

Missed opportunities

Behind the headlines by Bunn Nagara

Amid loose talk of a new Cold War in the West, the realities are still very different in a much more dangerous world today

WHEN the decades-long Cold War dissipated more than 20 years ago, there was a collective sigh of relief.

Few imagined at the time that within a single generation, the perceived certainties of the time would be missed. How times have changed, and how swiftly so.

True, the Cold War produced limits and encouraged divisions. The West itself was divided, particularly Europe, and notably Germany whose Berlin Wall symbolised the implacability of those divisions and the intractability of their problems.

The world as a whole seemed split between the Western and Eastern “blocs”, one led by the US and the other by the Soviet Union. The ideological differences appeared everywhere and coloured everything.

Both these superpowers were also the most heavily armed nuclear powers in the world. Much was said about their mutual capacities to annihilate each other and the rest of the planet several times over.

And yet the realities were often very different. The superpowers did not go to war with each other, preferring instead to wage proxy wars in the Third World through client states in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

There was also a predictability, even a stability, in geopolitical terms. The affiliations – if any – of various countries were clear, their policies along with their global allegiances well demarcated.

Conflict, whenever it arose, was inter-state in nature. National military forces were developed accordingly with little doubt about their actual or prospective foes.

Terrorism was never developed to the scale and extent it has today. Insurgencies and isolated terror attacks existed, but these were largely domestic in nature and containable.



Communist relic: Runners passing the former

Berlin Wall during the '100 Meilen Berlin 2014' marathon event. During the Cold War, the Berlin Wall symbolised the implacability of the divisions and the intractability of the problems back then. - AFP

Not so now: terrorist groups have grown in size, number and variety; the “loyalties” of presumed allies have blurred or meandered, and even a superpower like the US has come to rely on mercenary groups whose allegedly terrorist actions add to global war atrocities.

New blocs such as BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) have emerged to complicate the geopolitical stakes. These developments may serve member countries and non-aligned nations, but global power relations have become more complex if not also more confusing.

The “Arab Spring” and its aftermath have contributed to the flux. Since former Cold War allies and adversaries are no more, they, their enemies and everyone else in between have uncertain identities and display unpredictable tendencies.

Growth of terrorist activity has effectively snookered the conventional armed forces of nation states, including and especially the sole superpower. The highly irregular tactics of terrorist groups are more challenging than the guerilla operations of insurgents in terms of military procurement, operational deployment and order of battle.

More than just nostalgia pervades today's post-Cold War world. Attempts to imagine a world where more certainties prevail are natural and expected, even if they include crude stereotyping of adversaries whether real or assumed.

The West has been reconstituted, consolidated and grown in size and strength since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc. Its military arm in Nato has also grown, particularly in global ambition and reach.

So when Russia has a firm leader with a clear grasp of the national interest and an independent foreign policy, such as President Vladimir Putin, the West is prone to balk. Tension is accentuated when Moscow is averse to Nato's expansionist plans right up to its doorstep.

Tension was already rife in mid-2008 when then President George W. Bush sought to expand Nato eastwards to include Georgia and Ukraine, besides stationing a US ballistic missile system in the Czech Republic and Poland. Although President Obama has cancelled those plans, the spirit of Western expansionism remains.

The Soviet bloc's Warsaw Pact is gone, but the West's equivalent military bloc Nato has instead grown. A parallel encirclement if not containment of China has been underway with strengthening US ties with India, Japan, the Philippines and Australia along with a strong US naval build-up in East Asian waters.

Nato, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation established for a particular sector of the Western world during the Cold War, hopes to expand to all the world's continents in encircling the globe indefinitely. Like the original Nato, it will remain US-led with a clear military component aimed at major non-member countries.

In June, Putin made a state visit to China, combining it with this year's Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit. The SCO, a Eurasian bloc co-founded by Russia and China, was established in 2001 a full decade after the end of the Cold War.

Despite fanciful projections and some yearnings, there will be no return to a Cold War. The world no longer has any ideological or even military bipolarity.

There are niggling suspicions, occasional irritants, alarmist speculation and crude portrayals of the "other" foreign leader, but the coordinates and vectors are different now. Add the new uncertainties of the present age, and reconstructing the Cold War becomes an elusive task.

The most vivid differences now being played out in the West are over the former Soviet Ukraine and the adjacent Crimean peninsula. Ukraine's strategic location in fronting the Black Sea, pivotally between East and West, made power plays over it inevitable.

Access to this Balkan region is essential to Russia as well as to an expanding Nato, with Nato member Turkey also fronting the Black Sea. The difference is that the region is in Moscow's backyard just like the Caribbean is in Washington's.

An independent Ukraine was never an issue so long as it remained within Russia's orbit, or did not venture into the West's. All that changed when Maidan happened, pointing Kiev westwards and the autonomous republic of Crimea going the other (Russia's) way.

It is too easy to depict this as some kind of throwback to Cold War politicking, with hapless countries in the middle caught in a bipolar embrace. But the situation today is different in being much more unstable and dangerous.

The Cold War had seen Nato's clear geographical reach and geopolitical focus, but those limits are now off. The Cold War also meant a bipolarity producing a military balance of sorts, but no sense of any balance remains now.

Internally, Europe is becoming less united owing to different or competing national interests relative to Russia. The US, as the dominant Nato power, has had trouble keeping a unified Europe behind it from West Asia and North Africa to the heart of Europe itself.

At first, even as Europe declared a ban on arms exports to Russia, Britain and France went ahead with theirs. The embargo was said to apply only to future exports.

Now Europeans' heavy dependence on Russian gas is dividing Europe again. Last month, some 10 European countries snubbed calls to turn off Russian gas by considering plans to expand the gas supply.

Even Poland, which although a buyer of Russian gas is still historically averse to Moscow, admitted that the decision of whether to "buy Russian" really lies with each country concerned.

Russia itself said the US wants Europe to stop buying from Russia because it wanted the European energy market to itself. The brave new economically defined world is no help in untangling today's complexities.

Meanwhile, opportunities for resetting US-Russia relations more positively are sacrificed. In this "fertile" environment, terrorism thrives and grows.

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