Commentary
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What Kind of Cold War Do You Want?

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Summary

The future is about the choices that countries make, but today's structural reality restricts these choices enormously and sometimes streamlines them beyond control.

Last month, in a commentary called "What kind of Cold War do you want?", the ELN's Director, Sir Adam Thomson, wrote that "although it may now be hard to escape a cold war, especially between Russia and the West, countries can still make real choices that affect the course of the confrontation."

Sir Adam's piece launches a discussion that needs to be had, and the sooner the better. While I fully subscribe to Sir Adam's argument, it is important to stress one point that carries significant implications for this discussion.

That "the world faces a protracted period of acute, militarised, strategic confrontation", as Sir Adam put it, is a profoundly structural problem. It results from tectonic shifts in the international system, which have been undermining the pillars of the post-Cold War order for over a decade. Given where we are now, the all-pervading security dilemma has become a central driver of this accelerating transformation. These are obvious observations, but analysts and practitioners often seem not to keep in mind their specific implications, which might prevent us from having a cold war we want:

1. The future is indeed about the choices that countries make, but today's structural reality restricts these choices enormously and sometimes streamlines them beyond control. If we dismiss this, we will see ill will even where it doesn't exist, which will distort our own choices.
2. The tougher the geopolitical confrontation, the fewer the number of states whose choices along Sir Adam's four axes matter and who can even make such choices. For most small and medium-sized states, security policy is increasingly about mere survival as their margin of error is too minuscule to consider grander questions, even though their leaders may think otherwise.

3. Stuck with a security dilemma, it does not help to focus too much on individual decision-makers, be it Putin, Xi or Biden. The structural problem requires structurally-informed choices. Otherwise, we will again prove Robert Jervis right: “the central theme of international relations is not evil, but tragedy”.

Read other ELN Network reflections on Adam Thomson’s commentary here

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