

# Battle of Narratives in Cold War 2.0

BY DERWIN PEREIRA



Power transitions involve both material and ideational change, the latter in the form of discursive contests over the direction of history. These contests throw up thinkers on international relations who seek to show the way forward. Today, a majestic power transition is underway, from the international order established after World War II to a new order that is apparent in the rivalry between America and China for global supremacy. In the process, a new generation of international thinkers is coming to the fore. They include policy intellectuals from Singapore.

One such thinker is Dr Lynn Kuok, who holds the Lee Kuan Yew Chair in Southeast Asia Studies at the Brookings Institution in the United States. In June, she testified at a hearing of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on East Asia and the Pacific. The subject of the hearing was the strengthening of US-ASEAN ties to combat Chinese influence. Dr. Kuok entitled her testimony “Economics is Security: Rebuilding U.S. Strategy in Southeast Asia.”

Dr. Kuok went for the jugular. Building on the theme of economics being the source of security, she said: “As Beijing holds itself out as a champion of free trade while Washington swings a wrecking ball at the global trading system, Southeast Asia’s economic ties with China are likely to deepen. Over time, strategic alignment could follow – either by design or necessity.”

Meanwhile, it remains unclear “whether Washington sees China as a long-term strategic competitor or is instead edging toward accommodation in pursuit of political or economic deals. A grand bargain, or even a more limited economic deal, could entail concessions on issues vital to regional allies and partners... Uncertainty over U.S. goals, and whether regional interests could be sacrificed in the process of achieving them, sows doubt about U.S. reliability.”

Her testimony placed these developments in urgent perspective. With an eagle eye on the America First philosophy that now defines U.S. foreign policy, her presentation noted: “China builds influence through sustained, long-term engagement. If the United States fails to do the same, it risks creating a strategic vacuum that Beijing will seek to fill. Without allies and partners, U.S. leadership in Asia – and globally – will erode, leaving the country weaker abroad and ultimately poorer at home.” To put it simply, America First cannot mean America Alone. A poorer world will not produce a richer America.

Dr. Kuok – who earned her doctorate at Cambridge and has held fellowships at Yale Law School, Harvard Law School, the Harvard Kennedy School and other institutions – is one of the new generation of international thinkers who should be able to contribute to the ability of the public sphere, in Singapore as elsewhere, to comprehend what is really happening to the world.

### Astringent thinker

Dr. Kuok is an astringent thinker, one who goes against conventional wisdom, is prepared to stake her professional reputation on the



soundness of her countervailing views, and is willing to speak truth to power – power in her case being dispersed in an unravelling global status quo.

Astringent thinkers have done much for the world during previous global power transitions.

One was the iconic British economist John Maynard Keynes. His 1919 book, “The Economic Consequences of the Peace”, criticised the Treaty of Versailles, which had concluded World War I, for the harsh economic terms it had imposed on defeated Germany. Germany’s subsequent economic crisis, its eventual rearmament, and the cancerous growth of Nazism, all of which helped to precipitate the outbreak of World War II in 1939, vindicated the thrust of Keynes’s prescient forebodings.

The two furtive decades of peace between the two world wars are the subject of the British scholar E.H. Carr’s “The Twenty Years’ Crisis 1919-1939”. Written on the eve of the second global conflagration, the book makes a foundational contribution to the Realist understanding of international power transitions. This approach remains excruciatingly relevant in today’s transitional.

The American political scientist Francis Fukuyama’s 1989 article, “The End of History” (later expanded into a bestselling book), was far less successful in its predictive power. With a penchant for triumphalism that ill suits a serious thinker, Fukuyama argued that the direction of human history, viewed as a struggle between world-encompassing ideologies, was largely at an end. Apparently, the globe had settled on liberal democracy after the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Well, it had not. The Earth revolves around the Sun: It settles for nothing else. The gravitational rise of authoritarian China as the heir presumptive to the global throne threatens to consign Fukuyama’s views to the dark boondocks of intellectual history.

Far more successful as a reading of hobbled historical evolution is the Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington’s idea of the Clash of Civilisations, developed in the 1990s, which argued that humans’ cultural and religious identities would be the primary source of conflict after the Cold War. That pessimistic view rings true, not least because the thwarted agency of international socialism, which once threatened international capitalism and hence closed national ranks within it, has opened the way for internecine cultural, ethnic, and economic conflicts in the ideologically victorious capitalist sphere today. What else is the transitional conflict between the United States and China, both

products of the global free market, all about?

John Mearsheimer, another American scholar, knew that and much more. His 2001 book, “The Tragedy of Great Power Politics”, is based on the reality of an anarchic international system that forces the great powers to maximise their share of world power merely to preserve their current positions. He is blunt: America should contain China. Not that his prescription is guaranteed to produce results. A Chinese Mearsheimer would well argue that China should resist America’s containment to persevere with the creation of a Sinic world order. That is what China is doing through its Belt and Road Initiative. This globally ambitious economic project contours its military assertiveness in the South China Sea, the launchpad of its naval forays into what the United States calls the Indo-Pacific.

A grave power transition is underway in the region, which exists without war now but which is always open to that possibility. After all, war is the continuation of politics by other means. Equally, then, politics can be the continuation of war by other means. That is how power transitions take place: Predatorial war creeps up on unwary peace.

That is why astringent thinkers are important. They think beyond the comfort of peaceful times.

In doing so, they create fresh intellectual premises. Keynesian economics sought to save capitalism from its own excesses – so that Communism would not prevail. Carr was a Marxist who went far beyond the historical materialist conception of history prevalent in pro-Soviet circles in his time to provide a sophisticated Realist interpretation of events with the hope, no doubt, that Nazism would not prevail. Huntington’s answer to Fukuyama would have sounded counter-intuitive to American ears in the 1990s, but that answer has survived because it did not fall into the teleological trap of treating history as a process marked by inevitability and therefore finality. Mearsheimer’s Realism sought to regain intellectual ground for America against the siren currents of Liberalism and Constructivism, those other two grand theories of International Relations. Astringent thinkers like them, and Dr. Kuok today, offer higher-order analyses of global affairs that are uncomfortable but true. Therein lies their value.

### New Realities

The expectation is that more such thinkers will come to the fore as a new Cold War begins. The key difference with the previous Cold War, as I have noted, is that the current conflict is

occurring within the capitalist sphere between the liberal and authoritarian versions of the same economic philosophy: the supremacy of the global market system. The West – essentially the United States and the European Union – is fighting desperately for its ideological survival against a revisionist China, which believes that the time has come for it to show its global hand. Indeed, what the world is witnessing now is the long aftermath of the Global Economic Crisis of 2008-2009, which almost brought the Western/liberal ordering of global affairs to an end. That order managed to recover, thus delaying China’s bid for hegemony. But it might not be possible for the West to prevent indefinitely the emergence of China as a peer power that seeks global recognition and respect on its own terms.

In the interregnum that marks this latest power transition in world history, it is important for Asian countries that are caught between America and China to speak out. It is a truism that the grass gets trampled whether elephants make love or war. Hence, the geopolitical grass must have a say in how the moods of elephantine great powers affect it. In Southeast Asia, a region that lies at the heart of the Indo-Pacific, no country is immune to the dangers of war. After all, Southeast Asia was a cockpit of great-power rivalry in the first Cold War, leading to disastrous consequences, particularly for the Indochinese states. ASEAN has regained a degree of agency, if not autonomy, in Asian affairs since the fall of the Berlin Wall, but it would need to contemplate its future with a renewed sense of purpose if it is to stand a chance of determining its fate in Cold War 2.0.

Policy intellectuals must complement the voices of statesmen and market leaders in presenting a vision of Asia in the world that acknowledges and acts on new realities. This is an existential reality for Singapore, a country for which the rest of the world is its hinterland.

There is a battle of narratives that is accompanying the new Cold War – one premised on Western decline and the other on China’s growing influence.

There must be something in between, something better than either extreme.

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