THINK-TANK

An eternity of geopolitics

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W
hen I was a diplomat, I tended to say that diplomacy was the world’s second-oldest profession, hastening to add that it bore no relationship to the oldest. The reason why it is old is that since human beings began organising themselves into tribes, there were rivalries, frequently over territory. Diplomacy was therefore invented to handle the eternal challenge of geopolitics.

In the modern world we live in, where the prospect of a war between any two major powers is a remote possibility (partly because of the advent of nuclear weapons), many might believe that geopolitics has taken a back seat. But one stark reality about the 21st century that we should insist in is that geopolitics will return with a vengeance, though many of the geopolitical rivalries will be played out beneath the surface. The naked eye will not catch them. We need a sophisticated vision to understand the new geopolitical context that is emerging. And that terrain could become treacherous.

History teaches us that whenever a dominant power begins to lose power relatively, new opportunities are created for rising powers. We are living in such an era. The United States is slowly beginning to lose the unquestioned dominance it had over the global order.

Fortunately for the world, it has been on balance a benevolent power. The 1945 rules-based order it created — with multilateral institutions like the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, or GATT — was a great gift to the world. This multilateral framework, in the remarkable explosion we have seen in both global economic growth and trade, was the ultimate guarantor of this global system, we would not have had global stability.

The American people were happy to see their country act as custodian of this benign multilateral order because they believed they would naturally emerge as the biggest winners of the system. Now, in a remarkable and geographically reversed, fewer and fewer Americans believe that they will benefit from global openness. Instead, more and more believe that they will lose their jobs and prosperity to China and India.

In the next 10 years, there will be an intense debate within the US as to how much global responsibility it should retain. We cannot predict the outcome of that debate. Populist pressures could lead to greater protectionism. If the US walks in that direction and stirs retaliatory actions from others, we will see the gradual unravelling of our benign global order.

The big problem the world faces today is that there is no other global leader to assume America’s role. The European Union would be a natural candidate. Indeed, it has played a constructive role in supporting the US. However, it has no capability to step into Washington’s shoes.

The reasons are complex but they revolve around the EU’s highly divisive decision-making process. Because it has to reconcile the interests of 27 member states, the EU is often driven to the lowest common denominator. The Irish veto of the Lisbon Treaty destroyed the chance of having a single foreign minister for the EU. To paraphrase Dr Henry Kissinger, there is no single telephone number to call in Europe.

To make matters worse, the EU has become geopolitically incompetent. Its greatest civilizational achievement of creating a zero-prospect of war within the EU has to be balanced against its failure to create zones of security and prosperity beyond its immediate borders. All the long-term threats it faces are going to come from its immediate neighbouring environments: North Africa, Middle East, the Balkans and the Caucasus. The recent Georgian episode provides a powerful case study of the EU’s geopolitical incompetence. It must also be emphasised though that the new models of rules-based global cooperation will in one way or another be inspired by the EU.

History teaches us that relations between the world’s greatest extant power and the world’s greatest emerging power are usually tense. Hence, we should see rising geopolitical tensions between US and China. Instead we are seeing the opposite. Why?

The reason is simple. China is emerging as the most geopolitically competent rising power. Luck has helped. Both Sept 11 and the recent Georgian fiasco, which created new tensions between the West and Russia, were geopolitical gifts to China. But the Chinese also know how to capitalise on their luck. They have been shrewdly helpful to the US on some of its crucial geopolitical challenges, including Iraq, Iran and North Korea. The US reciprocated by squeezing Taiwan’s president Chen Shih-chih when he was in power. Hence, the Taiwan issue, which could have been a flashpoint in US-China relations, has become a vivid example of cooperation between the two. This is a geopolitical miracle.

China has adopted a low profile, wisely adhering to Deng Xiaoqing’s advice not to aspire to global leadership. But this low profile has now become a double-edged sword. It has defused America’s worry about China. But it also prevents China from aspiring to become the custodian of the global system. India, the other possible candidate, is also not ready to assume such a position.

Hence, at a time when globalisation is creating a global village, we have a situation where all the major powers — US, EU, China and India — are shunning global leadership. This is a prescription for trouble. If the global order deteriorates and we move away from a rules-based regime, we will inevitably see new geopolitical rivalries emerge. When that happens, our dependence on the world’s second oldest profession will never end.

The only consolation for Singapore is that it is geopolitically competent. Now that I am no longer a diplomat, I can create my own index of geopolitical competence. I would give the former Soviet Union a two — for losing an empire without a shot being fired; the EU a four — for reasons given above; the US a seven — for remaining the world’s greatest power; and China a nine — for emerging as a great power with such skill and deftness. And I would give Singapore a 10 out of 10.

This is the result of the extraordinary leadership we have enjoyed. At a time when we may be moving into treacherous geopolitical terrain, the real challenge for Singapore is to maintain its extraordinary leadership.

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