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Invasion of Ukraine

Consent & Trust in the World Order

By Joel Ng

SYNOPSIS

Power may order the world, but it is the consent and trust of smaller actors that allow the powerful to maintain their position. These signals should be heeded.

COMMENTARY

THE INVASION of Ukraine has brought unusually loud protests from unexpected corners. Singapore Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan did not try to mask it with diplomatic niceties, calling it "an unprovoked military invasion of a sovereign state". Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong added that "when treaties and diplomacy fail, we cannot rely on others to protect us". Yet they have been united in their call for the adherence to international law.

It is an oddity of Singaporean foreign policy circles that virtually everyone is a realist – that is, they believe that power is fundamentally what orders the world – while simultaneously an advocate of international law – that everyone should follow the agreed-upon rules of the international community. In academic circles, most realist thinkers do not have much time for international law: For them, international law works only where the powerful permit it, and should the powerful feel it obstructs their goals, they will contravene laws accordingly. Russia's invasion of Ukraine seems a textbook example of that.

Maintaining 'Order'

Singapore's appeals to international law then may seem incoherent to some, but it rests on a simple principle: 'Is' does not imply 'ought': How we observe things to be does not mean this is how things *should* be, but there is more to it than mere virtue

signalling. Singapore understands that the world is governed by power. Only the powerful have the means to enforce transgressions of ‘order’; only they can restrain themselves when push comes to shove.

Yet enforcing their preferred order is costly. If they had to send in tanks to enforce every rule or policy, they would quickly stop being powerful as the costs overwhelm them. The world’s largest superpower, facing no international sanctions, still found a war in Afghanistan too costly to enforce and eventually had to withdraw.

The largest empires in the world, despite being victors in the Second World War, set timers on the end of their empires because they knew they could not hold all their territories once their subjects refused to be ruled any longer. Bloody uprisings in Algeria and Kenya occurred as if to prove the point.

Domestic consent is now a pre-requisite to maintain an international order, and small states help by speaking up when the principles they wish to abide by are transgressed.

Pretexts and Principles

Specific contentions are always fraught with historical cycles of disputes. This brings risks for anyone raising an issue, particularly when it is a great power infringing the principle. Russia came up with a narrative, accused Ukraine of provocation, and embarked on a ‘military operation’ to ‘protect’ alleged victims (themselves). No one with working critical faculties would buy this narrative, and we have seen this before – *many times*.

Hitler annexed the Sudetenland prior to World War 2 using this playbook, a move the Allies permitted despite the protestations of the Czechoslovakians. Facing no resistance, Hitler fatefully felt he could go much further.

Saddam Hussein tried a similar pretext to annex Kuwait: selectively interpreting historical debates about the status of Iraq, Kuwait, and the Ottoman empire. Many territorial disputes are tangled up in these conflicting principles around ethnicity, history, and conflict and ripe for opportunistic picking in a determined aggressor’s hands.

There is no easy way to step in and argue the rights or wrongs about where today’s modern territorial borders are drawn, especially the further back in time one goes. Small states can only call for these disputes to be settled peacefully and amicably.

Back to Consent

A great power that wishes to lead an international order without exhausting itself must do so with the consent of its members. For all the flaws of the US order, the rapid economic growth that it permitted, allowing its members to surge past those under a Soviet order, was the one more and more people were attracted to.

The fall of the Berlin Wall was the symbol of that. It is true today that the West is in need of getting its house back in order. But these problems are not simultaneously a call to return to some of the alternatives, such as the Warsaw Pact system.

The Soviet satellite system has already failed once, and it failed because it failed to learn the lessons about consent that Western colonial empires had to learn the hard way. Perhaps a great power can maintain such costly enforcement of their 'order' forever.

But as they do, the Soviet experience tells us, they fall behind other great powers as they divert their economies' resources toward unproductive ends. The Soviet order was costlier to maintain even as its members' weaker economies made its benefits less apparent than the West's.

Singapore's Position

Singapore's position is not contradictory as some may charge. The recognition that power structures the world does not rule out small states signalling effective ways to maintain order, ensuring their consent. That is why Singapore's United Nations ambassador was keen to point out that this was not about choosing sides, but about upholding the principle of international law and the UN Charter, a position that benefits all states.

This is a principle-based and realist-centred position to protect Singapore's interests, particularly those of city-states that are historically vulnerable.

In the long run, the maintenance of order is most effective with the consent and trust of all members in that system. Without their consent, the cost of upholding that order would be far greater. It is worth observing that today's discontents are not only small states but some large states who feel excluded from a place at the table too, and the same problem of the costs of their discontent would apply too.

Carving out self-serving exceptions within an order may be a great power's prerogative, but it reduces others' incentives to support the system, thus raising the costs of its maintenance. Promoting international law – which provides the security of predictability for small states – is the best means of securing that consent and trust, and these actions benefit great powers too.

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