

Sharing our fear can make peace

envisaging military cooperation to avoid Mutually Assured Starvation

Modern political problems stem from a single source. *A lifestyle which permits 9 billion people to live in comfort does not yet exist.* Every political step which does not resolve this fundamental resource-bounds issue will simply solve one problem and run into another later. Environmental policy shows up as foreign policy shows up as defence shows up as social policy in an endless tangle. Governments which coerce their populations into lower resource use lifestyles are unstable as culture and vested interest collude to push consumption up.

The primary actors in Mutually Assured Destruction were *rational elites* who, for example, refused to fire Soviet missiles when technical problems issued nuclear launch orders. The *implicit peace agreement* established by second strike was the foundation of rational hope.

Massive decentralized overconsumption concentrates terrible political problems in the centres of governance by generating an impossible popular mandate: *“get us what we think we need, even if it costs first peace, and then the world.”* Those who will not serve those overconsumption agendas are not given power. Even China buys stability with manifestly unsustainable growth. People are irrational.

The *Hail Mary pass* is new technology - fusion reactors, genetically engineered food, ultra-cheap plastic solar panels - which let us to live something like the two-car lifestyle, but on a nine billion person world without resource overconsumption. These technologies are reasonable to expect in the future, requiring no obvious miracles. Our progress is slowed by the glacial change of human culture - modern America reprises the Darwin vs. Wilberforce (1860). Europe lives under the shadow of Marx (d1883) decades after the last Marxist nations have fallen into mass murder or chaos. But the technical fix is still possible.

Rationality is rare, expensive to create, and offensive to popular belief. We cannot solve the *collective action problem* without rational actors and agreement on equilibria like *avoid mutually assured destruction*.

Ten years ago I realized that one of the few rational sites in politics was the long range thinking being done by developed world militaries. The equilibrium propagated by (for example) the United States Energy Security Council appears sane: good engineering like energy efficiency and renewable power applied as an alternative to resource conflicts. However, the social consensus required to back such initiatives down to the point of rewriting building codes and raising energy prices requires popular assent in a way that *let's not go to nuclear war did not because rational elites entirely controlled the nuclear capability*.

Our rational elites cannot save us now because our populations are dreaming of the past, not the future. Those planning for a realistic future lack the political support to deliver the future we deserve.

Quiet political realism about a nine billion person world could have the same stabilizing effect that mutually assured destruction did. Rational military elites could form a shared understanding like MAD, but about end-game resource conflicts and the impact of given technological equilibria such as new solar panels or biotech foods on those futures. MAD was simple enough that the mass of voters could understand it. 2050 technological projections about the global scenario based on educated guesswork have unknowns (fusion?) larger than the knowns, but many free us from resource constraints so can be ignored.

A fearless sharing of likely outcomes under a handful of technological base scenarios (fusion, life extension, space travel) could produce the same kind of steering cooperation that prevented the Cold War becoming a Hot War. In short, even if we accept nation state rivalry as a future fact, technological powers may share common interests in tilting the board towards mutual prosperity by sharing a coherent set of base scenarios and neutral R&D. Early diplomacy around resource conflict is possible, but leaving it to the climate circus is asking for disaster. The alignment of interests required to face resource constraints is identical to the alignment of interests that prevented MAD, but it requires the rational actors that only the military can provide to do the thinking, policy making and negotiating around avoiding a conflict in which all sides eventually lose, as constraint causes conflict which causes constraint down an avoidable spiral of decline.

Vinay Gupta, 2012