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Beware the crocodile: The challenge for small states

Small states and middle powers are scrambling to respond to the economic and military coercion emanating from US President Donald Trump's administration, say the writers. Particularly important for small states is to craft forward-looking, strategic responses that make the best use of their strengths and agilities. PHOTO: AFP

Hard power politics was centre stage at Davos. But smaller players are not without agency in pushing back against the notion that 'might makes right'.

Danny Quah and Irene Ng

A great power is like a crocodile: it can bring danger even as it looks benign. As Singapore's first foreign minister S. Rajaratnam put it, when the crocodile shows its teeth, "one is never quite sure whether it is smiling or baring its teeth".

A statesman who had seen a lot of big teeth in his time, Mr Rajaratnam had no illusions about the brutal nature of great power politics.

He accepted great power rivalry as a fact of international life: "Whether we like them or not, we the small nations must learn to cope with the fact of great powers."

But he also believed in collective strength, and throughout his career, devoted much energy urging states to act together to protect and advance their common interests rather than sit on the sidelines, waiting to be picked off one by one.

"If we are internally strong, if we studiously avoid confrontation among ourselves and use such collective strength as we can summon not to confront great powers but to negotiate realistically with them, then we can coexist with the great powers with greater safety and with advantage to ourselves," he said in a 1976 speech.

Such reasoning is relevant today more than ever.

Small states and middle powers are scrambling to respond to the economic and military coercion emanating from US President Donald Trump's administration. The list includes abduction of the head of state of a sovereign nation, Venezuela; threats to take over or intervene militarily in Canada, Greenland, Colombia, and Iran; and weaponising tariffs to force political submission and extract territorial concession.

Danger lies now not only in the breakdown of the international rules-based order, but also in how the world reacts.

Particularly important for small states is to craft forward-looking, strategic responses that make the best use of their strengths and agilities.

When a large nation plays an aggressive "Might Makes Right, We're a Superpower" strategy against others, three kinds of interested parties emerge.

First are those who reckon the superpower acts on their behalf; second, those who reckon the superpower acts against them. All else equal, the first group cheers on the aggressor nation's "Might Makes Right" actions. The second group frets.

For such first and second parties, talk is appropriately about alignment because the situation is a zero-sum game: one side wins only when the other loses. So, choose a side.

The remaining party – third nations – are those not in the direct line of fire. What strategies should they adopt?

Observers might think such third nations should be neutral or non-aligned.

Yet, as on a playground with schoolyard bullies, some third nations will side with the aggressor. This is because they might feel empowered doing so: finally, something they can win at, even if it's some other party taking the hit and the gain.

Or they might worry that if they don't stand with the aggressor, they will be the next ones set upon.

This doesn't have to be derided as cowardice. It could be just self-serving tactical thinking.

Finally, it might be because they figure "Might Makes Right" is the natural way of the world, and the optimal strategy is always to side with whoever is strongest. They point to the law of the jungle and like to quote Thucydides, "the strong do what they can, while the weak suffer what they must".

We think, however, third nations can do better. They should come together not only to stand for international principles but also to call out unacceptable aggression that contravenes international law. Upholding the rules-based order is especially critical for small nations – it is not just a diplomatic posture, but a vital security strategy to protect their sovereignty against the actions of larger, more powerful nations.

ADAPTATION AND MITIGATION

Aligning passively or acquiescing to "Might Makes Right" aggression only emboldens the aggressor. Instead, to use concepts drawn from the global climate crisis, the third nations should adapt and mitigate.

The global climate crisis is bigger than any nation on earth. To manage climate risks, a nation can adapt or mitigate. Adaptation addresses the symptoms of climate change: societies can improve their water management or move their vulnerable populations to safer ground.

Mitigation addresses the causes of climate change: societies can transition to green energy, shift out of hydrocarbons into renewables; work to reduce emissions.

Similarly, to manage "Might Makes Right" geopolitics, third nations should develop adaptation and mitigation strategies. An example of adaptation is to seek other ways to prosperity rather than by staying over-reliant on a protectionist and coercive great power and attempting to trade with it.

Mitigation strategies include building credibility in international relations, making oneself essential to others and thus altering the cost-benefit calculations for anyone who might have wanted to harm us; seeking out new like-minded partners. By coming together in new coalitions of the willing, the impact of our stance on principles is magnified, a strategy that combines both adaptation and mitigation.

In his address to the Davos World Economic Forum on Jan 20, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney warned of a world at "the beginning of a brutal reality" where the great powers' geopolitics is not subject to any constraints.

At the same time, however, middle powers and small states are not without agency.

When we come together in coalitions to solve problems on a case-by-case basis, we can address global challenges and, in the process, shape a new global order.

Those who think this way do

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Sticking to old strategic postures dangerous in turbulent times

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not stand alone.

Of late, particularly since Mr Trump's push on Greenland, European leaders have become more vocal and united in their opposition to America's "Might Makes Right" approach to foreign relations.

Yet, despite that, some observers in Asia and elsewhere continue to consider that stance naive. They justify Washington's actions as only normal for a hegemon. They dismiss negative official statements from other countries as ritualistic and mere posturing.

Everyone, however, should be able to agree on one intellectual proposition: the historic import of the moment, and the need to read the world as it is – not as it was or should be.

Sticking to dogma or old strategic postures can be dangerous, especially in these turbulent times.

As President Tharman Shanmugaratnam argued at Davos: "We have to bend the trajectory", starting not from idealism alone but from "a plan B that recognises that even as national interests prevail, there's enough of an intersection between national interests and the global good". That means building plurilateral alliances around the common challenges faced.

ASEAN AND SINGAPORE

The geopolitical climate in East Asia today is primarily defined by the strategic rivalry between the United States and China.

That rivalry influences critical issues such as South China Sea tensions and global trade routes. It places pressures on the smaller countries to choose sides.

This point in history is a crucial moment for ASEAN. Whether it likes it or not, South-east Asia has become a major arena of great power rivalry.

Both China and the United States have shown their teeth. They are not a pleasing sight: China with its aggressive maritime claims in the South China Sea and its subversive interference in the domestic politics of other states, for instance; and America with its coercive tariffs and blatant disregard for international law.

If ASEAN gets its act together, it can harness its collective strength to better withstand the pressures and counter-pressures from the two rival powers, even as it strives to build good relations with each.

But to do that effectively, it needs to get its internal house in order and not allow bilateral issues or narrow national interests to stymie a coordinated approach.

This is also a teachable moment for Singaporeans on the intricacies of foreign policy and the importance of internal solidarity. In the intensifying great power rivalry, foreign powers would certainly seek to exploit any vulnerability in our society to weaken it and influence its foreign policy to one more amenable to their own interests.

Singapore has striven to be nimble in how it responds to great power rivalries, international events and geopolitical challenges. It understands that it needs to be not only closely attuned to the fast-changing international patterns, but also courageous to shift its own policies and strategies if necessary.

Amid the flux, one urgent task remains constant for Singapore: managing relationships and building alliances – and doing so while preserving stability and the greatest room for manoeuvre possible.

As our founding foreign minister reminds us in another speech, "so long as we remember that a crocodile is dangerous even when it is friendly, nothing is lost by observing diplomatic niceties".

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