

By Invitation

# How China looms large over the chessboard of European security

Where once the contest between European colonial powers influenced Asian geopolitics, the dynamic has flipped



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What happens in Europe does not necessarily stay in Europe. Russia's twin-track dialogue on European stability with the US and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato) is bound to have significant consequences for Asian security. Although China is not part of the agenda in these talks, it looms large over them.

Russia has mobilised about 100,000 troops on the border of Ukraine and laid out a sweeping set of demands for Nato. Russia is seeking nothing less than a reordering of European security. Its leader Vladimir Putin wants an end to the further expansion of Nato to the east, especially to Ukraine. It also wants Nato to limit its conventional military activities in Central Europe and withdraw nuclear weapons and missiles from the region.

These demands were widely dismissed as unrealistic, for they amount to nudging the United States and Nato out of Central Europe and ceding a sphere of influence to Russia.

Despite Moscow's evidently unacceptable demands, the attempt to negotiate with a gun pointed at Ukraine's head and the insistence on an immediate settlement, Washington has agreed to talk. Clearly, there is more than meets the eye.

To be sure, both sides are talking tough – Washington promising a “decisive response” to any Russian invasion of Ukraine and Moscow threatening war if its demands are not met immediately. But evidently, there is much interest in both capitals to begin a new conversation on European security.

What does this mean for Asia? Although Europe and Asia tend

to be viewed as separate strategic theatres, there has always been a dynamic geopolitical interaction between the two regions in the modern era.

In the colonial age, the competition between European powers for territory, resources and markets in the East profoundly influenced Asian geopolitics. Underlying the current map of Asia is the story of war and peace between European colonial powers.

When the rest of Europe did not follow the example of the Bolshevik uprising in 1917, Russian communist leader Vladimir Lenin turned his attention to promoting revolution in the East. This set the stage for a prolonged ideological contest between the West and Russia that had a deep impact on the domestic political evolution of Asian nations.

When the West and Russia turned against each other after a brief alliance against Nazi Germany in World War II, the impact on Asia's international relations was enormous. The US, which was empathetic to the anti-colonial movements in Asia, had to curb its enthusiasm as it worked with the European imperial powers to launch the containment of the Soviet Union. America's anti-communist imperatives in Europe seemed to constrain American warmth towards the emerging Asian nationalism that was trying to overthrow the colonial yoke under Europe.

As the US focused on countering the Soviet Union around the world, many in the region were drawn into Cold War alliances. Navigating the rivalry was also the main preoccupation of those who remained non-aligned. Others learnt to leverage the possibilities of playing Russia and the West against each other. It is easily forgotten that the US-Soviet rivalry might have been “cold” in Europe, but it was rather “hot” in Asia where the two sides fought long and bloody “proxy wars”.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and with it the prolonged schism in Europe opened the door for an extraordinary period of peace,



progress and regional integration in Asia. Now, great power rivalry has returned to Asia and regional integration is challenged by notions of economic decoupling.

## ROLE REVERSAL

This time though, there is a big difference. In the past, Asia was the secondary theatre in the intra-European rivalry. Today, it is the rise of Asia, especially China, that is shaping European geopolitics. If China was the object of European great power rivalry in the 19th and 20th centuries, it is Beijing that now drives change in the European and global order.

In the Cold War, Mao's China was the junior partner to the Soviet Union; today, Beijing is the senior partner in the relationship with Moscow. Although Russian military power is more impressive than China's and both sides proclaim a relationship based on equality, there is no denying the widening gap between the two. China's gross domestic product at US\$16 trillion (S\$21.8 trillion) is nearly 10 times that of Russia.

In the Cold War, China was a “card” played by the US against the Soviet Union. Today, China is the peer of the US and Russia might be the card. Asia was mobilised to win the Cold War in Europe; today,

Europe is being mobilised by the US to join the battle to rebalance Asia, or the Indo-Pacific if you will. Once the US defined the Indo-Pacific strategy, its European allies followed suit.

Russia has been the exception. Moscow has consistently rejected the Indo-Pacific construct as aimed at containing China. The last few years have seen significant expansion of the Sino-Russian relationship. Moscow and Beijing, which have had a chequered relationship since the middle of the 20th century, now proclaim that their ties have never been as close as they are today.

Trade is growing rapidly between China and Russia, joint exercises between them are growing in number, frequency and complexity. Moscow and Beijing are also talking of joint development of weapons and greater coordination of regional and global policies.

Since taking charge, the Biden administration has made addressing the China challenge the principal focus of US foreign and security policies. Whether it was the emphasis on domestic rejuvenation or revitalising US alliances, China has been at the top of the White House's mind.

It was inevitable that President Joe Biden would take a fresh look

at Russia. While president Donald Trump's national security strategy argued that both Russia and China were threats to the US, Mr Biden's team is suggesting that America's contradictions with China are more important than those with Russia.

Defying the conventional wisdom in Washington, Mr Biden decided on an early meeting with Mr Putin, which took place in Geneva at the end of his European trip last June. Mr Biden signalled personal respect for Mr Putin, acknowledged Russia's role as a great power in the international system and offered to address Moscow's concerns.

But creating a new framework for a less confrontational relationship between the West and Russia will not be easy. Given the deep polarisation in the US – Democrats who blocked Mr Trump's moves to normalise ties with Russia will surely find the Republicans returning the favour. In any event, Russia seems to have few friends in Washington.

Europe too is deeply divided on Russia. While France and Germany might prefer an accommodation with Russia, the Baltic states and former members of the Warsaw Pact like Poland are deeply opposed to any compromises with Russia. Ukraine, of course, is

already nervous that it will be sacrificed by Washington for a deal with Moscow.

## RUSSIA'S PRICE

Some in Washington believe that it might be possible to separate Russia from China in a move akin to Mr Henry Kissinger's outreach to China at the turn of the 1970s to counter the Soviet Union. Others question this assumption and insist that the new partnership between Russia and China and the US is too deep to break. They argue that the West has no option but to confront both Beijing and Moscow simultaneously.

The essence of the security dialogue between Russia and the West beginning next week is about exploring a path in between. The US would want Russia to stop being a spoiler in America's Indo-Pacific strategy and reduce its burdens in Europe.

Russia would hope that it could get enough concessions from the US to enhance its position in Europe. For all its warmth towards China, Russia's centre of gravity is in Europe and it is eager to return to its historic role as an important element of the continent's great power system.

The White House is realistic enough not to expect that Moscow will break from Beijing, a powerful neighbour, to become a “pawn” in Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy. But a reasonable relationship with Russia will cool European temperatures and allow the US to focus more on the China challenge in the Indo-Pacific.

Mr Putin surely understands the new dynamic between the US and China. If a new Cold War congeals between Washington and Beijing, Moscow does not want to find itself locked in on China's side and lose its strategic autonomy in the new bipolar world order.

After nearly two decades of deepening strategic ties between Moscow and Beijing, any change in direction in the Sino-Russian relationship will matter much to the Asian balance of power.

Deeper conflict in Europe would mean that Russia would inevitably draw closer to China and reinforce Beijing's growing weight in Asia. A relaxation of tensions in Europe would imply that Russia can move to a more nuanced approach to the US-China conflict in Asia and develop its natural impulses to become a more independent force in the East.

In the end, the proposition that China has triggered pressures for a reconstitution of the European order is arguably the most fascinating element of the new dynamic between Europe and Asia.

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