



# War by other means

Sino-US rivalry is growing in many areas. Wrapping them all within a war narrative risks making things worse.

**Simon Tay**

For *The Straits Times*

Talk is growing about a “New Cold War”, or even outright war, between the United States and China. This impacts not only the two giants. It ripples to countries in between, as seen in the meeting of foreign ministers convened last week by Asean.

While Asean had a much wider agenda of its own priorities, the competing claims in the South China Sea came particularly in focus. There was, moreover, considerable finger pointing between the US and China, which strained the unity and consensus of the group.

There is no denying that Sino-American rivalry spans many sectors, from politics and security to trade and technology. It is also true that differences are accelerating and direct (if limited) conflict cannot be ruled out. Yet, Asean and other countries must resist the analogy of war. Such a mindset risks focusing on the wrong things. They must seek ways that allow space in between.

## AMERICAN WAR NARRATIVES

The US has made no formal

declaration of war since 1942 for World War II. But some Americans still seem to love the word. It is applied not only to conflicts in Korea, Vietnam and the Gulf, but also the “war on terror”, when there is no opponent state. Even efforts against the pandemic are dubbed “war” – without a human enemy.

Perhaps crying “war” is simply a way to rally people and recall past victories. But the word is more than semantics.

War’s drumbeat shapes how society recognises and processes information, and rallies citizens to accept and support conflict – as shown in studies like *Analogies At War* by Professor Khong Yuen Foong (now with the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy).

In recent writing, Prof Khong considers that a “Cold War 2.0” framework with a bipolar Asia is on the cards. Under these circumstances, tensions could be managed, “frozen” so that major military conflict can be prevented and be the lesser of evils. But such a war stance can prove slippery from cold to hot, with serious consequences for those caught up in it.

Recall that during World War II, no bomb landed on continental US (the sole American target was Pearl Harbour in Hawaii). The Cold War witnessed tense stand-offs across

Europe and the Cuban missile crisis, but the hot conflicts were in proxy wars, such as in Korea and Vietnam.

To Americans, “war” is mostly fought elsewhere. But to those elsewhere, there can be real damage. What seems cold in one place can run hot in others.

Thinking in terms of “war” emphasises and legitimises breaking the normal rules. The imperative is to win at all costs. Rules and international law, already too often broken by the Trump administration, are seen as mere hindrances.

A third tendency of talking war is to paint the situation in black and white, between “good guys” and “villains”. There can be no moral equivalence or effort to understand the other side, let alone offer compromise. The war analogy shapes a stark dichotomy, a one-off choice in which a great power asks other states “whether you are for us or against us”.

For the countries caught in between, agile and rational diplomacy can be read as appeasement and complicity. Neutrality becomes cowardly, and autonomy impossible. For every one Switzerland, others risk becoming like Finland – so painfully caught between the Soviet Union and Hitler’s Germany

in the years before and after World War II.

## THROUGH THE FOG OF ‘WAR’

Countries caught between the great powers must resist the pressure to ally permanently with one side or the other.

Take the statement on the South China Sea, issued just after the Asean meetings among foreign ministers. Asean correctly called for the contested area not to be militarised. But it refrained from naming China. Nor did Asean refer to the increased US “freedom of navigation” patrols in the disputed waters.

The US, however, did not pull its punches. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo declared China’s claims “completely unlawful” and called for a boycott of companies linked to construction work in the disputed areas. China’s top diplomat Wang Yi, on his part, accused the US of being the biggest driver of militarisation of the South China Sea.

Certainly, the rule of law should provide the bedrock of what a state can or cannot do, and China’s actions in the South China Sea have come under criticism for breaching the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (Unclos). Yet, the Trump administration is itself breaking rules and the US has never

ratified Unclos. This breeds scepticism about international law; that it is used not from principle but weaponised to wage what is called “lawfare”.

If war is accepted as the master narrative, then no single issue is determinant and important in itself. Whether it is the South China Sea or, say, Hong Kong, every issue is instead subservient – treated merely as skirmishes, proxy conflicts and as opportunities for propaganda.

## BEING BETWEEN

This is not to say that Asean and others in the region are entirely at ease with China. Asians do want a Beijing that is less assertive and more of a partner. But the same is true of what they would like from the US.

Refusing the framework of war does not mean countries in between are blind to the increasing rivalry. But there is good reason to see the current tensions in a longer arc of events, tracing back to the global financial crisis. Back in 2010, I warned in my book, *Asia Alone*, against a “dangerous divide” between the US and Asia.

This was before US President Donald Trump was elected but the sentiment that has since brought him to office was swelling. In China, this was before Mr Xi Jinping

became president, yet a rising assertiveness could be sensed.

My book also included a map of South China Sea disputes. But at that time, there were neither extensive reclamation by China nor American “freedom of navigation” naval patrols. The problem was being managed and calmed by diplomacy, and it is not impossible that it can be again.

Some do accuse then President Barack Obama of having been too soft on China. But to swing to the other extreme of bellicosity is not the solution. Nor is Mr Trump’s inconsistency. The US today snubs the region’s summits and broader agenda, and only seems to call when it is Washington that wants something. Consequently, “America first” often results in “America only”.

The need is, instead, to build consistent and steadfast engagement with other countries, taking a multilateral approach across a broad range of issues. The US used to be able and willing to build such partnerships. But today, such comprehensive engagements and collective efforts are left to other countries and struggle without the cooperation of great powers.

Moreover, such efforts must accommodate the legitimate expectations of China, today and for the future, rather than be geared solely towards pushing back on the South China Sea and the widest range of Beijing’s interests.

The increasing Sino-American antagonism concerning the economy, finance and technology can and should be managed. But this should be subject to established international rules, or by developing new norms, and not simply be shaped according to what is best for the US.

In this context, it is far better to frame issues and actions as one of strategic competition rather than “war”. We might pause to think what victory could mean in a deeply interdependent world already struggling with the pandemic.

If waging “war” hobbles China’s return to growth, or distracts Americans from their own domestic challenges, great harm results – not only on the two countries directly, but also on all others, and the overall international system.

Long ago, the Prussian General Clausewitz spoke of war being “policy by other means”. International law and global interdependence have strengthened since to limit the use of force and rule out coercion. Yet, a kind of reversal is now risked.

Even short of military collision, strident politics and provocative policies are emerging that add up to “war by other means” – waged through economic and financial sanctions, coercion and one-sided “lawfare”.

The countries in between should not accept this mindset. It is not easy being caught between China and the US. But if their competition and rivalry are reclassified as “war” and seen through the lens of inevitable conflict, the situation will become next to impossible.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• Simon Tay is chairman of the Singapore Institute of International Affairs and associate professor at the National University of Singapore’s Faculty of Law.