Source: *The Straits Times,* pA18
Date: 24 March 2021

US-China ties

Chilly 'reset' in Alaska sets Asia on uncertain course

The two external factors that facilitated the transformation of Asia – Sino-American entente as well as the shared commitment to economic globalisation in Washington and Beijing – are fast disappearing

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For The Straits Times

The opening session of US-China talks in Anchorage, Alaska, last week that involved US Secretary of State Antony Blinken (right), Mr Yang Jiechi (left), director of China's Central Foreign Affairs Commission, and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi (second from left). A potential confrontation between the two countries will be far more intense and consequential for Asia than the Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union, says the writer. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

A week is a long time in politics. Despite that adage, international relations tend not to be given to much volatility, guided as they are by enduring factors such as geography, history and national interest. But there are moments in global politics when the geopolitical dynamic acquires a sharp and noticeable shift of gears. The unprecedented public acrimony between senior United States and Chinese officials last week in Anchorage, Alaska, might turn out to be symbolic of the huge change in Sino-US relations that could propel Asia into uncharted waters.

Few expected the talks to go well, given not just the recent signalling by the Biden White House but the steady build-up of tensions over the years as successive administrations raised objections to Chinese actions, particularly during the Trump years. But no one was prepared for such a fiery public exchange, which underlined the determination of each side to defend what they see as their essential interests. Neither side can be expected to back down any time soon.

It was, in its way, a reset, but not a return to the less pugilistic era in relations that Beijing and others were hoping for.

Although presidents Joe Biden and Xi Jinping might want to avoid an escalation of tensions and explore potential cooperation, Asia must now come to terms with two important propositions.

One is that the relative harmony in great power relations that produced a long period of peace and prosperity in Asia is now behind us. The other is that Asian regional integration, constructed over the last few decades around an Asean-centred framework, will come under increasing stress.

The diplomatic dust-up in Alaska came on the heels of a number of other developments in the last few days. The leaders of the so-called Quad – or the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue involving Australia, India, Japan and the US – announced themselves as a purposeful entity in the Indo-Pacific.

Soon after, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin travelled to Tokyo and Seoul to reaffirm US alliances with Japan and South Korea. As Mr Blinken and National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan gathered to meet Mr Yang Jiechi, the director of China's Central Foreign Affairs Commission and Politburo member, and Foreign Minister Wang Yi, in Alaska, Mr Austin travelled to New Delhi to consolidate the US-India defence partnership. Beijing, meanwhile, invited Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov for consultations.

As we talk of the new disharmony among the great powers, it is easy to fall back on the metaphor of the Cold War. That, however, could be underestimating the scale of the challenges that a Sino-US confrontation presents the region.

ASIA AND THE COLD WAR

A potential confrontation between the US and China – with other major actors like Russia, Japan, South Korea, Australia and India taking sides or leaning one way or another – will be far more intense and consequential for the region than the Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union.

Asia was only a secondary theatre in the US-Soviet confrontation. The only exception was North-east Asia.

What's more, the bipolar framework never really held in Asia. Communist China broke from the Soviet Union within the first decade of the Cold War, many large and newly independent nations did not accept the bipolar discipline and chose to be non-aligned. The military alliances that the Western powers set up in the region in the 1950s – the Central Treaty Organisation and South-East Asia Treaty Organisation could not be sustained for long.

While it is fashionable to denounce the Cold War, many Asian countries benefited immensely from the US wars in Korea and Vietnam. They helped accelerate post-war economic growth to those who played an auxiliary role in these wars. More importantly, in its ideological commitment to save Asia from communism, the US gave market access to the newly industrialising countries and allowed them to embark on export-led growth that famously began the Asian miracle.

Another major difference – the Soviet Union never had the kind of weight in Asia during the Cold War that China does today. China is far more central to Asia than Russia is to Europe and the last three decades of regional economic integration have enormously increased China's weight in the region. China's military clout might not be the same as the Soviet Union's, but geographic advantages make China a much tougher challenge to the US.

If a new Cold War does indeed materialise, Asia and the Indo-Pacific will be the primary theatre, much like Central Europe in the old Cold War.

If the US continues along the strategic course that the Biden administration is laying out and if Beijing doubles down, Asia will be faced with a dangerous military dynamic between the US and its allies on the one hand and China on the other.

As its military clout grows, Beijing senses the possibilities for threatening America's forward military presence and its strategic alliances on China's periphery. On its part, the Biden administration is talking about strengthening its military capabilities to deter Chinese assertiveness, offering political reassurance to its allies, strengthening its alliances and broadening its partnerships.

The relative harmony among the major powers since the normalisation of US-China relations in the 1980s, the collapse of the Soviet Union by 1991, and the emergence of Asean-led regional cooperation have lulled Asia into a comforting narrative about ineluctable Asian integration.

Both the US and other Asian countries did not understand the intensity of China's great power aspirations. China had no reason to be satisfied with a prominent place in the US-led regional order. It wants to make its own. The claim is very much in tradition with the history of great power relations. All such claims, however, have consequences, as others seek to safeguard their own equities.

ASIAN NATIONALISMS

Even more important, Asia has underestimated the significance of entrenched nationalism in its midst, not just in China but across the region. Beijing has had longstanding territorial claims against its neighbours – on land and sea. Some of them were settled when China was reconnecting with the region. Some were not.

China today has the military power to redeem many of these claims. That it is doing so purposefully should not come as a surprise. Here again other nationalisms, for example in India, are equally passionate with territory and are willing to resist Chinese efforts, despite the great asymmetry in power and huge costs of that resistance.

That takes us to the larger question of nationalism and Asian unity. It is indeed interesting that high hopes on constructing Asian unity over the last century have inevitably ended in failure as nationalism continued to trump other transcendental identities such as pan-Asianism and regionalism.

The idea that "Asia is one" was articulated by the likes of Japan's Okakura Kakuzo and India's Rabindranath Tagore at the beginning of the 20th century. Besides cultural figures, political leaders like Sun Yat Sen and Jawaharlal Nehru, too, were enthused by the idea of Asian unity. But translating that into practical outcomes was not easy. It was also clear that the slogan of Asian unity could easily be misused.

For example, it was Japan, which was on an expansionist spree in the inter-war period, that proclaimed "Asia for Asians". The slogan was indeed a thinly veiled attempt at establishing Japanese hegemony in Asia.

But the reaction against Japanese expansionism was not uniform across the region. At least some in Asia saw merit in aligning with Japanese imperialism to defeat European colonialism.

It was not easy for Asian nationalists to come up with a common strategy against the shared threat of imperialism, for they fought different imperial powers. In India, the national movement extended strong support to China's struggle against Japanese imperialism. Yet when World War II broke out, Mahatma Gandhi chose to focus on throwing the British out of India rather than work with Britain and China to defeat Japanese imperialism.

The efforts to construct Asian unity after the war turned out to be unsuccessful. Although widely romanticised, the conferences in Delhi (1947) and Bandung (1955) revealed the deep differences among Asian elites on a range of issues – including the approach to the West, attitudes towards communism, the choice of national economic strategy, and the role of capital, foreign and private. Some smaller Asian countries were worried about the great power ambitions of China and India and the potential role of the large Chinese and Indian communities in South-east Asia.

This daunting context of post-war Asia makes the triumph of Asean-led regional integration all that much more impressive.

DISSIPATING FORCES

But now, the two external factors that facilitated the transformation of Asia – Sino-American entente as well as the shared commitment to economic globalisation in Washington and Beijing – are dissipating.

The "extreme competition" with China that Mr Biden promised is not limited to geopolitics. It involves economics, trade and technology. Mr Biden's focus on an international economic policy that works for the US middle class and Mr Xi's focus on dual circulation seek to limit American and Chinese exposure to the global economy.

To be sure, there will be some cooperation between the US and China. At Anchorage, the two sides explored the intersection of their interests on climate change, North Korean nuclear weapon proliferation, Afghanistan and Iran. But unlike in the recent past, that will not limit competition in other areas.

Asia had it good when the US and China got along. The region will have to do more than merely wish for a return to the happy times. Asia must prepare to cope with the military and economic conflict between the world's foremost powers that will be played out on its terrain.

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