COMMENT

Post-war lesson for Southeast Asia

CAUTION: States with claims in the South China Sea must resist power plays, and ensure region remains inclusive

EXACTLY a week after Southeast Asian capitals marked Asean Day on Aug 8 to celebrate the establishment of an organisation founded to promote regional peace and stability, Northeast Asia observed a more sombre commemoration of a tragic period in history marked by destruction, decimation and devastation. This past weekend on Aug 15, 70 years ago, World War 2 (WW2) in Asia finally ground to a halt with Emperor Hirohito's public declaration of Japan's surrender.

It is a poignant juxtaposition of two halves of East Asia, both of which suffered immensely during the war but each of which has diverged in its treatment of history since. Whereas Southeast Asia seems to have forgiven the brutality of colonial Japan, even if it has not necessarily forgotten, China and Korea seem neither to have forgotten let alone forgiven. Northeast Asian hawks at the Track Two level have in fact excoriated Southeast Asia for moving past history with the reminder that no amount of overseas development assistance can whitewash Japan's sins of its past.

No doubt, Northeast Asia paid a much heftier price during and after the war than Southeast Asia did. While the infamous Thai-Burma death railway was built using more than 200,000 forced labourers and allied prisoners of war under appalling conditions with nearly half having perished during construction, the Nanking massacre alone resulted in the deaths of up to 300,000 victims and the rape of 20,000 women.

Nearly every Malaysian of my generation will have had a parent or grandparent who endured the cruelty of Japanese occupation, if not perished because of it. I expect the same is true in other parts of Southeast Asia and to greater severity in China and Korea, whose women were ignominiously made to serve "comfort" and whose citizens were also subjected to heinous chemical and biological warfare experimentation on top of everything else.

It bears reminder that although Japan was unequivocally the belligerent, its civilians, too, suffered during the war. Bodies were left charred in more than 67 cities across Japan from Allied firebombing offensives before Hiroshima and Nagasaki were ultimately razed by United States atomic bombs. Okinawa paid a particular price for being caught between the Japanese imperial forces and the US, such that in his final transmission of June 6, 1945 before a suicide charge, Rear Admiral Minoru Ota made a plea for Tokyo to "give the Okinawan people special consideration from this day forward". Needless to say, the Allied troops also bore a heavy cost from the war, physically and psychologically.

But this is not a competition. The war may have been won and the aggressors made to pay but 70 years on, is it really in anyone's interest to determine who suffered the most? To be sure, these are deep wounds that cut to the core of humanity and inter-state conduct. But these, too, must heal, and better they soothe and scar than fester and putrefy. It is in no one's interest to be paralysed by the past.

Perhaps a more constructive treatment of history would be to assess whether the relative stability of the post-war period can prevail for at least another 70 years and what needs to be done to manage it. Both the past and the present prove that peace cannot be presumed for the future and we are not necessarily any more secure now than we were before.

Despite the horrific legacy of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as well as the numerous frameworks governing disarmament and non-proliferation, the number of states possessing nuclear weapons has de facto increased since WW2 with unequal regime observance among them. Despite the ravages of WW2, war broke out just five years later on the Korean Peninsula and tensions persist until today, on land across the demilitarised zone, in and around the Yellow Sea, even in cyberspace. Despite post-war countries having transformed into economic powerhouses, historical complexities continue to permeate ties. If anything, they have transmogrified into rising nationalism exacerbating prickly differences over sovereignty and territorial integrity issues in the East China Sea.

These territorial disputes are mirrored somewhat in the South China Sea, where Southeast Asian claimant states will have to resist power plays and spheres of influence while remaining as inclusive a region as possible.

If there is a lesson for Southeast Asia from the post-war experiences of its northern cousins, it is this: a nation's past behaviour may be an indicator of future actions but not assuredly so. Those that have transgressed are not condemned to repeat their actions and those that have not are not impervious to doing so. With evolving security challenges provoked by existing and emerging (increasingly, non-state) actors, it would be unwise to presume a linearity of intention or action just because states conducted themselves a certain way in the past. More importantly, this region writ large may not necessarily be better off from before if old tensions are not eventually transformed into new relationships.

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