplifying radio waves by bouncing them off the sun and in this way beams a message to the universe. When, years later, she receives a response from the highly unstable and authoritarian planet Trisolaris, it takes the form of stark warning not to send further messages. Deeply disillusioned with humanity, she does so anyway, betraying the location of Earth to the Trisolarans, who are seeking a new planet because their own is subject to the chaotic gravitational forces of three suns (hence the book's title).

So misanthropic that she welcomes an alien invasion, Ye co-founds the Earth-Trisolaris Organization (ETO) as a kind of fifth column in partnership with a radical American environmentalist named Mike Evans. Yet their conspiracy to help the Trisolarans conquer Earth and eradicate humankind is ingeniously foiled by the dynamic duo of Wang Miao, a nanotechnology professor, and Shi Qiang, a coarse but canny Beijing cop.

The nonfictional threat to humanity we confront today is not, of course, an alien invasion. The coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 does not come from outer space, though it shares with the Trisolarans an impulse to colonize us. The fact, however, is that the first case of COVID-19—the disease the virus causes—was in China, just as the first

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messages to Trisolaris were sent from China. Rather as in *The Three-Body Problem*, the Chinese Communist Party caused this disaster—first by covering up how dangerous the new virus SARS-CoV-2 was, then by delaying the measures that might have prevented its worldwide spread. Yet now—again, as in Liu Cixin’s novel—China wants to claim the credit for saving the world from it. Liberally exporting testing kits and facemasks, the Chinese government has sought to snatch victory from the jaws of a defeat it inflicted.

Not only that, but the deputy director of the Chinese Foreign Ministry’s Information Department has gone so far as to endorse a conspiracy theory that the coronavirus originated in the United States. On March 12, Zhao Lijian tweeted: “It might be [the] U.S. army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan.” Zhao also retweeted a claim that an American team had brought the virus with them when they participated in the World Military Games in Wuhan last October.

It was already obvious early last year that a new Cold War—between the United States and China—had begun. What started out in 2018 as a trade war—a tit for tat over tariffs while the two sides argued about the American trade deficit and Chinese intellectual property theft—had rapidly metamorphosed into a technology war over the global dominance of the Chinese company Huawei in 5G network telecommunications; an ideological confrontation in response to the treatment of the Uighur minority in China’s Xinjiang region and the pro-democracy protesters in Hong Kong; and an escalation of old frictions over Taiwan and the South China Sea. Henry Kissinger himself acknowledged last November that we are “in the foothills of a Cold War.”

The COVID-19 pandemic has merely intensified Cold War II, at the same time revealing its existence to those who last year doubted it was happening. (Chinese scholars such as Yao Yang now openly discuss it.) It is therefore to state the obvious that China will be the biggest geopolitical challenge facing the next president, whoever is sworn in next January. In the United States, public sentiment toward China has become more hawkish. Armed with John Bolton’s new memoir, Joe Biden’s campaign can now claim that their man would be tougher toward Xi Jinping than Donald Trump has been. Commentators (and there are many) who doubt the capacity of the United States to reinvigorate and reassert itself imply that this is a Cold War the Communist power can win. Those who believe in historical cycles are already writing the obituary for a dollar-dominated world.

Yet it would be a mistake to focus an essay such as this exclusively on the U.S.-China relationship. As Henry Kissinger has argued, the pandemic “will forever

alter the world order.” But how exactly? One answer is that COVID-19 has reminded many countries of the benefits of self-reliance. When larger entities—not only China, but also the European Union and the United States—stumbled, it was smaller, nimbler polities—such as Taiwan, South Korea and Israel—that most effectively dealt with the new plague. But some second-tier great powers—notably Germany and Japan—have also done well, minimizing infections and deaths without inflicting protracted “lockdowns” on their economies.

In Cold War I, there was a significant nonaligned movement, the leading members of which were Yugoslavia, India, Egypt, Ghana and Indonesia. For most West Europeans and many East and Southeast Asians, nonalignment was not an attractive option. But that was because the choice between Washington and Moscow was a fairly easy one—unless the Red Army tanks were rolling into a country’s capital city. Today, the choice between Washington and Beijing looks to many Europeans like a choice between a frying pan and a fire. According to one recent survey of German opinion, “The public is leaning toward a position of equidistance between Washington and Beijing.”

Cold Wars are usually regarded as bipolar; in truth they are always three-body problems, with two superpower alliance networks and a third nonaligned network in between. The biggest problem facing the president of the United States today, and for years to come, is that many erstwhile American allies are seriously contemplating nonalignment. And without those allies, Washington may well find this Second Cold War to be unwinnable.