

By Invitation

US-China rivalry: Towards proxy wars?

As the contest intensifies, so will the imperative for proxy fights at different levels across Asia



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For The Straits Times

Although most of Asia is not interested in a new Cold War between China and the United States, the escalating dynamic between the two superpowers is very much interested in Asia. Few chancelleries in the region would want to choose between China and America, but that is not going to stop Beijing and Washington from persuading key actors in the region to take sides.

Consider two recent developments. Bangladesh, which has a solid relationship with Beijing, was publicly warned recently by China's Ambassador in Dhaka Li Jiming against warming up to the Quad. The so-called Quad is the framework for a security partnership between the US, Japan, Australia, and India. Bangladesh moving closer to the Quad, Ambassador Li argued, would do "substantial damage" to Dhaka's ties with Beijing.

During his visit to Washington last week, South Korean President Moon Jae-in was apparently under much pressure to endorse the current American critical views on China. The joint statement issued by Presidents Moon and Joe Biden did have some boilerplate references to the Pacific and the Quad. Among other things, it expressed concerns about the freedom of navigation in the South China Sea and underlined the importance of maintaining peace in the Taiwan Strait.

Even though Mr Moon did not explicitly criticise China, Beijing promptly warned South Korea "not to play with fire" on the

Taiwan question. China's Foreign Ministry spokesman reminded Seoul that "the issue of Taiwan... concerns China's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and thus shall not be interfered with by any external forces".

Bangladesh and South Korea have very different international orientations, but both have come under new pressures from the China-US rivalry.

Bangladesh is a non-aligned nation and is just graduating out of the category of least developed countries. It was among the early supporters of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Few would have thought of Bangladesh as a strategic prize for anyone. But here was China forewarning Bangladesh amid speculation that Delhi, Washington and Tokyo were stepping up their outreach to Dhaka. Put differently, no country big or small is going to escape the consequences of the gathering confrontation between China and the US.

South Korea is a longstanding military ally of the US but has substantial economic ties with China. Like much of East Asia, South Korea has enjoyed the benefits of a harmonious relationship between Washington and Beijing over the last four decades and more. That period has come to an end now.

ALLIANCES AND COALITIONS

If then US President Donald Trump signalled a new desire to confront China, his America First policies alienated allies like South Korea and Japan in Asia as well as its European partners. The Biden administration is going about the confrontation with China in a more systematic way, rejuvenating its traditional alliances in Asia and Europe and strengthening new coalitions like the Quad.

This is reflected in plans by the US to convene an in-person summit of the Quad leaders this autumn with a focus on

infrastructure to take on the China challenge. Mr Kurt Campbell, the administration's Indo-Pacific policy coordinator, said on Wednesday: "We can do everything right in Asia, but without an economic strategy, it's hard to be successful. That's what Asians are looking for as we go forward... we're ambitious about the Quad."

China is pushing back in the meantime. It imposed retaliatory sanctions against Europe after Brussels imposed sanctions on China accusing it of genocide in Xinjiang. As the conflict escalates, the pressure will mount across Asia. Beijing is stepping up efforts to undermine US alliances in the region and forestall new US-led coalitions. Washington is trying to strengthen its old military alliances, turn partners into allies,

and neutrals into partners.

With the growing capabilities of the People's Liberation Army, China is applying pressure on America's forward military presence that has dominated Beijing's eastern waters for decades and trying to push it back. The US, meanwhile, is working to strengthen its deterrence capabilities in the Western Pacific against China. While the military competition looms large, it is unlikely that China and the US would embark on a deliberate hot war given the huge costs of one. This was very much in keeping with the Cold War. The consequences of a nuclear conflict dampened the impulses for a war between the US and the Soviet Union. But it also opened the space for proxy wars in third countries where they battled for political

and ideological influence.

MANY KINDS OF PROXY WARS

Proxy wars came in different forms. One involved Washington and Moscow aligning with competing neighbours to steer the regional balance in their own favour. We saw that across Asia, including the Korean Peninsula, South-east Asia and the Indian sub-continent, as well as in the Middle East and Africa.

The superpowers were also sucked into a deeper level of conflict – civil wars within nations. Sometimes they supported governments against rebels, and on other occasions they promoted armed rebellion against states. In the 1980s, the final decade of the US-Soviet Cold War, Washington supported insurgencies against regimes friendly to the Soviet Union in Cambodia, Afghanistan, Mozambique, Angola and Nicaragua, to name a few. Some of the consequences from these civil wars – most notably in Afghanistan – continue to unfold more than four decades later.

There were also interventions of a different kind short of the use of force. These included covert actions, propaganda wars to shape public opinion, promotion of preferred narratives, influence operations on policymakers, and reorientation of ruling elites, including leaderships of the armed forces and political parties.

Could this US-Soviet past be the future of Sino-US proxy wars in Asia? The US, of course, has a long experience of intervening in local wars. For all the talk in Washington about ending the "forever wars", the US is unlikely to give up on wars of intervention. While there is no stomach for large-scale occupations of the kind we saw in Afghanistan and Iraq, Washington is likely to continue its interventionist strategies amid its rising stakes in the Indo-Pacific.

China claims it does not intervene in the internal affairs of other states. The record speaks otherwise. Maoist China backed revolutionary forces and insurgencies across Asia in the 1960s and 1970s. It justified these in the name of fighting imperialist interventions.

Under Deng Xiaoping, China focused on economic development and curbed the impulses for a revolutionary foreign policy. But a rapidly rising China soon saw the need for interventions in third countries to secure a growing range of interests.

These include enhancing border security against terrorists from abroad, protecting commercial investments, evacuating diaspora, supporting friendly regimes, gaining access to critical natural resources, exporting arms, winning contracts for mega projects, securing facilities to sustain power projection across the seas, building new alliances, and limiting US influence.

THE QUAD AND THE BRI

We have indeed begun to see this play out. The US and its Quad

partners have stepped up their campaign against China's BRI by offering potential alternatives. In Sri Lanka, India and Japan have jointly bid for a Colombo port terminal. In the Pacific Islands, Australia is moving with Japan to outbid China on submarine cable projects. Japan, which has a long tradition of developmental assistance in Asia, has an ambitious Partnership for Quality Infrastructure.

But there is no doubt that the scale and scope of China's BRI remain unmatched and now include the health sector and outer space.

The digital domain has already become contested. After the Trump administration's campaign against Huawei, the Biden administration is determined to offer serious competition to China's lead in a range of advanced technologies. The decision to get Samsung to invest in chip production in the US and initiating a vaccine production partnership with South Korea were among the highlights of President Moon's visit to the US.

DOMESTIC DISPUTES

What about the prospects for more dangerous interventions in the internal affairs of other nations? Few Asians would want to imagine such a prospect, but it certainly can't be ruled out. The risk of external interventions rises when domestic political consensus breaks down in a country.

Whether the US and China want to intervene or not, the demand for political and military support against their local rivals is bound to grow in civil war-like situations. To make matters more complicated, proxies have minds of their own and often suck their patrons into a larger commitment than originally bargained for. For now, a deepening domestic crisis makes Myanmar a potential site for a proxy war.

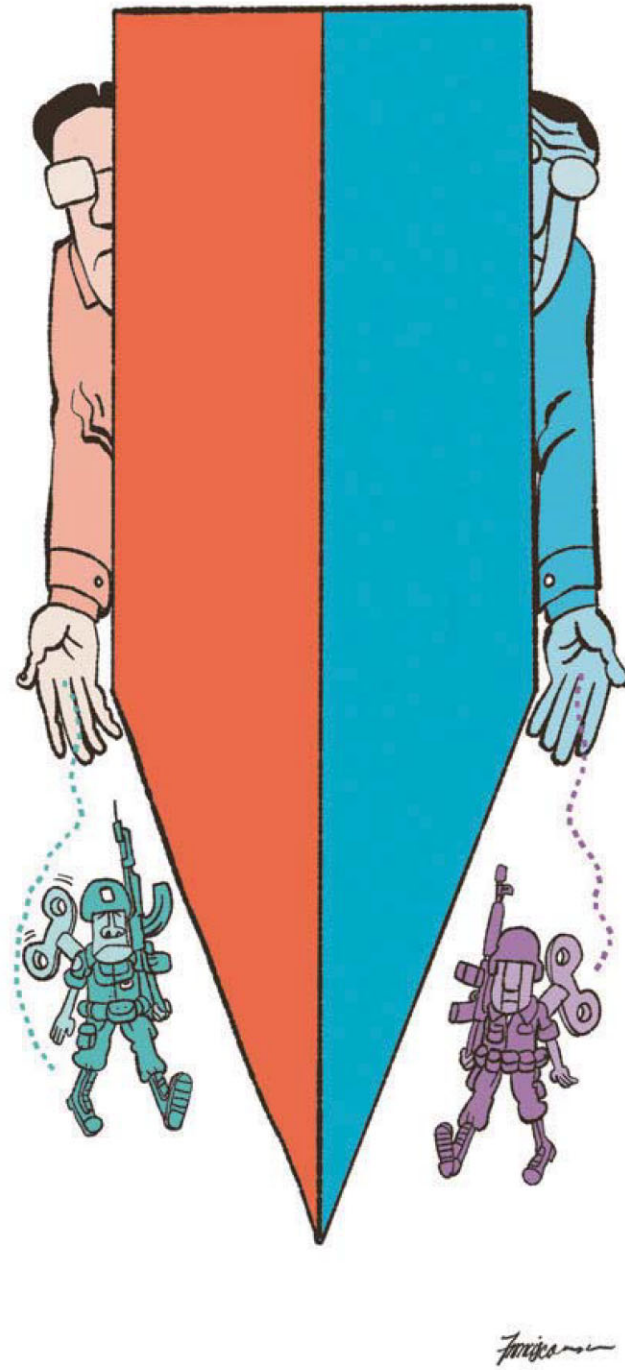
To make matters worse, the US and China are not the only powers interested in proxy wars. An assertive Russia is rediscovering its tradition of intervention. Meanwhile, many regional powers in the Middle East – including Iran, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey – are actively engaged in proxy wars. In South Asia, Delhi and Beijing are already locked in a severe competition for regional influence that varies from country to country.

The only way for East Asia to avoid similar competition is to prevent its internal political disputes from becoming intractable civil wars through political pluralism and mutual accommodation.

Otherwise, internal conflicts will inevitably intersect with Sino-US rivalry and raise incentives for intervention on both the demand and supply side.

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