Growing US-China conflict may not be bad for Asia

Smaller countries stand to gain from the contest for influence despite its risks

By Invitation

C. Raja Mohan
For The Straits Times

“We don’t want to choose between America and China” — that has been the mantra in East Asia for the last decade as the contest between Washington and Beijing intensified. It is a lose-a-game strategy that has driven the continuation of the relatively harmonious relationship between America and China that helped stabilise the region for more than four decades. But China’s neighbours in Asia never wanted that game to be played. They wanted an alternative, a new game, that could create a new kind of balance:

SMALL DIPLOMACY

One benefit has become evident quite quickly. Consider, for example, Beijing’s new small-diplomacy towards Tokyo and Delhi.

In the pre-Trump era, China appeared unassuming towards Japan and India. In the past few months, though, we have seen China reach out to both in large but not too conspicuous ways. In April, Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited India’s capital, New Delhi. Soon after, in May, US President Donald Trump travelled to Beijing. It was the first Chinese president to visit Tokyo in eight years. And then Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited Beijing in September. India’s small-diplomacy with Japan and China is already yielding big results, especially in the security cooperation between the two countries.

The Strait era, for example, had slipped into China’s orbit of influence, centred on America, the choice for the region would have had little meaning. The region’s leaders have had good reason to welcome renewed geopolitical competition and the prospect of a bipolar/multipolar Asia.

The conventional wisdom that small wars are hard to define does not stand up to close scrutiny. The history of US-Soviet confrontation in the second half of the 20th century offers a very different narrative.

For the sharp-witted and nimble-footed in Asia, the unfolding rivalry between America and China offers multiple opportunities for advancing their individual national interests.

Great power contest also demands considerable diplomatic discipline that treads the thin line between provoking a great power and exploiting it.

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