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Back to the Confrontation

By Makio Miyagawa

SYNOPSIS

The world has plunged into a new confrontation, which is distinctive from the Cold War confrontation between the US and the USSR. With its frontline having shifted from Europe to East Asia, the new key confrontation is now between the US and China, despite growing economic interdependence and the development of international organisations. Asia requires new doctrines and mindsets to adapt to this new turbulent strategic environment to safeguard the fruits of its development.

COMMENTARY

The world has entered a new confrontation. What is certain is that this new strategic environment would be neither more stable nor more peaceful, but it is uncertain whether it would be more prosperous.

The four score years after World War II can be divided into three distinctive periods. The first was the forty-two-years of the Cold War from 1947 to 1989, marked by the confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union. The second was the period of global cooperation from the end of the Cold War in 1989 to the beginning of the new confrontation around 2017, this time between the US and China.

In retrospect, the arrival of the global cooperation period following the collapse of the Berlin Wall in the autumn of 1989 brought joy and relief to the world, especially to Europe, long being the front line of the confrontation. The threat of nuclear war seemed to have passed into historical oblivion, although the relief felt was less certain. This period of relief ended several years ago, when the world was brought back to a new confrontation, the beginning of the third period.

Distinctive Features of the New Confrontation Age

The new confrontation has the following distinctive features in comparison with those seen in the US-USSR Cold War.

First, there is no guarantee whatsoever, at this stage, that the new confrontation shall remain a cold confrontation till its end or that it could develop into a hot war.

Second, the central axis of confrontation is not the re-emergence of the US-Russia confrontation but has now erupted between the US and China.

Third, as a result, the front line of the confrontation has shifted from the European continent to our region, i.e., the Far East and the Western Pacific.

Fourth, during the Cold War, the East and West camps did not mutually engage much in economic transactions, but the two camps in the new confrontation are already deeply interdependent economically, and a rupture of this relationship would hurt the economies of both. While the growing economic interdependence could act as a brake to mitigate the confrontation, reducing or severing it could constitute effective measures of economic coercion or sanctions. Economic interdependence could, therefore, act as a double-edged sword, alleviating or exacerbating the conflict. As a result, economic security would surface as effective means of deterrence. Hence, communications and collaborations between the military and civilians as well as cooperation between the government and industry will become increasingly essential.

Fifth, strategic space has rapidly expanded from land, sea, and air to outer space and crept into cyberspace. Because outer space has no borders, it is free for the activities of every nation. Ground observations from space are not subject to the constraints of national sovereignty based on national borders. This newly emerging strategic environment could, therefore, have a deterrent effect on the military movements of all nations.

Sixth, the emergence of unmanned weaponry has blurred the distinction between peacetime and wartime, making international rules ambiguous in their application. Further, the distinction between offence and defence has almost disappeared, particularly in cyberspace. Japan has long based its national security policy solely on defence and never on offence, but this posture may no longer remain meaningful.

Seventh, as theorised by a Russian military officer, Gerasimov, major powers around the world have already moved to prepare for “hybrid warfare”. As a result, all policy factors that make up our society, including politics, diplomacy, and the economy, could be weaponised. Public and private sector assets, including transportation networks, power grids, communications networks, land, data, and cyberspace, could be mobilised for war purposes.

Eighth, a loosely knit grouping of developing countries known as the Third World or the Non-Aligned countries, which existed during the Cold War, stayed rather independent from the two conflicting blocs. Now, however, major developing countries are inclined to join or stand closer to BRICS countries and adopt a multipolar view of values, which is mainly advocated by China.

The World Has Crossed the Rubicon

The ongoing war in Ukraine is symbolic, demonstrating that conflicts have returned to our world. International organisations have become dysfunctional, as represented by the ineffectiveness of the United Nations Security Council, the key organisation responsible for ensuring international peace and security.

One of the permanent members of the Security Council, expected to bear primary responsibility for international peace and security, is now itself committing serious violations of international law and destroying peace by attacking a non-nuclear neighbouring state. The UN's institutional capacity to prevent armed conflicts has immensely weakened and may cease to function.

Another permanent member of the Security Council has been attempting to unilaterally change the status quo in the South China Sea, ignoring the rulings of the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea and engaging in physical clashes with patrolling vessels of the coastal states. It is concerning that this very member has declared unlimited cooperation with Russia.

In this new era of conflict, nations are re-examining and reaffirming the effectiveness of the "balance of power" theory, a method of creating and maintaining peace and security theorised among European powers in the 19th century. Critics of this system have argued that it would only create an "accidental peace" by the fortuitous formation of alliances.

However, in an era when international collective security systems have become weakened, having failed to bring about peace and security, the pursuit of peacebuilding based on the balance of power theory may also be realistic and practical, albeit imperfect or partial. One cannot help but appreciate that this approach has a certain peace-building and peacekeeping dynamism at work.

The key to peacebuilding through a balance-of-power approach is, first, to strengthen one's own defence capabilities and, if possible, to form a group of friendly countries that can cooperate to maintain or restore peace in the event of a threat or a breach of the peace. Suppose a group of nations capable of exercising the right of collective self-defence can form an alliance or loose security cooperation, peace could be restored and/or secured even more effectively than countering single-handedly.

New Doctrines and Mindsets Required

In the world, moving rapidly towards an era of confrontation, five elements seem to indicate strategic importance.

First, nations, particularly the major powers, will move swiftly to create a new global order. In this process, the world could be divided into those nations which would lead the creation of the new order and those which must accept the created order. It is necessary for nations in Asia to actively participate in the process of building a new global order so as not to undermine the interests of Asia.

Second, although US leadership is beginning to wane, it remains as a unique country

that could effectively influence global and regional order, including in wars in Ukraine and in the Middle East. Countries, especially those on the front line of confrontation, will continue to be bound to seek ways to leverage the power of the US even if they are compelled and inclined to prepare for its potential loss of will or capacity to address, single-handedly or collectively, the peace and security in the region or in the world.

Third, regarding the worrisome dysfunction of the UN collective security system, the world now faces a golden opportunity to reform the UN system to build and re-build a far more effective system for ensuring international peace and security. This reform is long overdue. This path has repeatedly been thwarted until today by the staunch oppositions, especially from a few permanent members of the Security Council. Should the nations of the world fail to seize this opportunity to reform the United Nations, the world would risk slipping back into an era of exploring peace and security based solely on a precarious theory of the balance of power.

Fourth, strengthening economic, political, and military cooperation among Indo-Pacific nations is essential to maintaining the region's stability and prosperity in the long term, especially at a time when international institutions have become far less functional. The security system in East Asia has been described as a hub and spoke system, with the United States acting as the hub and connected to many Asian countries through spokes. This system has not fundamentally changed, nor is there at this moment any solid system to replace it. On the other hand, new security arrangements involving several countries, now described as "minilateral", are beginning to emerge, such as Quad, AUKUS, and the US-Japan-Philippines trilateral. These trends have arisen out of natural necessity and inevitability. The peace and security of East Asia in future will be guaranteed through the overlapping of various old and new mechanisms. Our creativity and wisdom shall be crucial.

Lastly, a new era of confrontation might lead ASEAN to the brink of division. There is now a risk that a new global confrontation and polarisation could push ASEAN, hitherto well integrated and solidified since the end of the Cold War, to the brink of division in Southeast Asia. This would not be in the interest of any country in Asia. For the sake of guiding the region to stability, efforts should become required to strengthen solidarity of ASEAN bond through region-bound integration programmes, such as energy grids, data centre networks, or decarbonisation projects.

Ambassador Makio Miyagawa is an Adjunct Senior Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. He previously served in Japan's foreign policy makings with Europe, the US, Russia, Asia, ASEAN, and the Middle East; led negotiations on Trade, Nuclear Disarmament, and Climate Change; and was assigned as a Special Advisor on National Security. He received a D.Phil. on economic sanctions from Oxford University and a B.Sc. in Aeronautical and Spacecraft Engineering from Tokyo University. Ambassador Miyagawa was awarded L'Ordre National du Mérite au grade de Commandeur from France.
