

Disruption is the new change

By Elina Noor



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THE start of the year is usually a time for forecasts and predictions. However, if the world's events last year were anything to go by, the safest bet would probably be to expect more disruption in the months ahead.

Disruption, of course, is all the rage. As a term of art, it sounds more exciting than the staidness of "change". Disruption connotes an unexpected, sometimes refreshing and other times disturbing, interruption to a continuum.

Originally coined as a term of art in business administration to explain an innovative process that starts at the bottom of a market but eventually displaces established competitors, disruption has been particularly useful in trying to understand the stunning political and security developments over the past year, from Beijing to Berlin, Wellington to Washington, and Paris to Pyongyang.

As neighbouring countries closer to home still grapple with the flashpoints ignited in Rakhine State, Myanmar, and Marawi, the Philippines, it is clear that even in the relatively stable nations of Southeast Asia, we may be shaken and stirred by both sudden and slow-burn security risks.

However, rather than the litany of singular events that may erupt — and these are numerous, from nuclear threats to terrorist attacks — what makes for more interesting observation is how states and, particularly, established powers, have had to adjust to systemic disruptions and the challenge of displacement. Power is being shifted by the multiple axes of people, personalities, ideas and technology.

In 2016 and 2017, it was clear that the shortcomings of globalisation resulted in rising waves of populism across western Europe and the United States. But at the strategic level, it is the way in which leaders of powerful countries are steering their nations to retain or claim their place in the world that has given rise to a fascinating, if not slightly disconcerting, game of thrones that will continue to unfold this year and beyond.

US President Donald Trump has upended conventional expectations of world leaders, just as Russia President Vladimir Putin and China President Xi Jinping have challenged notions of what world order should look like. The US rebalance has been thrown off-kilter by its domestic prioritisation, dismissal of multilateral processes, as well as by competing strategic frameworks, like China's Belt and Road Initiative.

At no other point in recent times has the challenge of displacement been so evident than by repeated, official calls to observe rules and “the rules-based order”. Following the revival of the quadrilateral security dialogue among the US, Australia, Japan and India in November last year, press releases by all partners except India, explicitly stressed upholding “the rules-based order”.

The Australian Foreign Policy White Paper released in December last year mentions the “rules-based international order” three times, a “rules-based order” four times, and “rules” 85 times.

The US National Security Strategy released in the same month references “rules” 13 times.

Rules are undoubtedly important, especially for smaller countries like Malaysia. It is one of the reasons why, as a nation, we prioritise adherence to international law and the multilateral organisations that shape them.

The question that must be asked is: whose rules matter? Whose rules are we expected to observe in “the rules-based order”? Note that this phrase is always prefaced by the definitive “the”, rather than “a” rules-based order. Should there be only one rules-based order, especially in light of changing power dynamics on the global stage?

When rules are tied to values and systems of government that exclude a large number of countries, including powerful ones, then the international landscape may be ripe for disruption.

It is of worth to note that while democratic nations have been on the rise over the decades, according to polls like the Pew Research Centre’s December 2017 release which covered 38 countries, surveys like the Economist Intelligence Unit’s Democracy Index show that the number of democracies in the world come to just under half of the 167 countries scored.

These surveys are not conclusively indicative of democracies, but they demonstrate that there is a significant number of countries in the world that might be excluded from “the rules-based order”, particularly when coupled with an emphasis on the values of freedom and openness.

Since Asean does not impose any democratic conditionality for membership, would member-states observing alternative forms of government be excluded from a values-tied rules-based order? This is by no means an argument against democracy or freedom, simply a factual statement of the diverse forms of government and political ideologies that exist and that must be acknowledged and taken into account, regardless of agreement with them.

Finally, it must be borne in mind that not all rules apply equally and that the administration of rules is closely tied to power. History is replete with examples of big powers doing what they will and weaker countries suffering what they must. So, when cries of protest are raised against the interference of electoral systems because others have seized the advantage of manipulating grey zones in the cyber domain, it is worth recalling that non-intervention as afforded by international law constrains, and applies to, all countries.

The case of Nicaragua vs the US at the International Court of Justice in 1986 underscores this.

The difference is that countries will interpret this rule in line with the resources that they have.

Watch this space for further developments, particularly as states increasingly use cyberspace as a domain for military and security activities.

Whether disruption in the international system will result in a displacement of power is still to be seen and will be a long-term eventuality, if it were to take place at all. However, it is obvious from resistance by the prevailing rules-based order that this is a phenomenon to continue unfolding for the rest of the year.

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