

Charm and China in a multipolar world

Time and patience are needed for a multipolar superstructure to emerge. In the meantime, it is in China's interests to know when to go hard or soft in its relations with others.

George Yeo

Let me use the analysis of Karl Marx – that there is an economic base, and there is a superstructure. If we look at the economic base, there is multipolarity. Whereas in the superstructure, multipolarity will take time because of how history has developed.

This is because the Western world has been used to dominating the world for a long time, so it will take time for that mentality and the institutions, which were derived from that mentality, to change. And China must not underestimate the difficulty of changing the superstructure. The domination is in the international media. It's in international organisations. It is an intellectual way of thinking.

But even the idea of multipolarity is objectionable to many Americans. They still believe that they are the main dominant power in the world, not only economically, but morally.

Now, there's no point in getting angry about this. And a debate will not resolve this issue. This is a problem of the superstructure. It will take time.

I know many Chinese people are very angry, so they are very happy when the foreign ministry spokesman adopts a wolf warrior attitude and hits back. Hence, when the European Parliament made comments about Xinjiang, China hit back. And China felt good about hitting back. When Australia took a position which was very pro-America, China retaliated economically. And the Chinese people are happy that the country is strong, firm and prepared to react.

But this is not necessarily a wise thing to do.

I think Chinese people have a great wisdom, which is "to be patient". Sometimes to have the knife placed near your heart and not to react – that is wisdom.

Unfortunately, the Chinese system operates in a certain way. Officials are afraid of their bosses. So when they say things, it is not necessarily to persuade somebody else. It is also to please their bosses.

We can understand this in Singapore because we have the same phenomenon in Singapore. People are more afraid of their bosses than of their audience. I don't think you can change this system because this system is the product of a long civilisation. But the bosses can give more room to the subordinates, so that the subordinates know that they can be more tactical.

A WEIQI LESSON – LITTLE THINGS MATTER

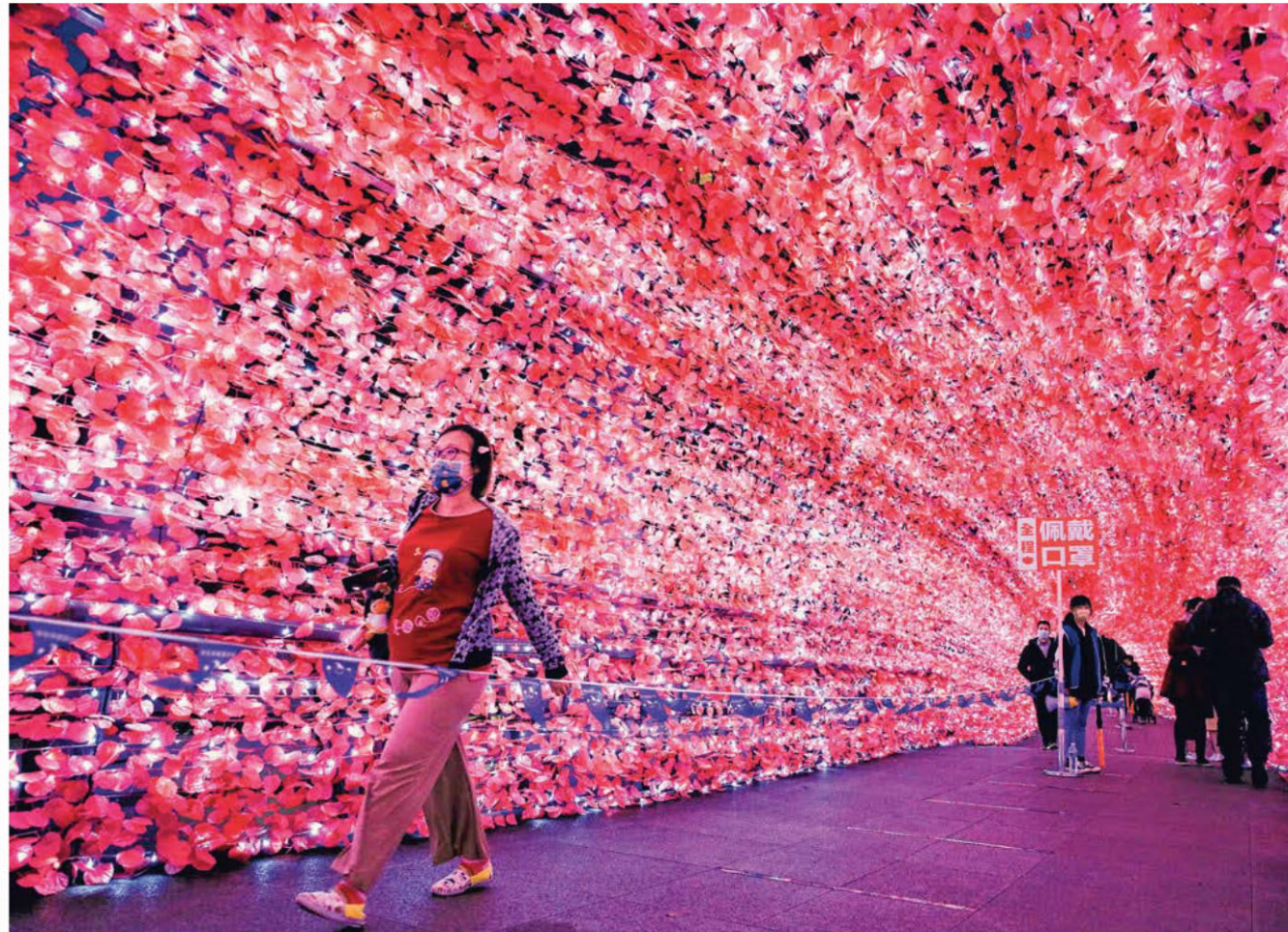
I have had time during this Covid-19 period to learn weiqi. But the more I learnt it, the more difficult it became for me.

Because you can have a great strategy, you can have a long-term view, but if on the little things you make mistakes, you will lose.

So achieving the multipolarity in the superstructure requires a lot of attention to little details. If mistakes are made, these mistakes, over time, can affect the economic base. And this can affect China's future. And lead to an unhappy world.

To begin with, the objection to multipolarity is firstly from the United States.

Many Europeans don't accept this because they think that Europe is a separate pole from the US. But they believe that the Western people should dominate. Suddenly to see Chinese people stand up to them, look them in the eye and say "no" – many of them can't accept it. They can accept criticisms from one another, but



A corridor of lights simulating pink cherry leaves at a Christmas theme event in New Taipei City, Taiwan. When China deals with Taiwan, policy and demonstration of force are involved, but it must also win over the hearts of Taiwanese people, says the writer. The internal factors are just as important as the external factors. PHOTO: REUTERS

when China criticises them, they become very upset.

Sometimes, it is important to "give face" – provided giving face is not seen as weakness. So sometimes, when we've achieved a strong position, it's good to give some face. Otherwise, the loss of face will lead to an irrational reaction, which can harm both parties.

INDIA TIES: IMPORTANCE OF 'GIVING FACE'

Take the example of the skirmishes on the India-China border. In the early 1960s, Jawaharlal Nehru had a Forward Policy, and that led to the China-India war. India lost, and the wound has still not healed.

Until recently, many people in China did not know there was such a war. If you point to a map and ask them "Where was the war?", they will not be able to tell you what happened. But in India, it was never forgotten.

China believes the recent skirmishes were due to India making moves, small moves, on the border. Of course, in India, they have a different view.

The important point is that India lost many soldiers. China thought: "It's good that India has learnt a lesson." But in fact, India has lost face. And the reaction is completely disproportionate to what happened.

So suddenly all Chinese companies in India were affected. India made a decisive move to reaffirm its membership in the Quad and to support it.

So I asked myself, could China have handled it better? I do not know the details. But if I were China, I would find a way to give face to India.

Take the time Prime Minister Narendra Modi made a special effort to be close to China – when President Xi Jinping visited India, Mr Modi hosted Mr Xi in his home state of Gujarat. After that, Mr Xi hosted the Indian leader in Xi'an and took him to the Giant Wild Goose Pagoda, where monk-scholar Xuanzang went back to after leaving Nalanda in the seventh century. It was Mr Modi who proposed regular retreats with Mr Xi. So Mr Xi invited Mr Modi to Wuhan. At that time, no one in India knew where Wuhan was. Of course, today everybody knows. And the next visit was in South India, in Tamil Nadu, in a small seaside town called Mahabalipuram. Why did they choose Mahabalipuram, a port city during the reign of the Pallava Dynasty? There's a temple

with many Hindu gods. Among the hundreds of Hindu gods, there is one Chinese face. Indian scholars believe the Chinese face is that of Faxian, a fifth-century Buddhist monk who went to India and then went back to China via Indonesia. When Faxian was in India, he visited Kanchipuram, then the capital of the Pallava Dynasty.

Between India and China, two ancient civilisations, when they deal with each other, there must be a sense of cultural context. So giving face to each other is very important.

I'm not supporting one side or the other. So I thought, no, this is not the proper way for two ancient civilisations to interact with one another.

EUROPE – ADDRESSING THE HEART

China has great respect for European civilisation. I remember watching the documentary series *The Rise Of The Great Powers*. Every episode – whether it was about Portugal, Spain, Holland, Germany, France, Britain or Russia – was produced with admiration. In many ways, Europe had the greatest impact on world civilisation.

Because of the small area, they're always divided. This is like the Spring and Autumn period and the Warring States period in China – when people were struggling with ideas, and many different schools of thought blossomed.

When dealing with Europe, it's good to begin with its history. Then we're not just addressing the mind, we're addressing the heart.

But sometimes, because China feels that it is being unfairly treated, it hits back. And the Chinese people are very happy, on social media. But this is not good for China.

Because it is better to understand how others think and how to get into their heart. This requires a lot of thought. It requires a lot of creativity.

All of them, the European countries, know that China is an ancient civilisation... with lots of accomplishments. But in their heart, they do not want to feel inferior to China. So China should explain itself, but without boasting or being arrogant.

China knows that in the West, there's a lot of anti-China sentiment. That it's gone from bad to worse. And you say: "Oh, it's because of America." That is a superficial analysis.

America is an influence, only because the Europeans already feel that way. Take Lithuania. Lithuania has gone out of its way to

poke China in the eye, so China gets very angry with Lithuania. The Baltic republics – Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia – for years they've suffered under the Soviet Union. So they look at the world through that historical lens.

So, sometimes you have to be hard, sometimes you need to be soft, but knowing when to be hard and when to be soft is an art. It is not easy. It requires judgment.

Going back to Sun Tzu's *The Art Of War* – know yourself and know your enemy. It is not just about the military and economy, it is also about civilisation and emotion. You know your own civilisation and your own emotions. You must also understand the other party's civilisation and emotions.

I'm not saying that this is easy. But it will come at lower cost if we handle this with greater skill.

CHINA-US RIVALRY: SINGAPORE'S POSITION

Singapore's position is the position of Asean. Asean makes Singapore's position more comfortable. Asean will always be neutral. Asean will not take sides. Asean is already China's biggest trading partner. The more important China is to us economically, the more Asean will want to diversify. The more Chinese investments come to South-east Asia, the more China markets are important to us, the more Asean countries will welcome America, Japan, India and Europe.

This is natural. If you were in Asean, this would be your position.

In 2002, when then Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji and Asean leaders were in Phnom Penh, they signed the framework agreement for the Asean-China free trade agreement. I remember two statements made by Premier Zhu.

One, if after 10 years the trade imbalance is too much in China's favour, then we shall renegotiate the trade agreement. And the second statement was remarkable. It said China does not seek for itself an exclusive position in South-east Asia. When I heard it, I thought: "Yes, Premier Zhu understands what is in our heart. Our fear."

Singapore is close to the US for obvious reasons.

I was in the air force for many years. I was in charge of buying aeroplanes and weapon systems. Our most advanced weapon systems are from America.

Why do we choose America? Because without America, who will ensure that the Strait of Malacca and the Singapore Strait will remain open for international

shipping? Naturally we are afraid of our neighbours. Because they're bigger than us. But if there's a superpower in the region, then everything will be kept open.

Maybe one day, China's navy will be so encompassing that it will ensure freedom of navigation all over Asia. However, I think it will be very unwise for China to have such an ambition.

Because this is not the 15th century. If you do that, India, Japan and other countries will organise themselves against China. So from our perspective, naturally we want the Americans to be around.

TAIWAN AND SOUTH CHINA SEA

Will Singapore help America (on) Taiwan? I think Singapore's position has been very clear on this matter. Why did the Wang-Koo talks (Taiwan's Straits Exchange Foundation chairman Koo Chen-fu and his Chinese counterpart Wang Daohan) take place in Singapore in 1993? Why did the Xi Jinping-Ma Ying-jeou talks happen in Singapore in 2015?

It's because we have a very clear view that there is one China, that there should be reunification.

Of course, we don't want it tomorrow because we have an interest in a separate Taiwan. But we do not take the US position that it should happen far into the future. I remember Lee Kuan Yew described it in this way. He said that China wants Taiwan and China to converge early. America wants it to be parallel lines going to the horizon. Singapore's position is that it should converge.

The other issue is the South China Sea. This must be settled by negotiation. No country can give up its claim. Their own people will not accept it.

The nine-dash line used to be the 11-dash line. In the early 1950s, Mao Zedong and Ho Chi Minh marked out their boundary in the Gulf of Tonkin. So the 11-dash line became the nine-dash line. Maybe over time, from nine-dash to seven-dash line, five-dash line, no-dash line. But this will take a long time.

In the meantime, we should have peace and joint economic development. This is why the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea is very important. And I think it is important for China to take a magnanimous approach. After all, China is a very big country. The other countries are small. So China can afford to be generous. Because this will bring peace. This peace is of great strategic importance to China.

SINGAPORE'S ROLE IN RESOLVING TAIWAN ISSUE

Singapore does not desire a role in this. It's too dangerous.

Today, the Kuomintang has a new chairman, Eric Chu Li-luan, my old friend. So I immediately texted him my congratulations. I said: "You have a critical mission of the greatest importance."

After a few hours, President Xi wrote him a congratulatory letter. And within a few hours, Mr Chu replied to Mr Xi. I think that's very interesting because there was a rival to Mr Chu – Chang Ya-chung. He was too pro-mainland. If he becomes the KMT candidate and stands for elections against the Democratic Progressive Party, he's sure to lose. So I see the letter from Mr Xi to Mr Chu as a way of telling Mr Chang to cool it.

But when China deals with Taiwan, you need policy, you need demonstration of force, but you must also win over the hearts of Taiwanese people. The internal factors are just as important as the external factors.

I watched live on Oct 9 the commemoration of the 110th anniversary of the Xinhai Revolution in Beijing. Then on Double Tenth Day, I watched live, the celebrations in Taipei.

In Beijing, the big picture in the middle was of the "father of modern China", Sun Yat-sen. The celebration in Taipei never mentioned "110". There was no mention... of the "father of the nation". They only mentioned 72 years of the Republic of China in Taiwan.

Ma Ying-jeou, Chu Li-luan, they were all very angry. So within Taiwan society, there is a debate.

China has to think, you are involved in an internal debate, that's not good. You need to make some subtle moves. The most important quality for China to have at this point in time is one word: charm. You need charm.

It's easy to say, but how do you achieve it? That's not easy. You can only achieve it through understanding, in great detail, the person you're trying to charm. What's in his mind, what's in his heart.

This is a shorter version of an article first published on thinkchina.sg. Lianhe Zaobao's English-language e-magazine. The article was based on an edited transcript of remarks by former foreign minister George Yeo in his speech to students of the Master in Public Administration and Management programme at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy on Nov 3.