Looking for trouble: Future world wars

ANY flights of fancy concerning a new era of international peace would have been weighed down by images of Bosnia, Somalia and Russia, for a start. Little wonder, then, that the key geo-political questions being asked were not whether conflict would occur again, but why and where.

One theory served as a focal point for the discussions at Davos. "The next world war, if there is one, will be a war between civilisations." Professor Samuel Huntington's simple thesis, in an essay entitled The Clash Of Civilisations?, continues to grip the imagination more than six months after it first appeared.

Its intuitive appeal is not surprising, considering the persistence of ethnic and nationalist conflict. Its timeliness, too, is beyond doubt. The world is witnessing a major shift in its economic centre of gravity, from the Western countries of Europe and North America towards the Confucianist world of East Asia.

The Huntington thesis addresses this process directly.

Differences between civilisations will become more important as the world gets smaller, he says. Conflicts between civilisations will be more frequent, more sustained and more violent than conflicts between groups in the same civilisation.

Non-Western civilisations, until lately passive players in international relations, will increasingly become actors in their own right. Indeed, the paramount axis of world politics will be the relations between "the West and the Rest", he says, borrowing a phrase from Singapore diplomat Kishore Mahbubani.

Prof Huntington was in Davos to present his controversial views. And to face his critics.

"Civilisations do not have conflicts; states do," said Professor Ghassan Salame, a Paris-based political science scholar. The distinction may be subtle, but it is an important one.

While different civilisations may have interests and values that clash with each other's, only states possess the instruments of war and thus exist as international actors. And the actions of states are determined by factors that go beyond, and may not include, the civilisations they represent.

Chief among those factors: economics.

Indian Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao noted: "The forecast that cultural and civilisational problems will beset mankind hereafter implies that today's economic problems will become irrelevant."

This was patently not the case, he said.

Even clashes that seemed overtly civilisational — such as religious fanaticism and ethnic nationalism — could, on deeper analysis, be found to have economic or other roots, he said. "To discover and remove those causes will be the real challenge of the leaders of the world."

Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto agreed. Politicians use nationalism, religion and ideology as clarion calls, but events were still determined by paramount economic interests, she said.

Identifying the roots of a conflict is no mere academic exercise.

When relations sour between two countries, much depends on how they define the situation. Disputes that are defined as political, economic or territorial can be grappled with through diplomacy. Civilisations, on the other hand, are all-encompassing, deep-rooted, and long-lasting. They cannot be put on a negotiating table.

If either or both sides see their tensions as a clash of civilisations, they increase the chances of locking themselves into a conflict of epic proportions — one that may then resolve itself only in suitably dramatic ways. For this reason, the clash of civilisations thesis has the makings of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Singapore's Ambassador-at-large Professor Tommy Koh is one who worries that the Huntington thesis may grow from prediction to prescription, from an essay of mainly scholarly interest to a foreign policy doctrine that shapes how the big powers behave. With the end of the Cold War, some Western intellectuals have begun to ask who the new enemies of the West are.

"Unwittingly, Prof Huntington's essay gives ammunition to those in the West who are looking for a new enemy, because it has identified two new enemies, Islam and the so-called Confucianist states of East Asia," he said. "He talks about the rise of East Asia as if it were a threat. It is only a threat if the West chooses to see it as such."

Such concern about the essay, first published in the Summer 1993 issue of Foreign Affairs, is not unfounded.

Prof Huntington says, of course, that he does not advocate any clash, but he advises the West to consider the foreign policy implications of his hypothesis.

His proposed long-term strategy is reasonable enough. As non-Western civilisations grow in economic and military might, he says, the West will have to accommodate them in spite of their different values and interests. This would involve developing a more profound understanding of the basic religious and philosophical assumptions underlying other civilisations, and of the ways in which their people see their interests.

"It will require an effort to identify elements of commonality between Western and other civilisations. For the relevant future, there will be no universal civilisation, but instead a world of different civilisations, each of which will have to learn to coexist with the others."

So much for what he advocates as the long-term approach. The problem is what he says the West should do in the short term. He is in favour of a closing of ranks.

The West should promote greater unity within its own civilisation, and draw in Eastern European and Latin American societies "whose cultures are close to those of the West". He even advocates that the West "exploit differences and conflicts among Confucian and Islamic states" to try to keep them weak.

All this, however, is bound to backfire, increasing mutual mistrust and undermining any efforts at cooperation. Thus his short-term prescription of containment may sabotage his long-term one of positive engagement.

China specialist Harry Harding of the Brookings Institute noted that some analysts in Washington are already talking about a strategy of weakening China by promoting its break-up into smaller parts.

Instead of declaring China as the enemy, he said, the United States should increase economic contacts across the Pacific to make the East Asian power more interdependent with the outside world. After all, China's sights are at present focused on integration with the world economy, not political hegemony.

Prof Huntington acknowledges that countries of non-Western civilisations may want to jump on the bandwagon of Western values and institutions. But he says there are obstacles to non-Western countries joining the West.

"They are least for Latin American and East European countries. They are greater for the Orthodox countries of the former Soviet Union. They are still greater for Muslim, Confucian, Hindu and Buddhist societies."

Thus cultures in the latter — essentially non-white — category are doomed to be on a collision course with the West, it seems.

This pessimistic view is not held only in the West. Some Singapore officials have come to a similar conclusion.

Minister for Information and the Arts George Yeo has said: "Just as the rise of the West was accompanied by innumerable conflicts among Westerners and between Westerners and others, the resurgence of the East will be as tumultuous."

To assume that the pendulum could swing back to the East smoothly would be "unrealistic and foolhardy", he said. "Such a hope flies in the face of human experience. It is not in the nature of the species."

IS THE future necessarily so bleak? Prof Salame did not think so. He said that encounters between civilisations in history show there have been long centuries of cooperation and commerce as well as conflict. He noted the topsy-turvy relationship among the peoples of the Mediterranean: the Europeans on the one hand, and the Middle Eastern and African peoples on the other. The conflicts included the Crusades, the colonial expansion of the 19th century, the Muslim conquest of Spain and the Ottoman expansion.

"But between these great events, didn't we witness one of the most important exchanges of techniques, of manuscripts, of languages, of technology and of culture?" he asked.

Prof Koh provided a contemporary example. Asean countries have enjoyed unprecedented peace and prosperity in the last 27 years, he said, without the advantage of sharing a common civilisation.

Indonesia has the largest Muslim population in the world, and Malaysia and Brunei have Islam as their state religion, he noted. The Philippines is largely Catholic, Thailand is mainly Buddhist — "while in Singapore we spread the risk" by worshipping a number of gods.

"Have these differences of religion, of language, of colonial background, prevented the six Asean countries from working together for the common good, to create a free trade area, to bargain with united strength with Japan, the United States, the European Union? It has not."

Similarly, the 16 economies of the Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation forum were not bound together by a common civilisation but by the trans-Pacific flow of investments and trade, he said.

Perhaps the strongest example of the integrative force of economic cooperation comes from Europe.

Despite the much-publicised troubles of the European Union, there is no doubt that the process of economic integration has achieved the main purpose for which it was started: to prevent another war between France and Germany; indeed, to make their economies so interdependent that war is rendered almost unthinkable.

Such cases suggest that although different cultures remain distinct from each other in language, religion and other ways, they may develop commonalities in the areas that count: those that increase the stakes in cooperation and make conflict against everyone's interests.

To Prof Koh, this is the dominant trend in international relations.

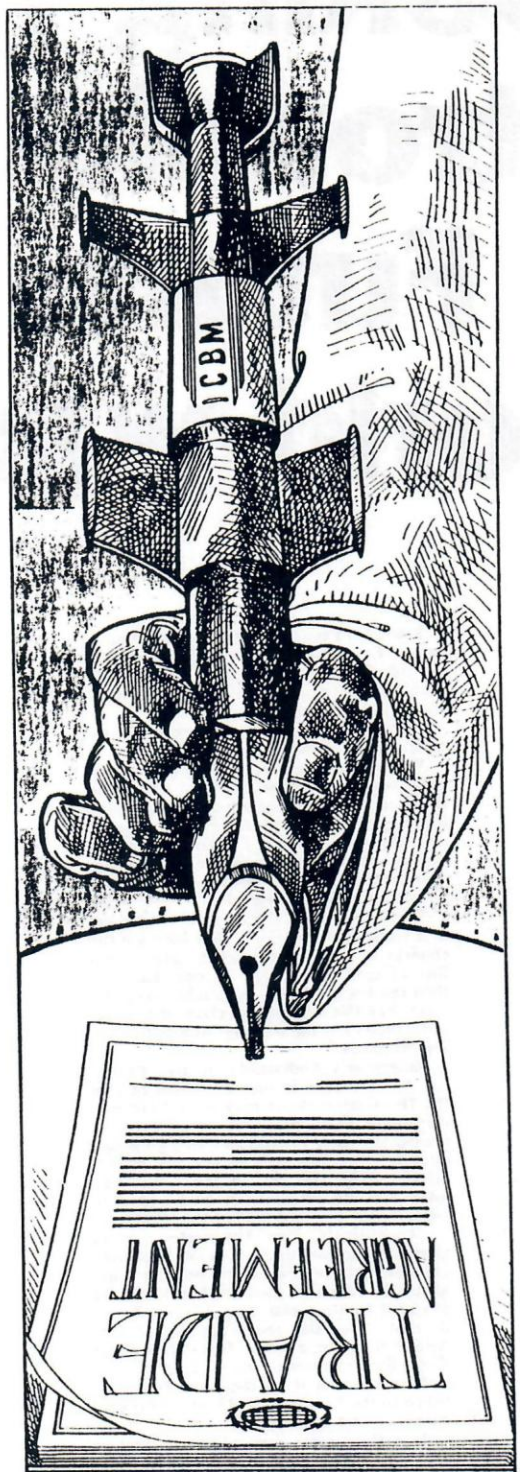
"Far from seeing a world that is divided by differences in culture and civilisation, I see a world that is increasingly being globalised and integrated, based upon mutuality of interests, based upon economic complementarity, based upon an increasing awareness that we are members of one human family and that we must take care of this one Earth that we inhabit," he said.

He identified three clusters of values, each pushed by a different dynamic force, but each helping to mesh the world together:

- Marketplace values: The failure of the centrally-planned economy is a universal phenomenon. It is being replaced by the logic of the marketplace.
- Modern scientific values: The values of modern science and technology, marketing and management, are also embracing the world, propagated by multinational corporations.
- Humanitarian values: These have been generated over time as a result of international discourse.

Although Prof Koh identified the US' proselytising on human rights as a source of friction with Asia, he felt the long-run trend was towards a consensus. The West's emphasis on individualism is being tempered by the realisation that this may have gone overboard and that it should be balanced with the common good.

Meanwhile, the communitarianism of the East is allowing more individual freedom, for the sake of the creativity and intellectual room a modern society needs, he added.



Perhaps even more significant is the fundamental shift in thinking about the nature of economic competition. It is no longer regarded as a zero-sum game in which a country can gain only at another's expense, but one from which all participants can benefit simultaneously.

THE leaders of two majority-Muslim countries, Pakistan's Ms Bhutto and President Suleyman Demirel of Turkey, stressed these universal values in their speeches. Both were anxious to distance themselves from fundamentalist Islam, the bane of the liberal West.

Ms Bhutto said there were two themes in Islam: the "vibrant democratic" and the "dying clerical", with her country belonging, obviously, to the first. She spoke of "the common values of justice and equity."

President Demirel said that using "rational fire-extinguishers" of secularism and democracy could help states avoid the fundamentalist traps. Every country, he said, could keep its culture and identity while defending international values like democracy, human rights, justice and fairness.

The view that the on-going shift in the balance of power must mirror violent ones in history may not have taken into account important differences in the modern world.

First, unlike in the past, the concept of the sovereign nation state and an international system is now firmly entrenched.

Although it is fashionable to scoff at the United Nations and other world institutions, there is little doubt that these have contributed to norms of international behaviour that simply did not exist before.

Former US President George Bush's "new world order" may be honoured more in the breach than the observance, but it is significant that it is internationally accepted as a worthy goal to aim for: "A world where the rule of law supplants the law of the jungle, a world where the strong respect the rights of the weak".

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The mercantilist theories of self-sufficiency that gripped great-power thinking in the past have been discredited, as countries realise that trade — even if slightly protectionist — is the only way to prosper.

Emerging countries are finding their interests served by being integrated with rather than isolated from the international system. The most irresponsible actors are likely to be the desperate who are given no say, not those who are admitted into the club. These include groups within nation-states whose rights are denied and whose interests are unrepresented by their political systems; and states that have been unable to gain a stake in the international system.

As Prof Salame put it: "It won't be a clash between civilisations, it will be a clash between those who have been included and those who have been left out in the cold."

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