

The emerging age of ambiguity in the global order

The US and China will remain at the heart of a fluid international order, one in which the complexities of interdependence will make it increasingly difficult to neatly classify relationships as 'friend' or 'foe'.



Bilahari Kausikan

Looking around the world today, I cannot but conclude that we have seen this movie before.

The cast of characters and locations may have changed. But whether we look at the war in Ukraine, or US-China strategic rivalry, or aggressive Chinese behaviour in the East and South China seas and the Himalayas, or the consequent stresses on globalisation and the risks of a world recession, these are not new plots. They are new variants of old plots within established patterns of state behaviour.

A few years ago, there was a slew of articles and statements riffing on some variation of the theme of "the return of great power competition". Return? When did it ever go away?

Competition is an inherent characteristic of relations between sovereign states. After the Cold War ended, this fundamental reality of international relations was masked by the overwhelming dominance of the US and its allies. American dominance made it seem as if only one conception of international order was left standing and even emboldened some to claim that history itself had ended.

In that extreme form, the delusion did not last very long. But a pale version still lingers in the idea that certain values are – or ought to be – universal. That idea does not bear close examination but can do immense damage.

The conflict between the West and Russia over Ukraine that led to the annexation of Crimea and the present war arose precisely because of differences of values, or interests, which comes to the same thing, because values are interests. Every country has its own values which are still interests to them even if you find them abhorrent. You will have to deal with them, whether by diplomacy or deterrence.

A parallel illusion was the idea that as China reformed and opened up economically, its political system would – if not exactly converge with Western democracies – at least move in a relatively more politically open direction. We owe President Xi Jinping a vote of thanks for making it clear to all except the terminally naive that the purpose of reform in a Leninist system is always and only to strengthen and entrench the power of the vanguard party.

We are now returning to a more historically normal period where competition and rivalry between the major powers is the primary structural reality of international relations; where international order is again going to be contested; and the possibility of war between major powers again looms over international relations.

I stress major powers. War and other forms of state-sponsored

violence have been a constant reality for many in the Global South. The Ukraine war is unique only because it is occurring in the heart of Europe – or to put things bluntly, because white people are killing each other – and because nuclear weapon states and permanent members of the UN Security Council are engaged.

Dangerous as it undoubtedly is and egregious as Russia's violation of some of the most fundamental principles of international conduct has been, the war in Ukraine that has pitted a re-energised West against Russia is a second-order issue in global geopolitics. Ukraine has become an unwitting proxy in the larger and more strategically important contest between the US and China.

Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin has said that the US wants to use the war in Ukraine to weaken Russia so that it cannot carry out another invasion. Left unsaid but clear enough is that this is meant as an object lesson for China.

What Mr Xi and Russian President Vladimir Putin have in common – the foundation of their "partnership with no limits" – is their contempt for the West, which they regard as at least effete if not in irreversible and absolute decline. I do not know if the unexpectedly swift, cohesive and resolute Western response has really changed Mr Xi's view of the West. But China's partnership with Russia has certainly placed Beijing in a very awkward position. It is a serious additional complication at a time when China is already facing many complicated internal and external issues.

Nobody is ever going to shun China. But as long as Beijing cannot bring itself to directly criticise the Russian invasion, it will be difficult for China to substantively improve relations with Europe to temper or balance its strategic competition with the US.

Beijing making anodyne statements about the need for negotiations and expressing concerns about the nuclear risks are not going to make a real difference. Nor will cultivating relations with the Global South. But China cannot risk a break with Russia because it has no other partner anywhere in the world of comparable strategic weight that shares its distrust of the American-led international order.

India or Vietnam or Indonesia or any country that in its own interest has taken a nuanced position on Ukraine is not going to throw its weight against the US

and Europe, because acting in your own interest is not the same thing as siding with Russia. Similarly, taking a strong stand against the invasion in your own interest – as Singapore has done – is not the same thing as siding with the West.

Unless the war takes a decisive turn in Russia's favour – which does not seem likely – China and Russia are trapped in an unenviable geopolitical position. It follows that there is no strong incentive for the US to seek any quick or permanent negotiated settlement and those in Europe that may have an incentive to seek a quick and permanent settlement are incapable of dealing with Russia without the US and cannot act independently.

The most probable scenario is a prolonged war that will eventually taper off into a frozen conflict.

LIMITS TO DECOUPLING

Whatever their concerns about Chinese behaviour, even the closest American ally is never going to cut itself off from China. And few if any Western companies are ever going to entirely renounce the Chinese market.

For its part, whatever successes China may have in its R&D efforts – and we should not underestimate China – for the foreseeable future, Beijing has no real alternative to the Global West for the critical enabling technologies it needs to put the results of its R&D to practical use.

Domestic household consumption relies on confidence and much better social safety nets to free household spending. It will take some time to restore confidence after China's response to the pandemic and chaotic exit from it. It will take even more time to establish adequate social security nets in a country of China's size and uneven development. The Chinese slogan of "dual circulation" acknowledges China's inability to separate itself from the world.

THE PROBLEM WITH THE U.S.

The biggest concerns about the US centre on its domestic politics.

Consider this: A vain, egocentric – to the point of being narcissistic – fear-mongering demagogue runs for president of the US, and wins! Sound familiar? Well, I am not describing Mr Donald Trump. I am describing the basic premise of a 1935 novel entitled *It Can't Happen Here* by the great American writer Sinclair Lewis, who based his plot on the political career of a real-life Louisiana politician, Mr Huey

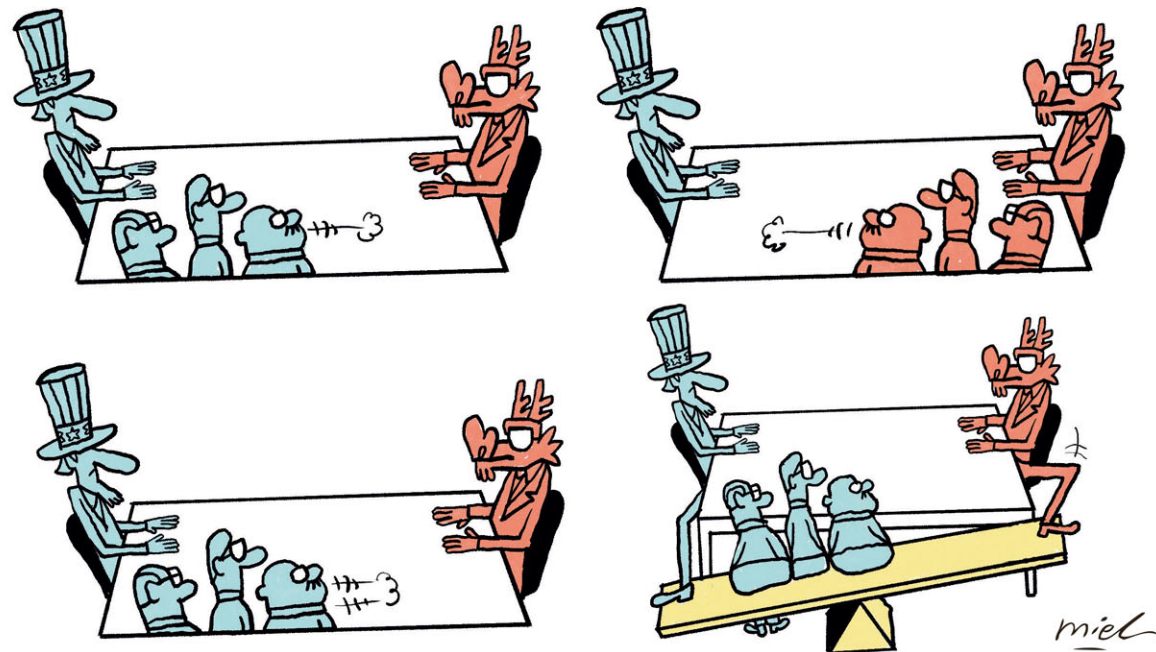
Long, who might well have had a chance of becoming president had he not been assassinated the year Lewis' novel was published.

I don't know what will happen in 2024. But even if Mr Trump is defeated or changes his mind

about running again, that will not be the last time we will experience a Trump-like political phenomenon.

Mr Trump and all he represents

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Fluid global order demands strategy shift

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did not suddenly appear out of thin air and will not suddenly vanish into the ether. He represents an established strain of American political culture that periodically surfaces, a characteristic that the American political scientist Richard Hofstadter called *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*.

We should not ignore these admittedly serious shortcomings of the American system. But we should also not forget that despite its politics, America is still here as a major power and that those who were overly focused on its periodically self-destructive and almost always ill-disciplined political process to the extent of underestimating the US often did not live to regret it.

There is only one America, and we have to work with it whatever its shortcomings. Otherwise, there can be no balance to China.

XI'S LEADERSHIP

Now, China. The most crucial questions about China centre around what lessons, if any, Mr Xi has taken from his experience of America over the last eight years, which saw a transition in the White House but no change of approach towards China and a major blunder by his most important partner that resulted in the war in Ukraine.

I stress the personal – Mr Xi, rather than the collective, China – because the consequence of the first decade of Mr Xi's rule – the use of the anti-corruption campaign to crush all organised opposition to concentrate power around himself and abolishing term limits for the top position – has been to reintroduce a single point of failure into the Chinese system.

Authoritarian systems are able to set goals and pursue them relentlessly over the long term.

But this is a strength only if the goal was correct in the first place. In this respect, in China, the two ends of the political spectrum were set by Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping. Mao's ideologically-driven Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution were unmitigated disasters; Deng's pragmatic decision to reform and open up saved the Chinese Communist Party.

In no other system could a leader take a cold hard look at his life's work, decide it had all gone wrong, and make a 180-degree turn without significant opposition. But it took millions of deaths and the need to avert an existential threat to Party rule to change course.

Where is Mr Xi situated on this spectrum? The optimistic can point to the reversal of zero-Covid, the easing of controls on big tech companies, efforts to revive the property sector and an effort to nuance support for Russia and improve at least the atmosphere of relations with the US as indications of Mr Xi reverting to Deng-style pragmatism. This is not an assessment that can be dismissed. However, my inclination is to be more sceptical.

These may well be tactical adjustments to mitigate mounting internal and external problems rather than strategic changes of direction. The lack of preparation for the shift away from zero-Covid clearly suggests an emergency response rather than a deliberate rethink.

There is no going back to zero-Covid, but the same cannot be said of the other examples. Big Tech had already been cut down to size and the relaxation is occurring within new parameters. I don't think Mr Xi will hesitate to act again if another Jack Ma-like character with ideas beyond what the Party considers his station in life should be foolish enough to take too high a profile.

DYNAMIC MULTIPOLARITY

Dealing with major powers with whom we cannot avoid working but do not entirely trust requires strategic autonomy. And even the closest of allies are moving in that direction. This does not mean that alliances or less formal arrangements like the Quad will break up, but they will become looser, as countries will want to preserve the widest possible range of options for themselves.

Few, if any, countries will commit to aligning themselves across the entire range of issues with any single major power.

This will encourage the natural multipolarity of a diverse world. Multipolarity will not, however, be symmetrical. The US and China will remain at the centre of the international order. It is also unlikely that the international system that will evolve around this central axis will have as clear a definition as the bipolar Cold War structure. The international order will become much more fluid.

Complex interdependence is making it increasingly difficult to neatly classify relationships as "friend" or "foe". Ambiguity is an intrinsic characteristic of relationships where interdependence creates ties, but the very extent of those ties exposes vulnerabilities. International relationships will become more complicated as countries grapple with political and economic considerations that pull in different directions.

What I believe is emerging is an order of dynamic multipolarity. Shifting combinations of regional middle powers and smaller countries will continually arrange

and rearrange themselves in variegated and overlapping patterns along the central axis of US-China relations, sometimes tilting one way, sometimes in another, and sometimes going their own way, as their interests in different domains and circumstances dictate.

To successfully navigate this emerging system will require a fundamental shift of mindset and approach that not every country will find comfortable.

I believe India and Singapore may find it relatively easier than most, because what is required is largely already our diplomatic *modus operandi*. But we will have to ensure that our institutions, and perhaps even more importantly, our politics, remain agile and courageous enough to continually adapt to this fluid emerging order without losing sight of our fundamental interests.

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