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Book review *The Age of Unpeace: How Connectivity Causes Conflict* by Mark Leonard, Bantam Press, 2021, 240 pages

The book *The Age of Unpeace: How Connectivity Causes Conflict* by Mark Leonard, published in 2021, outlines one major thought: the context that offered us more connection, is the same that drove us apart, into an era of “unwar” and “unpeace”. As the author stresses, in this current state, connections that bound the world together are also driving it apart (p.11), leading to a blurred distinction between the notion of war or peace, while connections between people and countries are weaponized in various ways (p. 8).

The book is structured around three parts revolving around the ideas that connectivity gave people the “opportunity for conflict” (Part 1 – The Opportunity); “reasons to fight each other” (Part 2 – The reasons) and “a lot of weapons with which to inflict harm” (Part 3 – Weapons and Warriors) (p. 20). In view of his valuable experience as the co-founder and director of the European Council on Foreign Relations think-tank, the author recounts throughout the book various stories and observations about world leaders, reasoning behind major political or economic decisions, global actors dynamics such as European Union, China, USA, Russia or Turkey, and the arsenal of weapons of this new type of conflict. All mentioned above offer an insightful approach on geopolitics trends and how over the past few decades, China, USA and Europe competed for hegemony by exploiting the connectivity of our world.

Leonard talks extensively about China’s growing role in an interconnected world, while also emphasizing the threat behind China and America’s “deadly journey that sees connectivity lead to comparison, which in turn increases competition and conflict” (p. 78). One important thought that needs to be pointed out for the area of international relations is that China’s “most innovative geo-economic tool has been infrastructure, physical, virtual and institutional” by using connectivity “more frequently, more assertively, and in a more diverse fashion than ever before” (p. 229). In the same line, the author points how differently global powers see the world. For example, where Washington sees “hubs in the network map – exploring where it can use them for surveillance or sanctions”, Beijing sees “ties” and explores how “it can connect other countries to its market and use these infrastructure links to bind them into a Chinese sphere of influence”. On the same topic, Brussels sees “individual nodes” and “thinks about what norms and rules will best serve the interest of European consumers and companies” (pp. 243-244).

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Leonard outlined an important and timely trend, “in this world of connected identity politics the goal is no longer to persuade people to change their minds but rather to identify people who agree with you already and to frame the debate in a way that ensures you have a majority” (p. 115). In the “age of unpeace”, power is exercised through “control over flows of ideas, people, goods, money and data, and via the connections they establish” (p. 144). Moreover, even international law has been turned into a weapon, “as rival states manipulate it to achieve political goals rather than using it to limit their confrontations” (p. 191). Apart from weaponizing the infrastructure in the traditional economy, “the internet has been the front line of the new tech wars”, and we witnessed how “in just a few years the internet has gone from being seen as the ultimate unifier of a global village to being seen as ‘the perfect weapon’” (p. 167).

As the author states, to understand the age of „unpeace” properly we need to look deeper at the battlegrounds of the twenty-first century and “explore the anatomy of unpeace”. Key-battlegrounds now involve the Balkans and Africa; the first one being the spot where “old empires meet – Russia, China, Turkey, Europe – in a battle for hearts and minds” (p. 246). The second is not only the place “to plunder natural resources”, but also the place “to tap into the fastest growing economies and markets (p. 247).

It is much appreciated that Leonard not only identifies the problem, but also proposes a “Manifesto” that would allow us to better understand the issue of connectivity and approach it consequently. Among proposed measures, the author advised relevant actors to “establish healthy boundaries” and “create enough distance to make people feel safe and in control” (p. 257). In this sense, states are advised to establish “recognized boundaries to their own behaviour”, which means that “humankind has to learn to govern the technology it has created” (p. 261). As such, it is crucial to work hard to get “real consent for contact between peoples and nations” (p. 265). This means that technology companies should be “a subject to real democratic control” (p. 265), and that we have to remain realistic about what we can control to avoid utopic scenarios. Overall, the book represents an insightful perspective on the issue of world connectivity, actors that have benefited from it, and vulnerable spots that were revealed in the last decade. The book may likely be of interest both to international relations, political science or public relations experts, as well as to the general public interested in the ongoing global trends, the premises that are at the core of these trends and possible solutions to deal with the circumstances of world connectivity.