

# Beware of Munich

Historical analogies can lead decision-makers dangerously astray. Should a crisis break out with China, the US should exercise great caution in seeking guidance from them, especially the 1938 Munich meeting between Hitler and Chamberlain.

## Khong Yuen Foong

How do wars start? Sometimes, it's because leaders apply the wrong lessons of history.

Then US President Lyndon Johnson, for example, scribbled to himself while deliberating whether to intervene massively in Vietnam: "To give in = another Munich. If not here - then Thailand." Mr Johnson's old friend, Senator Mike Mansfield, repeatedly warned him that Vietnam was not "another Munich", but his warnings fell on deaf ears. The net result was a war lost, and over 50,000 American soldiers and millions of Vietnamese killed.

The Biden administration should exercise caution about its favourite lessons of history as it begins thinking of new strategies towards Asia.

Clues about the Biden administration's thinking on the strategic challenges and opportunities in Asia can be gleaned from a 2019 Foreign Affairs article by Mr Kurt Campbell and Mr Jake Sullivan. In that article, Mr Campbell and Mr Sullivan, the new administration's "Asia czar" and national security adviser, respectively, laid out a level-headed road map - compared with the "fire and fury" approach of the Trump administration - on co-existing with Asia's rising power, China.

This co-existence "would involve elements of competition and cooperation" with China; for the United States to achieve the most favourable outcomes, it should leverage its strengths, as well as harness the efforts of US allies and partners, to "shape China's choices across all domains" in ways conducive to peace and stability.

Hearteningly, Mr Campbell and Mr Sullivan reject the relevance of the US-Soviet Cold War analogy in their road map: Containment is unlikely to work for reasons detailed in the article.

They do, however, draw on many lessons from the Cold War to manage the US-China competition to prevent it from spiralling into

military conflict.

Identifying Taiwan and the South China Sea as two of the most dangerous flash points in Asia - and threats to their co-existence model - they argue for the importance of maintaining a sustainable deterrence posture in East Asia, the utility of setting up military hotlines, codes of conduct, and concluding arms control agreements to regulate the military competition and to prevent accidents from spiralling out of control. These measures helped prevent a direct US-Soviet military clash during the Cold War.

### THE LESSONS OF HISTORY

I would like to add one item to their list of dos and don'ts: Be wary of "the lessons of history" invoked by key decision-makers in the event of a military crisis or confrontation over Taiwan or the South China Sea.

Here I focus on the "lessons of history" most frequently invoked by American decision-makers; it will be interesting to find out from Chinese foreign policy specialists about the "lessons of history" favoured by the Chinese leadership.

The "lessons of history" - usually encapsulated in the form of a historical analogy such as "no more Munichs" or "this is another Vietnam" - affect decision outcomes by framing the nature of the challenge; in so doing, they provide "answers" about the gravity of the stakes, the morality of action/inaction, as well as the action to be taken and its probability of success.

When invoked, these "lessons" can play an important role in structuring the decision outcome. In the two "hot" Asian land wars that America fought - the Korean War (1950-1953) and in Vietnam (1965-1975) - the lessons of the 1930s, encapsulated in the Munich analogy, were invoked in internal deliberations to assess the nature of the challenge and the stakes, as well as to prescribe a strong military response.

Munich, for Mr Johnson's generation, referred to the 1938 meeting between British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and Adolf Hitler in Munich, where the



A helicopter taking off from aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan in the South China Sea last year. If a major crisis in the South China Sea or Taiwan Strait punctuates the US-China competition, decision-makers should exercise great caution in relying on historical analogies to "evaluate" the stakes, says the writer. PHOTO: REUTERS

**International relations specialists have found that in general, historical analogies have tended to lead policymakers astray. This is so because historical analogies, by highlighting the similarities between the past and the present, will obscure or miss out crucial differences.**

former acceded to Hitler's demands on the Sudetenland (in Czechoslovakia).

This has been stigmatised as "appeasement" thereafter, and the strategic lesson that American decision-makers drew from Munich was that the stakes were extremely high (for Europe, the US and world peace); in suing for peace but at the price of not defending the Czechs, Chamberlain whetted Hitler's appetite, and made World War II inevitable.

The policy takeaway is that it would have been better to show dictators like Hitler at Munich the mailed fist - even if it meant war in 1938 - than to appease them because accommodating the Hitlers only meant a more disastrous war later.

To be sure, we are now almost a century past the Munich years and there is a plethora of other historical analogies that American policymakers can draw on, from "the lessons of Vietnam" to those of Afghanistan and, of course, Iraq; these latter analogies warn against fighting unwinnable wars in faraway lands. Yet, Munich remains an important part of America's historical repertoire - an analogy that can be easily triggered - when it comes to confronting autocrats.

### MUNICH'S ATTRACTION FOR AMERICANS

Munich has a special hold on the American imagination for three reasons.

First, it tells America the kind of great power it sees itself to be: one

that acts with great resolve and is able/willing to act in time to prevent a greater disaster later.

Second, and related to the first reason, it is also a code word for the importance of maintaining one's prestige and credibility - Britain's reputation as a great power was irreparably damaged after Munich - allies would no longer believe in its guarantees and assurances.

This consideration about losing prestige and credibility was crucial in the US decision to fight in Korea and Vietnam - a major worry on the US' part was that if it failed to save South Korea and South Vietnam, its allies and adversaries in Europe and Asia would no longer take the US word seriously. In his first foreign policy speech, President Joe Biden spoke about the importance of "reclaiming our credibility and moral authority".

Third, Munich is attractive also because it is based on an unproven assumption or counterfactual: that Hitler would have been stopped if Britain had been more resolute at Munich, and World War II would have been avoided. It is a controversial assumption, but the point is that it allows the policymaker using the analogy to insert his predicted outcome into the narrative. And that narrative is one that amplifies the importance and utility of a forceful response.

### THE DANGERS

The point being made here is not that it is never justified to go to war. Rather it is that when a major crisis in the Taiwan Strait or the South China Sea punctuates the

US-China competition, decision-makers should exercise great caution in relying on historical analogies - especially Munich - to "evaluate" the stakes and options. International relations specialists have found that in general, historical analogies have tended to lead policymakers astray. This is so because historical analogies, by highlighting the similarities between the past and the present, will obscure or miss out crucial differences.

There may be good reasons for showing resolve and perhaps even fight, but it is better to arrive at those conclusions without referencing Munich.

The Munich mindset inflates the stakes, assumes moral certainty, and propels one along a military path based on a counterfactual.

It is safer for the US and the rest of the world to assess the situation in terms of a sound understanding of the facts surrounding the case, clearly articulated strategic principles and the relevant international laws or norms.

Therefore, if "Munich" is invoked in a future East Asian crisis, red lights should go flashing in our minds; we need to warn all involved, "Beware of the Munich analogy"!

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