

Fighting for peace

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A game plan called the 'science of strategy' could be used to settle all issues peacefully.

AN anti-war meeting, called the Perdana Global Peace Forum, will be convened by the Perdana Leadership Foundation Centre (www.perdana.org.my) in Kuala Lumpur next week.

Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, president of the centre, says he wants to break the cycle of violence. Many eminent speakers are scheduled to attend the forum, themed "Peace Dividend, War Profit".

It is increasingly clear many leaders thrive by using war as a platform to get elected, even if they have to lie.

A classical case is of course the spin on Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction and the invasion of Iraq.

Some would argue that this is what politics is all about — the art of the possible, where the end justifies the means.

By manipulating the media and emotions, it is possible to legitimise war. Even pacifist countries can do so without much trouble. In fact, Japan reportedly has "broken" the post-war taboo and once again will have a "military".

It devotes close to five trillion yen (RM167.2 billion) to defence annually and the Japanese military is said to be one of the world's best-funded militaries. For the first time since 1945, Japan deployed troops, albeit on a reconstruction mission in Iraq. But this too can quickly change.

On the subject of preventing war, remotely as it seems, the 2005 Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences can offer some interesting solutions. In fact, this is one reason why the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences chose Robert J. Aumann and Thomas C. Schelling as the co-winners.

They are recognised as "having enhanced our understanding of conflict and co-operation through game-theory analysis".

"The most important event of the second half of the 20th century is one that didn't happen," Schelling, 84, was quoted as saying. He was referring to the noticeable absence of nuclear war for at least five decades.

This is somewhat related to the concept of game theory, Schelling's brainchild. Through his brilliant articulation of the concept, it led not only to the changing in the intellectual climate but, equally important, it inspired a generation of strategic thinkers.

At the same time, the emerging discipline of the game theory gained greater relevance, so much so it "permeates life", said Schelling, a professor emeritus at the University of Maryland.

It has been used to study interactions between businesses, people or even countries and how decisions are arrived at. In short, game theory has never been so relevant.

"I use game theory to help myself understand conflict situations and opportunities," said Schelling.

Indeed, he is able to explain major political and economic conflicts using the theory. And, better still, it can prevent the conflict from taking place.

Considered as the "science of strategy", it is an interdisciplinary field that studies how to calculate all the possible outcomes of a move by any of the actors.

The theory can be used to determine what action the actors are likely to take in the attempt to secure the best outcome for themselves by sizing up their opponents and anticipating their moves.

It is a scientific way of demonstrating what we all learned as kids — co-operation is better than conflict.

It emphasises that to make concessions is not a gesture of weakness and defeat; rather, it is a move that builds trust and leads to concessions from the other side. And it works better when both parties fully understand the other's motivating factors.

Similarly, in international politics, it is possible to avert war as was the case during the Cold War period when

superpowers were involved in much the same game of "managing" the nuclear arms race. Each side understood the other's power and knew that a pre-emptive attack could not prevent a counter-attack.

In fact, Schelling's early work relates to the Cold War and how to prevent it from escalating. His classic book *The Strategy of Conflict* (1960) focused on the US and the former USSR.

Using the analogy of a gun duel of the Wild West in framing the conflict between the two countries, David R. Henderson noted: "If the two 'duellists' are assured of living long enough to shoot back with unimpaired aim, there would be no advantage in jumping the gun and little reason to fear that the other would try it (AWSJ, Oct. 12)."

In this sense, Schelling invested his hopes for peace not on arms reductions but on preserving the ability to retaliate, knowing full well that all wars can be played out only once.

He argued that the capability to retaliate was more useful than the ability to resist an attack, and that uncertain retaliation was more credible than certain retaliation.

Unfortunately, like all theories and tools, there are always some exceptions to the game theory. The other Nobel winner, Aumann, was not optimistic about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and felt it would continue.

Where scholars and politicians failed, maybe the "The Peace Team", made up of Israeli Division One and Palestinian footballers who played against the Spanish champion in Barcelona last week, could yet be another alternative "game" theory.

Otherwise, let us hope the Peace Forum can come up with some ideas.

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