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No. 112/2014 dated 11 June 2014

A New Cold War?

By Barry Desker

Synopsis

The growing tensions around the world, including in East and Southeast Asia, are reminiscent of the old power play between the great powers. Are we headed towards a new Cold War?

Commentary

THE ANNUAL Shangri-La Dialogue held in Singapore at the end of May saw sharp exchanges pitting delegates from the United States and Japan against those from China over the rival claims of Japan and China in the East China Sea. Vietnamese, Philippine and American participants also criticised China's extensive claims in the South China Sea.

Meanwhile, European representatives clashed with Russian delegates on the impact of Russia's annexation of the Crimea and Moscow's support for breakaway groups in eastern Ukraine. The mood was confrontational, especially in smaller informal discussions.

Like the old Cold War

The atmosphere reminded me of debates on regional and global issues in the early 1980s, when I served as a Singapore diplomat at the United Nations. The rhetoric was that of the Cold War and raised the question whether the world was headed for a new cold war, or even the outbreak of hostilities.

Singapore is not a party to any of the territorial claims, and has sought to expand its ties with all the key states. Nevertheless, our role as a hub of globalisation with trading and economic interests globally necessitates that Singapore remains alert to these developments. Like most people around the world, Singaporeans presume that policymakers can manage conflicts and will avoid going beyond the brink when confrontations occur.

But there may be a misplaced sense that the global institutions established since the Second World War can handle these conflicts. Singapore may be the victim of over-confidence. Could Asia in 2014 be facing a challenge similar to Europe in 1914?

In 1914, most governments in Europe thought that the conflict in the Balkans could be managed and that the peace among the major powers that had lasted since the defeat of Napoleon in 1815 would continue. It was an age of globalisation, with rapid economic growth transforming the lives of many in Europe and America. Instant telegraph communications, efficient rail and sea links and more open economies resulted in greater interdependence.

Many observers felt that the spectre of war had been banished as the peoples of Europe were increasingly mobile and inter-connected. Even when war did break out after the assassination of the Crown Prince of Austria-Hungary in Sarajevo, governments expected a short, swift war.

Strategic convergence between Russia and China

No one thought that the next four years would see trench warfare, where thousands died to defend or seize inconsequential pockets of territory. Male populations throughout Europe were decimated, states were impoverished and long-established regimes were overthrown.

By the end of 1918, the Russian, German and Austro-Hungarian empires had collapsed, the victorious Allied powers faced the Soviet Union. The United States also emerged unchallenged as the pre-eminent global power, even though domestic opinion in America favoured a retreat from conflicts outside America's sphere of influence in its hemisphere.

The 1917 Russian Revolution also influenced intellectuals and workers around the world with the power of an idea - the belief that proletarian revolution represented the wave of the future, whose triumph in China in 1949 led to the emergence of the People's Republic of China. Although this idea is discredited today, it played a role in the key conflicts and political developments in the 20th century until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989.

Today's rising China has been the beneficiary of more than three decades of economic growth which has transformed the country.

While China strenuously insists that it does not wish to exercise hegemony, and that it seeks a peaceful rise, power transitions have generally resulted in conflict between the dominant power and the rising power.

The successful conclusion of the territorial boundary negotiations between China and Russia, growing trade, energy and investment links between the two countries and a shared perception that they are being targeted by the resurgent West have led to an increasing alignment between these two powers. This has occurred even as China's key economic linkages today are with the West and states in its immediate neighbourhood which also have strong links with the West.

Greatest threat: East China Sea

The greatest threat is posed by competing territorial claims in the East China Sea, especially between China and Japan. This is because they are wrapped in a larger dispute over Japan's lack of contrition for its role in the Second World War. There is also the risk of a wider conflict here because of American support for its alliance partner Japan. Strong economic ties should not lead us to discount the dangers posed by increasing security competition.

Any Chinese decision to unilaterally enforce its jurisdiction over its extensive claims in the South China Sea, however, will primarily be challenged by relatively weak Southeast Asian states. While ASEAN has called for the speedy conclusion of the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea, the claimants, including China, have been changing the facts on the ground by occupying land features, reclaiming reefs and undertaking drilling for oil and gas in disputed waters.

Singapore has no direct interest in these competing claims. However, as a sea and air hub, freedom of navigation and overflight are crucial. Singapore's interests lie in supporting the peaceful settlement of these disputes through international legal tribunals, just as Malaysia and Singapore did in the case of Pedra Branca.

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