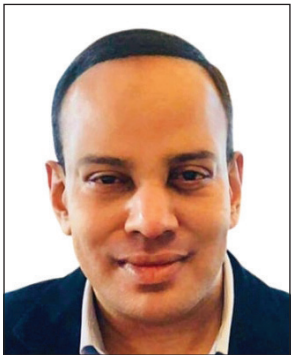


ASIAN VIEWPOINT

The AI counter-revolution

BY DERWIN PEREIRA



Beware of AI. Artificial intelligence may be considered revolutionary technology, but technology does not make revolutions: its use does — or does not. The uses of AI are presently and potentially so dangerous that this technology can only be called counter-revolutionary.

It is counter-revolutionary because, economically, it will move people back in time by depriving them of customary protections at work; socially, it will rob people of what makes them human in the first place — the right of free communication between empowered individuals who own their identities at least; and geopolitically, it is likely to bifurcate the world digitally into America-led and China-led technological spheres.

Even at the personal level, AI can be addictive. A recent study by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology finds that a growing number of Americans are being drawn to AI chatbots for emotional support, companionship and even romance. These digital relationships reveal the extent to which technological dependency is eroding human agency.

Indeed, AI represents a transformative moment in human history. *Encyclopaedia Britannica* defines AI as “the ability of a digital computer or computer-controlled robot to perform tasks commonly associated with intelligent beings. The term is frequently applied to the project of developing systems endowed with the intellectual processes characteristic of humans, such as the ability to reason, discover meaning, generalise or learn from experience”. Although “there are as yet no programs that can match full human flexibility over wider domains or in tasks requiring much everyday knowledge”, “some programs have attained the performance levels of human experts and professionals in executing certain specific tasks”.

Here, I speak of Generative AI, which, unlike traditional AI, produces new outputs in response to prompts. This secular miracle involves massive datasets and uses high-level algorithms to manufacture content that can resemble human-created work. This is what makes AI so destructive today: its ability to clone human imagination in the service of prompts that serve vested interests.

Admittedly, all technological



Whoever wins Cold War 2.0 will contribute to counter-revolution, thanks to Generative Artificial Intelligence

evolution has occurred for two reasons: to reduce the routine tasks that eat into humans’ productive time, or to increase the quantitative and qualitative output achieved during that time. From the invention of the wheel to the introduction of the printing press and thenceforth, technology has added value to human time and therefore to human life. In the process, industry has progressed through creative destruction, or the personally painful replacement of one period of economic development by its more efficient successor.

For example, the widespread introduction of machines during the European Industrial Revolution deprived many workers of a living. That led to the famous Luddite riots by English textile workers in the early 19th century against the use of automated machinery that would invade their jobs and livelihoods. The Luddites destroyed industrial machines in an act of violent collective bargaining to pressure employers and the government into addressing their grievances. They failed to stop the progress of industrialisation.

Similarly, it is futile to try and stop the advance of AI. Markets and states, the two most powerful forces in society, are the prime movers behind the AI counter-revolution. They fund AI research and legitimate the influence of its results on human existence. Citizens must live in a world created for them by markets and states. Of course, they can and do question the direction of scientific and technological development, but it is finally the financial and legal architecture of society that decides which way it will move forward. It is clear from the global embrace of AI that markets and states have decided that the technology points to the future. Luddite activism will be of no use.

What matters, nevertheless, is knowledge of what is at stake. Generative AI today operates on a different scale altogether from the way in which machines destroyed the world of pre-industrial Europe. It threatens the entire global edifice of work that has been created over the generations following the two World Wars of the last century. The profound blessings of rewarding work are seen in the long peace that is associated with the years since 1945, the Cold War notwithstanding. AI will challenge — successfully, I believe, and I fear — that architecture of work.

This is why profession after profession is going on the defensive. The question uppermost in many minds is: Will AI take not only my job but the very field in which my job exists? Surgeons, engineers, accountants, and many, many others are worrying about whether AI will invade and colonise their fields. Yes, automation has always held out that threat, but AI is automation with unknown characteristics.

Thus, the Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative reporter and author Gary Rivlin writes in a recent article in *Time* magazine: “Be an electrician, I tell my teenage sons. Be a plumber. Artificial intelligence is coming for virtually every job category, but it will be a long time before machines are crawling under sinks or threading wires through walls. The view from the frontlines of AI is sobering. Two-plus years spent embedded in this world have left me feeling petrified by the sweeping changes about to strike the global labour market. An economic earthquake is coming that will permanently alter the landscape of human work — yet few in power are recognising what’s happening, let alone doing anything about it.”

To be fair, some countries are better than others in recognising

the challenges of AI and preparing their citizens to meet them. However, it appears inescapable to me that economic dislocation will produce social disruption. True, that has happened since the advent of industrial technology, but this time, the scale is different: It covers the length and breadth of a world united by globalisation and not just a small part of Europe, itself a small part of the world, where the Industrial Revolution first appeared. The old economic adage — adjust or perish — will apply with intercontinental fury, carrying the evolutionary DNA of Social Darwinism into workplaces and homes everywhere like a tornado that strikes the world at one single go.

Unless, of course, AI-centric economic growth turns into a bubble. One AI sceptic is the professional market analyst Julien Garran, who has predicted that humans are amid “the biggest and most dangerous bubble the world has ever seen”. He argues that the “misallocation” of capital in the US makes the latest disorder 17 times bigger than the dot-com bubble and four times bigger than the 2008 real-estate bubble. Fundamentally, he thinks that AI is “the antithesis of socio-economic progress”.

Let us see. The economic system is adept at living with burst bubbles. When the balloons burst at a birthday party, the children cry, but the adults just get new balloons. The children smile and play with the new toys till those, too, burst. Then the party ends. It is time for school the next day. Call that the unseen hand of the market. It carries flowers with a knife hidden inside. The world stoops down to smell the delightful fragrance of the future. The nose draws the breast closer to the knife. Even closer. And closer. That scene would make for a nice AI-generated image.

The spectre of 2.0

The end of a market bubble (or even a market cycle) is one thing. The end of a geopolitical bubble is another, greater thing.

Hostile countries have always used technology against one another. It stands to reason then that AI, the latest of technological advances, will fuel competition, rivalry and ultimately conflict between nations.

Mark Esposito of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard sounds a blunt warning. “Technology has become a centrepiece of geopolitical power struggles, with nations increasingly wary of relying on foreign tech for critical systems. Strategic competition over AI is marked by rising trade barriers, competing AI ambitions and a scramble to secure control over data and its infrastructure,” he writes. Noting how America and China are in an AI-inspired phase of strategic competition, he adds: “International relations in 2025 are defined as much by geotechnology disputes as by traditional geopolitics, with global forums and alliances being reshaped by debates over digital dominance.”

How serious is this? Very serious, indeed. “A striking feature of this landscape is the politicisation of data itself,” he writes. “As AI systems grow more powerful, the data they rely on has turned into a strategic asset. Cross-border data flows that once seemed routine now face stricter oversight or outright restrictions under the banner of ‘digital sovereignty’.” And why not, because a new digital Cold War cannot but result when two contending superpowers treat AI as “a defining element of national power” and marshal “state resources to secure it”.

I find these words alarming because all this is occurring in a globalised world where America and China are supposed to be working within a single geopolitical field unified by market economics. The US and the Soviet Union were ideological adversaries that sought to bring down each other’s political economies and the world systems that they tried to sustain. Technology was obviously a weapon then, sharp at its strategic edges. It is worrying that AI should have recreated that world today between two of the world’s most powerful nations, when they both work within the ambit of market economics and a degree of human freedom in an unfree world.

The American victory in Cold War 1.0 was revolutionary. Whoever wins Cold War 2.0 will contribute to counter-revolution, thanks to Generative Artificial Intelligence.

O dear! I thought that humans won wars. ■

The writer is Founder and CEO of Pereira International, a Singapore-based political and strategic consultancy. An award-winning journalist and an alumnus of the London School of Economics and Political Science and Harvard University, he is also a member of the Board of International Councilors at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington DC. This article reflects the writer’s personal views.