

By Invitation

# Realism, rules and empathy all matter in a turbulent world

While rational self-interest is a key driver in any country's foreign policy, it would be a mistake to frame it too narrowly or to neglect international law and ethical principles



**Terence Ho**

For *The Straits Times*

The war between Russia and Ukraine has drawn a range of responses from governments and citizens around the world. Many have expressed outrage at Russia for its flagrant violation of international law and the growing humanitarian fallout from the invasion. Conversely, among those inclined towards a "realist" interpretation of global affairs, some pin blame for the war on the expansion of Nato to Russia's doorstep.

Realpolitik is a given in an inherently anarchic world; it would be naive to assume that states are guided by anything beyond self-interest. However, it is in the enlightened self-interest of all nations to uphold and reinforce international law and humanitarian principles as the foundation for a more stable and harmonious world order.

It was not long ago that globalisation seemed inexorable, and with it a more interdependent, prosperous and peaceful world. Commentators pointed to the rise in multilateral engagement and free trade, the global decline in absolute poverty, and the fall in combat deaths from military conflicts over the decades.

## QUESTIONING THE PREMISES FOR PEACE

Proponents of "capitalist peace" theory have suggested that growing trade interdependence would reduce the likelihood of armed conflict by tilting nations' cost-benefit appraisals in favour of peace.

Other political analysts have claimed evidence of a "democratic peace". This is the hypothesis that democracies are less likely to initiate war, particularly against other democracies, due to greater public accountability, checks and balances. Whereas an absolute ruler may be driven to war by pride or ambition, a democratic government can only garner the requisite public support for war

when enough citizens perceive the benefits to outweigh the costs.

There is also the notion that nuclear deterrence has made the world fundamentally safer. By guaranteeing mutually assured destruction, it is believed that no rational state would risk all-out nuclear war. This is of course premised on rationality on the part of decision makers. Where governments are accountable to the public and decision-making is collective, the likelihood of nuclear warfare appears remote.

In the light of recent developments, however, none of these premises for peace seems particularly compelling.

While economic sanctions would not be expected to have much impact on a country as isolated as North Korea, the threat of unprecedented sanctions by the West failed to dissuade Russia from invading Ukraine – this despite Russia being a G-20 economy plugged into global networks of trade and investment.

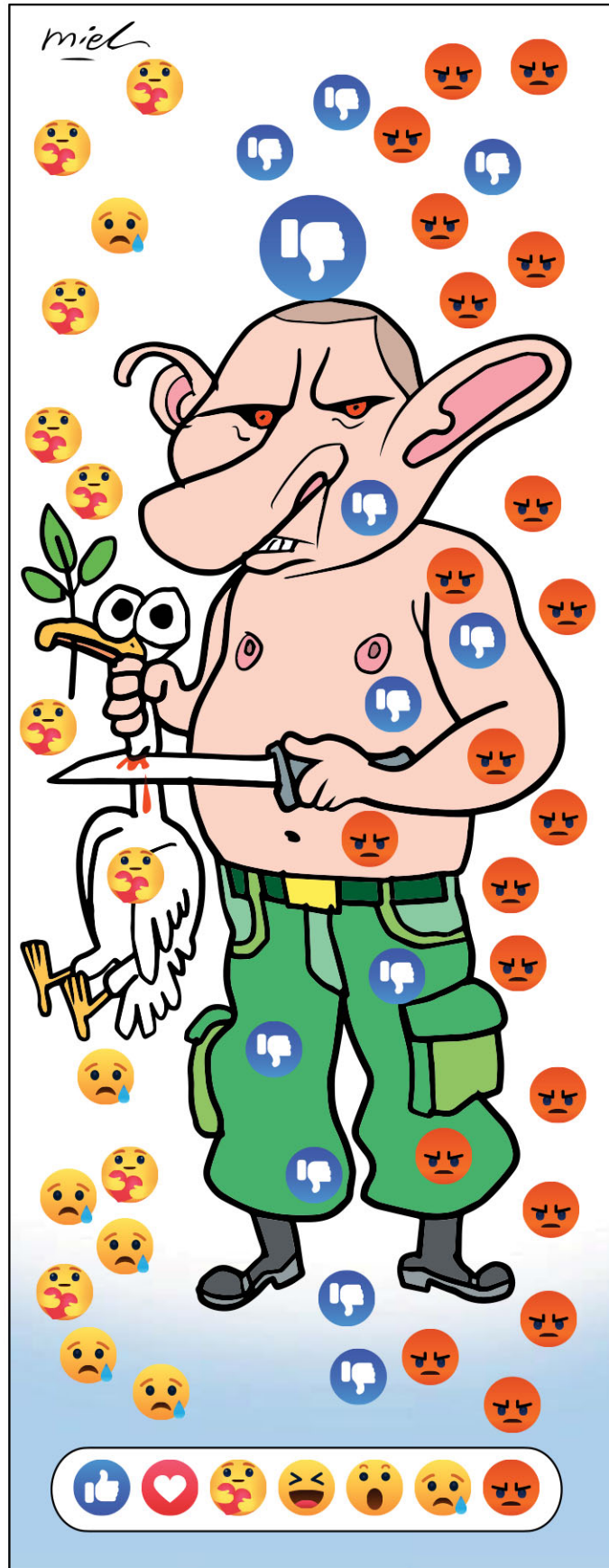
As for democratic peace, humanity's march towards "the end of history" – the "universalisation of Western liberal democracy" according to political scientist Francis Fukuyama – appears to have stalled. Last year, the Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index fell to its lowest level since its inception in 2006, as authoritarianism continued to advance globally.

Republics may themselves be hijacked by demagogues and turned into dictatorships; historical antecedents include the Roman empire and Nazi Germany. Besides the obvious examples of democratic reversals in countries such as Russia, even mature democracies such as the United States could be at risk of sliding into authoritarianism, as American historian Timothy Snyder has warned.

When absolute power is vested in one man or a small coterie of decision makers, the national good may be subordinated to the aims of self-preservation, ambition or revenge. In such a situation, even nuclear war cannot be ruled out.

## SELF-RESTRAINT AND PRUDENCE NEEDED

The fragility of peace impels realism for all actors on the world stage. It calls for self-restraint on the part of major powers, and prudence on the part of small



states. Instability is stoked when the world's most powerful states pursue narrow self-interest or overreach on the basis of what they can do rather than what they ought to do.

American political scientist John Mearsheimer and other commentators have warned for years that the eastward expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation would provoke a reaction from the Russian Bear. Russia, too, has now overreached, following its gains from war with Georgia and the annexation of Crimea.

While overreach may ultimately work to the detriment of major powers, their leaders will in all likelihood continue to fall prey to hubris in the pursuit of myopic self-interest. Small nations must therefore recognise the cold logic of great power competition, and make the necessary military and

diplomatic preparations on this basis.

This means investing in defence capability and being clear-eyed about geopolitical and security threats.

It will not do to put misguided faith in other countries riding to the rescue. There are limits to the help that small states can expect to receive in the event of war. As the Ukraine conflict demonstrates, the US and European powers are hesitant to risk military confrontation with a nuclear-armed state. Europe's dependence on Russian energy has also circumscribed the political will to step up economic sanctions on Russia.

## INTERNATIONAL LAW AND HUMANITARIAN PRINCIPLES MATTER TOO

The acceptance of realpolitik does not imply that governments

and citizens should acquiesce to the injustice of war and the contravention of international law.

To ignore international law and humanitarian principles would be to accept the law of the jungle, where might is right, and essentially give up on the multilateral project that arose from the ashes of World War II.

Given the limitations of the United Nations and the International Court of Justice in their ability to pass resolutions and enforce judgments against errant states, it is the responsibility of all nations to impose costs on states that violate international laws and norms.

Besides, the loss of lives, displacement of millions and injustices suffered should elicit in each of us a human response, regardless of political affiliation or geopolitical leanings.

In trying to garner support for Ukraine, it does not help that the West has in the past acted inconsistently with international law and principles, a notable instance being the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, which former UN secretary-general Kofi Annan indicated was not in conformity with the UN charter.

Europeans have also not been as welcoming to refugees of other war-torn nations as they have been with those fleeing Ukraine.

This has left the door open to charges of Western hypocrisy and reinforced existing distrust of and antipathy towards the West in many developing countries.

Rather than let Western shortcomings blunt sympathy for Ukraine, surely the correct response should be a greater commitment to uphold international law and ethical principles?

While the fallout from the Ukraine war is of a different scale, it is also important to keep the spotlight on the suffering endured by people in other conflict zones, such as Ethiopia, Yemen and Syria. There should not be any forgotten wars, and the international community must be equally seized with the urgency of bringing durable peace to other war-torn nations.

Citizens have a part to play as empathy and moral outrage are not inconsequential in realpolitik. Public opinion has a bearing on foreign and domestic policy in all except the most autocratic states. For instance, citizens of Western nations have to varying extents expressed willingness to accept higher energy costs as a necessary consequence of sanctions on Russia.

Multinational corporations, responding to public pressure, have been pulling out of Russia since the onset of the war in Ukraine.

In a world that is in part anarchic and in part rules-based, it is incumbent on governments and citizens to tilt the balance in favour of order and peace.

This means condemning violations of international law and norms in unequivocal terms, and seeking to collectively punish infractions as appropriate.

A broader view of national interest ought to include the strengthening of the rules-based international order from which most countries, including Singapore, benefit.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• Terence Ho is associate professor in practice at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.