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 shown 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 pleaded for the war on the expansion of NATO to Russia’s doorstep.

Realpolitik is given to 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 no coincidence that globalisation seemed tenable, and with it a more interdependent, prosperous and peaceful world. Commentaries 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 silencing nations’ cost-benefit assessments in favour of peace.

Other political analysts have cited 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. When an absolute rule may be driven to war by pride or ambition, a democratic government can more easily requisition public support for war.

When enough citizens perceive the benefits of striving for the common good, there is also the notion that nuclear deterrence in the world fundamentally safer. By guaranteeing a 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-makers have 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 at 20-century plunged 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.

Russia 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 a 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, the threat of 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 by the world’s most powerful states parvus 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 provide a reaction from the Russian Bear. Russia, too, has now overstepped, following its gains from war with Georgia and the annexation of Crimea.

While we may eventually 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 recognize 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 rising 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 constrained the political will to step up economic sanctions on Russia.

INTERNATIONAL LAW AND HUMANITARIAN PRINCIPLES MATTER TOO

The acceptance of realism 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, under which might is right, and essentially give up 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 incalculable sufferings inflicted by each act of a human response, regardless of political affiliation or geopolitical leanings. 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 charters.

Europeans have also been not 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 and 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 an extraordinary 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 the durable peace to other war-torn nations.

Citizens have a part to play as empathy and moral outrage are not inconsequential to popular public opinion. Public opinion has been 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.

The war that is in part anemic and in part rules-based, is incumbent on governments and citizens to lift the balance in favour of any one interpretation.

This means condemning violations of international law and norms in unequivocal terms, and seeking to collectively punish those imposing even if it means foregoing the suffering endured by people in Ukraine.

A broader view of national interest ought to include the strengthening of the rules-based international order in the interest of all, regardless of whether most countries, including Singapore, benefit.

* Terence Ho is associate professor at the Law and School of Public Policy.