

Commentary  
**The 'Third Space'  
gains traction**

As the war drags on, expect more displays of independence from countries taking stands in their own interest, not along the basis of alignment.



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For *The Straits Times*

Russia's invasion of Ukraine caused a profound rift in the world. The United States and Europe reacted with an unprecedented unified response immediately to oppose this blatant aggression, and US allies took the same position. Russia and China were cast as the opposing side.

In early March, I wrote about the new, new pop-up world order. It is reminiscent of the Cold War but much more complicated.

I highlighted the emergence of a number of countries that wish to belong to a third space, not aligning fully with the US and its Western allies nor with Russia and China. Many countries did not follow the US and Europe in imposing sanctions on Russia. Of the 193 members at the United Nations, 150 countries did not. None in Latin America, the Middle East and Africa. Israel did not.

Neutrality in Europe would be a thing of the past, I argued. We have just seen Finland and Sweden's joint application for fast-track membership in Nato. Turkey's veto, thought to be an obstacle, may not be a hard one, seeking reassurances from Sweden on its handling of terrorism.

One hundred days on has only confirmed these outlines. But will it stabilise there? Will there be more nuances and shifts as the war enters its fourth month, even among America's allies as economic costs are factored into calculations? Or will the resolve be strengthened and divisions run deeper?

What to expect going forth?

**THE THIRD SPACE**

First, we are seeing the notional third space become more and more a reality of positioning. We should expect a continued display of independence of action, with countries taking stands in their own interest, not along the basis of alignment.

On the issue of suspension of Russia's membership on the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) after reports of civilian killings by the Russian army in the city of Bucha, 93 countries voted for the resolution, 24 countries against and 58 countries abstained. India, South Africa, Saudi Arabia and Brazil, which abstained from condemning Russia and did not introduce sanctions, continued to abstain on this issue. All the Gulf countries abstained.

Singapore, which supported the UN resolution to condemn the invasion and introduced sanctions on Russia, abstained on its suspension from the HRC. Six African countries voted in favour of suspension as well as 14 Latin American and Caribbean countries, which was totally

different from supporting sanctions. Turkey voted to condemn the invasion, did not impose sanctions but voted to suspend Russia from the HRC.

Second, it will be a long war. Initially everyone asked how Ukraine could stand up to the massive forces of Russia. From what we can see and read from reports, Ukrainians have great courage and resolve to keep on fighting for their sovereignty and territory. They will not give up the fight.

Russian President Vladimir Putin must demonstrate victory given his massive mobilisation. Nato decided rightly that Russia cannot be allowed to prevail in this invasion. Substantial state-of-the-art weapons, training and intelligence were provided to the Ukrainians by the West. This has helped tremendously.

There has already been a perceptible shift in the thinking about the war. Initially, Nato's objective was to help Ukraine roll back Russian forces from its territory.

It is also clear that the objective of the US has shifted. Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin declared in April in Kyiv: "We want to see Russia weakened to the degree that it can't do the kinds of things that it has done in Ukraine." Many of the European countries, especially the smaller neighbouring states of Russia, seem to share this view.

The level of weapons transfer has been unsurpassed. More has been promised. Ukraine may demonstrate the principle that in an asymmetrical war, the continued external transfer of sophisticated arms and ammunition to a middle-sized country can make a difference between victory, defeat or stalemate in a conflict with an overwhelming power. This means the war will continue, deteriorating into local or regional conflicts in the future.

**UNITY OF PURPOSE**

Third, if this is a long war, will there be rifts in the alliance?

There is remarkable unity of purpose between the US and Europe that came with Feb 24, but dealing with the energy question may be a thorny one for the Western alliance. The Group of Seven took a stand, but many of the European countries are still buying Russian oil, pledging to phase out by 2030. But on May 31, the European Union moved to ban most of Russian oil imports by end-2022.

Japan has indicated it will consider reducing Russian oil imports in a way that minimises an adverse impact on the people and business, but it would maintain its stakes in the Sakhalin-1 and Sakhalin-2 oil fields. Some countries like Hungary and Bulgaria are highly dependent on Russian energy. The energy issue may see differences emerge in Europe on how to handle Russia, and beyond energy, how to handle Russia on the ending of the war.

There is the further question of whether French President Emmanuel Macron will pursue European strategic autonomy, but with the Ukraine war, Europe seems to be voting for Nato. Another idea is his European Community as a larger and easier-to-join grouping than the EU for countries like Ukraine, and the return of the United Kingdom.

The issues will require full discussion. But these differences and bickering will not amount to a breakdown of unity for now in the Western alliance on Ukraine. But if the war drags on, unity is not assured. Should Russia's threats and war brutality grow, the US,

Europe and its allies will be more unified.

**CHINA'S RESPONSE**

Where does China stand in this new world order? The bilateral relationship between the US and China was in a terrible place even before Ukraine. China and Russia's "no limits" friendship raised alarm in the West. How has China been affected by the Ukraine war?

I never believed China would be prompted by the Russian action to rush to take Taiwan. Many Western commentators and politicians were quick to accuse China of supporting Russia's war. But US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen have said there is no evidence that China is supporting Russia's war efforts or breaking sanctions so far. China is uncomfortably walking a fine line. It does not want to incur secondary sanctions. After all, China has a US\$3.5 trillion (\$4.8 trillion) trade with the West, and US\$150 billion trade with Russia. But in the end China will keep its relationship with Russia, as it is a major ally to counter the West.

China must have made many notes from the Ukraine war. I will highlight two.

The Gulf War in 1991 produced the first "shock and awe", which was the unimaginable state of advancement of US weapons as the world watched the war on CNN in real time. Americans believe China speeded up its programme to build its military capability as a result of the Gulf War.

The Ukraine war produced a second "shock and awe". It revealed the effectiveness and lethality of never-before-used financial sanctions against Russia. The power of global payment system Swift to stop money flows and the immediate freezing of the financial reserves of Russia must have shocked China.

The US continues to regard China as its long-term adversary, not Russia, even with the intensive focus on Ukraine. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, in the administration's long-awaited speech on China policy on May 26, called for vigorous competition with China, but at the same time said: "We are not looking for conflict or a new Cold War. To the contrary, we are determined to avoid both."

The US sees China as the only country with the intent to reshape the international order and the economic, diplomatic, military and technological power to do it. The US intends to "shape the strategic environment around Beijing to advance our vision for an open and inclusive international system".

Perhaps acknowledging the new geostrategic realities of countries wishing to belong to the third space, Mr Blinken argues the US is not asking countries to choose sides but wants to offer a choice. The speech proposes increasing direct communication and cooperation with China in some areas even while highlighting competition. The posture on Taiwan remains one of strategic ambiguity.

As the world order reshapes, we will be dealing with two opposing sides but we will not see complete decoupling, not between the US and China. Their economies are too interdependent. Both will try to build high walls around specific areas, technology for the US and financial matters for China. Both will try to build coalitions of friends and partners, but these countries will have overlapping memberships in the competing initiatives. And the relationships are thick. This mitigates the sharpness of division. It is possible and even imperative that the US and China find some common areas to work on. It is safe to say in Asia, we do not support the decoupling of the two economies or the isolation of China.

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