INSIGHT

CONTACT US
Agree or disagree with the opinions on this page? Write to us at **letters@scmp.com**
If you have an idea for an opinion article, email it to **oped@scmp.com**

Trust is key to peace

Ameya Pratap Singh says the Ladakh stand-off need not presage war between China and India

In light of Sino-Indian relations reaching a nadir, the common refrain among policy analysts is that India can ill afford to trust China any longer. John Mearsheimer, a professor of political science and international relations at the University of Chicago, restated during a recent interview with *India Today* his long-standing thesis that world politics is "tragically" bereft of trust and security can only be realised through self-help.

Such realism might seem appealing after the violent clashes on June 15 as they occurred while the disengagement plan agreed on at the major-general level on June 6 was being enacted. However, one must ask: if India or China abandons the possibility of peaceful coexistence or trust-building and adheres to Mearsheimer's prophecy, do they not risk bringing closer the very "tragedy" they want to avoid?

Even as rivals, if India and China are to lead the resurgence of Asia, they must avoid a Pyrrhic war and learn how to trust each other. One can intuitively reason that trust is often in short supply among rivals – particularly in times of conflict – but the historical record is surprising.

In 1950, faced with a refugee crisis on the Bengal border and the prospect of state failure, India's then-prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru and his Pakistani counterpart Liaquat Ali Khan avoided war and established a trusting relationship on the subject of religious minorities. In this instance, trust was possible despite an ongoing struggle over Kashmir, the trauma of partition and active warmongering by sections of the domestic population.

Other instances of trust between rivals include, the 1999 Lahore Declaration between Atal Behari Vajpayee and Nawaz Sharif, the end of the Cold War and rapprochement between Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan, and the 1995 Oslo Accords between Israel and Palestine.

While military deterrence and offensive capabilities are vital for national security, the recent clashes on the Sino-Indian border show they cannot guarantee war avoidance. The risk of escalation and pre-

> **Neither India nor China want the international stigma or material costs of aggressive war**

emption persists with increased militarisation. If rivals want to manage, stabilise and transcend the security dilemma, they must incrementally build trust.

First, states must be open to the possibility their adversaries may be fearful. In other words, before deliberating on whether China should trust India or vice versa, we must ask why one actor may be mistrustful of the other.

In particular, Beijing could be motivated by fears of India's road, infrastructure and military capacity-building in border areas and the change in the constitutional status of Ladakh after the de facto repeal of Article 370. In China's strategic assessment, India could be laying down the foundations to forcefully reclaim Aksai Chin.

On the other hand, India's need to bridge the infrastructure gap with China on the border and develop offensive options was vital for deterrence. The shifting of the offence-defence balance since China's infrastructure enhancements and the modernisation of the People's Liberation Army in the Tibetan region has made India particularly vulnerable to fait accompli strategies in the high Himalayas.

Second, once an actor accepts the other may be acting because of mistrust, it should seek pathways to reassure its adversary of its defensive intent. In essence, both India and China should signal to each other the mutual necessity of road and infrastructure development in border areas.

For instance, India should already have communicated to China that Ladakh's new status as a Union Territory has a domestic rationale and does not signify India's aggressive designs on Aksai Chin. One way to provide such reassurances would be through interpersonal diplomacy at the political and military levels.

So far, diplomatic engagement has followed every inflection point, with the de-escalation plan of June 22 and subsequent disengagement in the Galwan Valley, Pangong Tso and Gogra-Hot Springs being the latest iteration.

Third, to develop a relationship of reciprocity, previous agreements and confidence-building measures must be revised and updated. The challenges of "maintaining peace and tranquillity", to quote the border agreement of 1993, between India and China are different now. While no shots were fired during the skirmishes on June 15, the fact that the deadliest clashes on the border in the last 50 years occurred is a watershed and demands a reconsideration of existing frameworks.

Such revisions may include: a freezing of claim lines based on historical precedent to avoid revisionism; an acceptance of the rights of both parties to develop border area on their side of the Line of Actual Control while disallowing any territorial expansion or "salami slicing"; and joint or coordinated patrolling of disputed areas, which is already being done in southeast Arunachal Pradesh, or demilitarisation. The efficacy of previous agreements may have waned, but trust can still be maintained through a renewal of commitment.

In essence, a greater appreciation of the fears of one's adversary paves the way for a deeper dialogue and a trusting relationship. This requires a delicate balancing act.

Neither India nor China want the international stigma or material costs of aggressive war, but they also want to avoid the humiliation and domestic costs of territorial expropriation. In this respect, while containment or full-spectrum rivalry may seem instinctive, only incrementally built and contingent trust can meaningfully forge a sustainable relationship between the two nuclear security competitors.

Ameya Pratap Singh is a PhD student in Area Studies (South Asia) at the University of Oxford, researching critical non-Western perspectives on trust-building between adversaries in the Global South

Beijing must ease anxiety of those who fear China's rise

Robert Lawrence Kuhn says it would be a mistake to see US concerns as election-year rhetoric

The free fall in US-China relations has significantly heightened the chances for escalation or miscalculation. No doubt the US instituted, unilaterally, disruptive policies: Congressional acts related to Xinjiang and Hong Kong; restricting Huawei's access to American technology; seeking to limit foreign (read "Chinese") students; and now talk of prohibiting US visas for over 90 million Communist Party members, the vast majority of whom are not involved in policy.

But why does such a tough stand against China now enjoy widespread American support? Opposing China is just about the only issue on which Democrats and Republicans agree. Politicians follow polls. A Pew poll in March found 66 per cent of US adults held a negative view of China, the highest percentage ever.

Certainly, there is election-year politics involved: given the US' disastrous record of controlling the coronavirus, attacking China seems both politically expedient and a convenient distraction.

The contest between US President Donald Trump and his presumptive Democratic opponent, Joe Biden, will be a slug-out brawl. Both seem to believe that whoever can best bash Beijing will win. Each will accuse the other of being "soft on China" – the ultimate insult.

Democrats will attack Trump for his "weak" phase-one trade deal and for his initial praise of China in containing the coronavirus. Republicans will attack Biden for his past engagements with Beijing and for his son's alleged financial dealings. Specific policies – trade, technology, human rights, South China Sea – will not be much debated.

Is all this negativity furthering long-term American interests? Of course not. But then neither are the anti-American pronouncements of some Beijing officials furthering Chinese interests. There is a vicious cycle between American and Chinese mutual attacks, each reinforcing the other in a race to the bottom.

For decades, the "China card" has been played in American elections. It was "Who Lost China?" in the 1950s. In the 1992 elections, after three tough years in Sino-American relations related to the events of 1989, Bill Clinton took a hard line on China to attack his opponent, George H.W. Bush. However, once in office, Clinton sought better relations with China.

From then on, Chinese leaders recognised they should not take too seriously how China is bandied about in US elections, but simply seek to work with the winner in a business-as-usual manner. One hopes it will be the same this cycle, though one worries it will not.

Frankly, it would be a mistake to dismiss current American concerns as only election-year rhetoric. This time it is more. There is widespread conviction that China has become more repressive at home and more aggressive abroad, amplified by territorial disputes and "wolf warrior" diplomats.

Many are convinced that as China becomes stronger, it will impose its domestic values beyond its borders, restricting information and discourse. There is also widespread conviction that there is little reciprocity, in terms of market and media access, and that China steals technologies to boost its economy and limits human rights to maintain one-party control.

How to combat these current beliefs is a challenge for China.

On their part, many Chinese believe that America seeks to "contain China" and thwart its historic resurgence as a great nation. This is the real reason, many on the mainland believe, the US supports Taiwan and Hong Kong protesters.

> **Many are convinced that as China becomes stronger, it will impose its ... values beyond its borders**

China sees the US encircling it through military relations, if not alliances, with Japan, Australia, Taiwan, South Korea, the Philippines, and perhaps India and Vietnam; suppressing Huawei, ZTE and perhaps TikTok; fomenting "extremism, separatism and terrorism" in Hong Kong (with double standards); and applying the long arm of American law globally.

Beijing's leaders assert that, in an integrated global economy, China's stability and development is essential for world peace and prosperity. One-party rule, they insist, is key to maintaining such stability and development, from which the world benefits – from 5G technology to containing epidemics to alleviating poverty.

When playing the "China card" in the coming campaign, accusations against China will be made – alleged unfair economic practices, job loss, intellectual property theft, cybertheft, human rights violations, militarism, aggressive foreign policy, the pandemic. But none of these, I suggest, is the deep reason.

The deep reason is "nationalism", which features in leadership cycles in all societies and all social systems. Nationalism is rooted in biological evolution – early human allegiance to the tribe increased fitness for survival and procreation. Humans have confirmed time and again that they will bear any hardship to protect the group, which today is usually the nation-state.

After the US election is over, a window of opportunity will open to reset relations. The window will be narrower than in past cycles and the differences will be wider.

The challenge for the US is to avoid threatening China's core interests, such as party leadership or Taiwan. The challenge for Beijing is to reduce the anxiety of those who fear China's rise, especially with respect to limitations of information and freedoms imposed on others.

But there is no going back to halcyon days of amiable US-China relations. Nothing would be better for the American and Chinese peoples, indeed for the world, than genuine US-China cooperation. I'm watching for wisdom.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn, a public intellectual and international corporate strategist, won the China Reform Friendship Medal (2018)

Stores must take a strong stance on racist attacks

Suraj Girijashanker says that with an increase in reports of Asian shoppers being targeted at supermarkets in Australia, the two big chains must confront abuse and discrimination

A visit to your neighbourhood supermarket should be a routine if mildly enjoyable activity. However, for a number of minorities in Australia, stepping out to buy groceries can end in racial abuse and profiling.

This month, two video clips emerged showing Asian shoppers being targeted by fellow shoppers at separate Woolworths stores. Woolworths is Australia's largest supermarket chain, and along with Coles, controls over 60 per cent of the grocery market.

Unfortunately, these are not isolated incidents. A survey by Asian Australian Alliance found that 23 per cent of racist incidents against Asians, including racial slurs and assaults, took place at supermarkets. This is second only to racist incidents which took place on public streets.

Last week, Sydney hairdresser Linda Ha uploaded a video in which a fellow customer told her to "go back to where you're from". When Ha confronted the customer, she was accused of reverse racism. This came after a clip uploaded to TikTok showed an Adelaide couple at the receiving end of an expletive-laden outburst from a customer.

What responsibility do supermarkets have for protecting customers from racism? Clearly more than how Woolworths responded to both incidents. The Adelaide couple who were subjected to abuse were reportedly asked by staff to leave the supermarket. When the intervention came under scrutiny, Woolworths said staff "did their best to defuse the dispute in difficult circumstances", before subsequently calling the police. Targeting recipients of abuse sends out the wrong message – it undermines their experiences and normalises racism.

Woolworths' response to those filming abuse is also of concern. In both incidents, staff reportedly told the recipients of abuse to stop filming with their phones. This contradicts government guidance on the importance of documenting racist incidents.

The vast majority of racist incidents in Australia go unreported, with victims apprehensive about the process they will have to go through. Video recordings as evidence have the potential to ease the process.

> **Australia's largest supermarket chains have in the past been accused of complicity in racism**

In Australia and overseas, recordings brought to light cases of racial violence and abuse which may have otherwise gone unnoticed. This has often led to the identification of perpetrators, and some degree of redress.

Speaking of George Floyd's killing, Ibram Kendi, director of American University's anti-racism research centre, said: "If we did not have a video, would the officers have been fired as quickly? Would they have believed all of those witnesses who were looking at what was happening and were asking officers to stop?"

The Woolworths clips did not come as a surprise. Australia's largest supermarket chains have in the past been accused of complicity in racism. Last month, indigenous academic Stephen Hagan brought a racial discrimination complaint against Coles Express for being singled out to pay for fuel in advance. Earlier this year, it was reported a shopper of Asian appearance was "aggressively" ordered out of a Woolworths store by a staff member over fears of Covid-19.

These are among the minority of stories which received media coverage. In some of the reported cases, the supermarket chains did respond. However, as the most recent cases show, the responses have been inconsistent and do not go far enough. Critically, the chains have been careful to avoid acknowledging that any racism is at play.

Since the onset of the pandemic, the Australian Human Rights Commission has reported a spike in racism complaints in February, and higher-than-average numbers in the months since. It is important that Australia's two largest supermarket chains step up and set an example, by confronting racism.

Acknowledging that racial abuse or profiling takes place is a start. Questions also need to be asked about the anti-racism policies and training in place for staff at supermarkets. The next time someone is racially abused at an Australian supermarket, can the focus remain on the perpetrator?

Suraj Girijashanker is assistant professor at Jindal Global Law School. He is a specialist in international human rights law and international refugee law

Demonstrators wave placards during a Black Lives Matter protest rally in Brisbane. Photo: EPA