

Mistaken policies, missed chances



Behind the headlines by Bunn Nagara

There is no new Cold War, at least not yet, unless the West is determined to pursue it over all other needs

THE more urgent the crisis, the more exaggerated and distorted events tend to be portrayed. That is the sad irony of media reports on troubling situations.

The “new” electronic media’s greater immediacy worsens the exaggerations and distortions. And among the most troubling situations today is Ukraine’s civil war.

Some observers have begun calling the conflict a “new Cold War”. But has it really come to that?

It may be tempting to expand issues to sensationalist proportions on a global scale. An impressionistic style plus simplistic speculation helps to attract attention to the pundits at least.

However, analysts have a responsibility to evaluate often subjective, open-ended events that are still developing prudently.

The pouting match between the US (and Europe) and Russia over Ukraine’s civil war and geopolitical affiliation is instructive.

Tough rhetoric is still shooting like tracer shells between Washington and Moscow. Europe’s more developed economies are again identified as US allies.

More weapons systems and new force structures are being devised, commissioned or deployed. Dozens of near clashes between opposing military forces have reportedly occurred over the past year.

Strategic calculations underpin much of this face-off. Competing spheres of geopolitical influence are supposedly at the heart of the big power rivalry.

So a “new Cold War” is said to be in full swing. Yet professional analysts need to avoid wrongful diagnoses and disastrous self-fulfilling prophecies.

Careful analysis would expose much of the alarmist projections as premature bluster. As usual vested interests have something to gain: arms dealers have billions to make and imaginative authors have books on the subject to sell.

A new Cold War suggests a replay of the decades-long Cold War between the “West” and the “East” of the Western hemisphere that reshaped much of the world. Nothing today has reached such depths or dimensions.

Western commentators typically blame President Vladimir Putin of democratic, post-Soviet Russia for the current impasse. Others including Russia blame much of it on creeping Westernisation and an expansionist Nato.

If it were just Putin’s fault, it cannot be another “Cold War” as that would require a systemic and ideological confrontation between major power blocs.

Some cite Ukraine's critical role in geostrategically vital south-eastern Europe. Albeit a relative backwater of the continent, such was the birthplace of two world wars.

However, the world wars had been the biggest "hot" wars in history. The Cold War's roots can be traced instead to tensions in the 1943 Teheran meeting between the "Big Three": Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin of Britain, the US and the Soviet Union.

No such ideological divide or systemic differentiation exists between the big powers today, certainly none that can outlast individual leaders of the moment. Besides, Western leaders can no longer reshape the world on their own, as emerging economies particularly in Asia are now punching above their weight.

The Soviet Union is gone, with Russia now devoid of much of the USSR's territory. The Warsaw Pact is also history, although Nato remains and keeps expanding in scope and jurisdiction.

Ukraine's civil war is increasingly convoluted and complex, with any resolution distant and remote. But it is not spilling over national borders to engulf other countries or even spreading to Kiev itself.

There is still nothing definitive to mark the Ukraine conflict as a return to the Cold War. The sum of those parts that resemble the Cold War do not add up to the whole of a new Cold War.

A tragedy has to be how so much of the conflict has been unnecessary and avoidable. The Western powers exceed Russia in force and have thus defined the situation as it unravels.

In turn, much of the angst making for the conflict stems from a Western misreading of the situation.

This began with a misreading of the Ukrainian polity by failing to acknowledge Ukraine as a deeply divided country. Its ethnic and political differences between its eastern provinces and the rest of the country, centred politically in Kiev, have made Ukraine a fundamentally unstable nation.

The West has further misread Russia, which although nothing new remains definitive. This has meant a failure to recognise Russia's legitimate strategic interests in its western border regions, particularly in the vicinity of the Black Sea and Crimean peninsula where its naval assets have long been stationed.

The Washington-Brussels nexus has also misread Putin himself. The West sees him as a tyrant after regarding Russian democracy as a sham, then feels exasperated that he still enjoys such high approval ratings among Russians.

It is precisely because Russia's position is more than Putin, and that Russia is democratic, that its president has to do what the people want. That has meant a high 81% support among Russians as a poll by the US-based Associated Press and NORC Center for Public Affairs Research found last December.

Putin enjoys greater support among his people than any Western leader among theirs, the more so when Russia and its leader come under Western threats and attack. It is the same kind of persistent Western misunderstanding of other countries and their leadership, from Iran and Iraq to Cuba and China.

A Brookings Institution analysis last October identified the West's personification of blame, as on Putin for all the ills that Russia is supposed to represent, as a part of the problem. Given the West's ideological "high" from post-Cold War triumphalism, that problem is unlikely to be resolved soon.

To gauge the situation, apply the test of equivalence: what would the US do if the situation were reversed?

Suppose Nato had been dismantled for years and an energised Soviet Union zeroed in to recruit allies for the Warsaw Pact. Then Mexico suddenly became Soviet-friendly.

Legitimate US interests would be at stake and it can be expected to act, particularly after a great fuss had been made over tiny undeveloped Cuba decades ago.

Former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev is no ally of Putin, having previously criticised him on occasion. But Gorbachev now says the US is deliberately provoking Russia and raising tensions.

Even Greece, the cradle of Western democracy, opposes Western sanctions against Russia. Certain European countries leading Russia-bashing have their own undeclared historical and personal baggage.

Poland is historically alienated by Russia, and current European Council President Donald Tusk is Polish. Germany is also prominent in the anti-Russia campaign, and Chancellor Angela Merkel as a former East German may have baggage of her own.

Yet Greece and even Germany are mindful of the unintended consequences of anti-Russia sanctions. Today's integrated economies can also see those sanctions taking a toll in an already economically challenged Europe.

As the West pours more resources into a confrontation with Russia like before, larger problems from economic decline to terrorism requiring joint global efforts remain insufficiently addressed.

No side wins any war, not even a cold war. The Cold War resulted in the collapse of the Soviet Union and also massive losses in the West through resource wastages – with that part set to continue.

Meanwhile, India signals a growing partnership with the US while quietly cooperating with Russia and China. For Asian giants India and China to rise and rise more decisively, it helps if the developed West declined at the same time.

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