



A convoy of the armed forces of the separatist Luhansk People's Republic in Ukraine's Luhansk region on Feb 27, three days after Russia invaded Ukraine. According to the writer, Russia's assault on its neighbour has suddenly and inadvertently delivered a pop-up model of a post-Cold War world order that has the possibility of becoming a fixture and evolving to a new New World Order. PHOTO: REUTERS

Ukraine crisis

The new New World Order

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has offered a pop-up model for a new global order



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For The Straits Times

What a difference a week makes in global affairs. Before Feb 24, strategic analysts viewed the emergence of the New World Order after the Cold War as an organic tug and pull of competition, including zero-sum competition, between the United States and China. Sometimes one power attenuated the shape in its direction, sometimes the other, using military groupings and alliances and economic initiatives.

The shape of the order was still to be determined and no one was willing to come down strongly yet on what would emerge. That just

happened with Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Russia's assault on its neighbour suddenly sharpened the lines by inadvertently delivering a pop-up model sooner than we thought, a pop-up model that has the possibility of becoming a fixture and evolving to a new New World Order.

What we are seeing is the hardening of the division between US and Europe (and treaty allies such as Australia, New Zealand, Japan and South Korea) on one side against Russia, with the potential of drawing in China on the other side.

But it is not just simply a Cold War realignment of the past. It will be far more complicated. It is a division that will not be based simply on security and military issues, but will affect the flow of investments, trade and technology.

It would lead to a more advanced degree of decoupling and very likely a messy one as the interdependence of the economies of the US, Europe and

China is strong. So is the dependence on Russian energy in Europe.

This division carries the strength of ideological conviction, lining up democracies against autocracies. Finland and Sweden, understanding fully the security challenges, have indicated their interest in Nato membership, something they have avoided strenuously, and the last thing that Russia wanted.

Where will other countries fall in this division? Much will depend on what happens in the next couple of months with the war. Will this be a short war or a longish war with substantial losses on both sides? Will Russia stop at Ukraine? A Russia that extends war beyond Ukraine will probably cause pause even among friends and a prolonged internationally isolated Russia cannot be an attractive pole. How will Mr Vladimir Putin and Russia emerge? How will the Western alliance deal with Russia?

A MORE COMPLEX COLD WAR

The new New World Order will be a more complex iteration of the old Cold War Order for several reasons.

China at the time of writing is seeking a position that would

balance its "no limits" partnership with Russia, uphold the UN principle of sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries and protect its vital economic interests, that is, not to be caught in the cross hairs of sanctions and secondary sanctions and becoming collateral damage.

China wants stability in its relations with the US and Europe. Unlike Russia, China is strategically cautious, not reckless. Ripping up the world order is not in its interests. China will want some space where its economic interests and transactions can be preserved, but the in-between space, as a friend of Russia and working with the US and EU, would be harder to reconcile following the Ukrainian invasion.

China will be pushed to take the side of Russia because it knows no matter what it does to help Ukraine, the US will give it no credit in the bilateral relationship. The Chinese also understand their interests in the end are fundamentally opposed to the US in their perception of the world order.

Since January, it was evident the US and the EU would be focusing their energy and attention on Ukraine and Russia. After the war

started, it was more clearly so. The quagmire would not be the war itself as Nato troops cannot actually be sent to Ukraine to fight with the Ukrainians, but what follows is sorting out the red lines in Europe for Russia and what to do about it.

Keeping watch over Russia's next moves would be a Nato and European preoccupation. It has thus been argued that the winner in this Ukraine war would be China, which would then be able to move and develop its relationships in Asia.

But as developments unfold, that is not at all the clear outcome. While the US and its Western allies will be distracted by Ukraine and Russia, China will have to deal with the complications of the Russian relationship and how that impacts on its global economic interests and potential sanctions. The Chinese would not want to be further hit as domestic economic growth is a key concern. They already face the gamut of Trump and Biden administration sanctions.

A key question in this reconfiguration is where India stands in the new New World Order. Although a Quad ally, India's abstention votes in the UN Security Council and on the UN General Assembly resolution on Ukraine must have seriously discomforted the US.

The Soviet Union and India were staunch allies, and Russia and India continue to share a warm relationship. India is heavily dependent on Russia for military arms and equipment. India has deep concerns about China along

its Himalayan border, but deeper concerns about Pakistan and Afghanistan to its west. Russia remains a useful ally, especially as China has a close relationship with Pakistan. Russian vetoes on Kashmir in the Security Council are most helpful for India.

But trends currently indicate that India, when it comes to the crunch, will be lined with the West when dealing with the rise of China, even as Delhi will preserve an area of independence of action even on security matters.

The 10 countries in Asean each has its own interests but will watch the dominant global trend. Only Vietnam and Laos abstained in the UN General Assembly (UNGA) resolution on Ukraine. Most Asean countries, with an eye to China, are likely to opt for a US-led security order but are comfortable with a China-led economic order.

The same conclusions can be made about Middle East countries. In security matters they are likely to fall with the US-led order but would maintain independence to cooperate with China so long as the relationship works to their benefit.

Latin America is an interesting continent. If the UNGA vote on the Ukrainian resolution were an indicator, the tilt is towards the US – all Latin American countries except for Cuba, El Salvador and Nicaragua voted for the resolution. Many regard themselves as democracies and a couple of countries, Argentina and Brazil, are major non-Nato allies of the US. But each country has different histories with the US and strong economic relations with China.

While for a long time analysts were holding out calling the international situation a return to the Cold War, we are now witnessing the old Cold War Order re-emerging with some differences.

The US and Europe have been re-energised and resolute in setting the rules on how to respond in the international context in the case of flagrant aggression against a sovereign state. Neutrality may no longer be a European option.

THE THIRD SPACE

But there will be a group of countries in other regions that will split alignments on security and economics. They do not see this as contradictory nor an exclusive alignment. They want to occupy a third space but move to cooperate with the US or with China depending on the issue. They do take stands on critical issues.

In the last three decades since the end of the Cold War, many countries in Asia have developed their economies and political systems and taken initiatives to enhance their interests. They have a sense of their own agency.

In this context the leaders of the new New World Order would win more adherents by listening to their concerns and allowing this third space to exist.

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