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Opinion

Washington should stop shooting its mouth off about Hong Kong, when even Donald Trump is being sensible

- The chaos in Hong Kong comes as the US-China relationship wanders into dangerous territory. It is now believed in Washington that Beijing can do no right because the Communist Party can only do wrong

Topic | Hong Kong protests



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Let's get some simple facts straight: Hong Kong is not in the sovereign hands of the People's Republic of China due to invasion, communist subversion or anything nefarious. This historic territory was semi-willingly deeded back by the British, with their usual remote devotion to indigenous rights, after they occupied it for more than a century and a half.

Back in the British colonial masters' days in the sun, they had granted the inhabitants of Hong Kong no more democracy or proper representation than they had other colonies. Today's pathetic complaints from British MPs in London about Beijing's rough handling of their former possession are therefore more of a joke than a *Mr Bean* comedy routine.

Just as farcical is the US State Department's holier-than-thou attitude to Beijing's outrage over a meeting between a US consul and Hong Kong pro-democracy activists. This presumably was not the first such inappropriate rendezvous, but it needs to be the last. Beijing complained especially loudly, and while it is true that it complains a lot, on this occasion the rage has merit.

In this climate of tension and with the prospect of tragedy hovering, Hong Kong is not something to be trifled with by otherwise professional US diplomats or bloviating US officials such as Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

Instead, a simple if quiet apology should have been offered to the Xi Jinping government trying to keep some political distance from the fired-up anti-Hong Kong nationalists; they'd like nothing more than for the People's Liberation Army to storm Hong Kong with all the ferocity and misplaced rectitude of French paratroopers hitting Algeria.

Will America ever get out of the annoying habit of telling other people how to run their countries? Even when the US is right, which is sometimes the case, unsolicited counsel usually triggers resentment. For his part, President Donald Trump is said to have assured Chairman Xi Jinping in July of his focus on the trade talks, not Hong Kong.

Since the former mess is mainly of Trump's own making while the latter is not something he can do much about (US military intervention would be illegal under international law and beyond stupid), this is a sensible calculation by a president whose usual modus operandi is to give the meaning of the word "mercurial" whole new dimensions.

The agonising, tragic polarisation of Hong Kong comes as the relationship between China and the US becomes a mess. It is now believed in Washington and New York that Beijing can do no right because the Communist Party can only do wrong. More subtle alternative analyses are now practically treated as treason.

Forget the once broadly accepted Kissinger formulation in which a sighing Beijing notes the reality of the US' continuing military presence in East Asia (be it sometimes ever so obnoxious) while a newly mature Washington accepts with equanimity China's continuing rise (be it sometimes ever so pushy).

The fact of the matter is that the US will be floating on the back of its Seventh Fleet in the Pacific for a long time to come, and China, as a matter of geography, encircled by 14 other sovereign states, will keep building more ships for existential reasons.

Both sides must accept the world they are stuck with. The US should bring back not only the Kissinger formulation but also the Clinton-era policy of aggressive engagement. Rather than pick fights it cannot win – or afford to finance, or much less afford to lose – the US should relate to China by spurning no sensible compromise and using mutual insincerity as a necessary solvent of tight spots.

America's "nattering nabobs of negativity" (to steal a phrase from Spiro Agnew) and China's pure-as-the-driven-snow leftists need to be watched for the war hawks they are. On both sides, dangerous insanity lurks.

If we insist on having things all our own way, then we had better be prepared to risk a doomsday war with China. That's such an idiotic option in this nuclear age, you might need a session with an anger management therapist if that's how you want to go.

The term "Chimerica" – yes, I know, weird phrase – was once used to suggest an economic fusion of China and America, an odd-couple relationship, for sure, but non-volatile.

The goal is not for America to become more communist or for China to become more American. The endgame is to have no end to the game at all – but instead to develop a perennial, multilevel process of bilateral political interaction that brackets out brinkmanship. America and China have to find a solution to what Kissinger recently termed "the key problem of our time".

To this end, a teachable moment for international relations hit me while I was leaving a movie theatre the other day. For your consideration: *The Farewell*, just released.

Directed by Beijing-born, Los Angeles-based Lulu Wang and featuring Asian-American rapper Awkwafina (sedated among a top-notch Asian cast), the film posits that while there can be a valid American way of doing something, there can be a different but equally valid Chinese way of doing the same thing.

Before shooting our mouths off, we could give the other side enough time to show that their way might have at least equal potential. As I left for the parking lot, I thought about Hong Kong, caught in the vice of history and tearing up not only because of the tear gas.

A better US-China relationship might have helped avert this ongoing tragedy which, for all we know, might be a precursor to a larger tragedy yet. For sure, the bilateral relationship could benefit dramatically from much more astute direction and perhaps, like *The Farewell*, offer a surprisingly positive ending.

University professor Tom Plate's latest book on US-China relations is titled Yo-Yo Diplomacy