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## In the end, Pope Francis' 'kowitz diplomacy' towards China will show itself to be smart diplomacy


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Comment Insight & Opinion

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*Tom Plate says America has much to learn from the pontiff's open and humble attitude towards China*

 You don't have to be a saint to be a great and effective leader, but you do have to be audacious. So when an audacious leader comes along that a good many admirers suspect to be a saint, you have probably got something special in front of you. May we presume this, for the moment at least, of Pope Francis?

The restless pope: after a papal visit to Mexico, about which US presidential candidate Donald Trump (audacious, but no saint) had something negative to say, Vatican sources floated the thought that perhaps Francis might soon visit China.

If President Xi Jinping and the pontiff are able to crack the Catholic mainland problem, they will take the cake – and maybe a joint Nobel Peace Prize as well. In [his observations](#) [2] about a country with more than 21 per cent of the globe's population (but only 12 million in mainland China are Catholic), the pope will emphasise the positive: "For me, China has always been a reference point of greatness. A great country. But more than a country, a great culture, with an inexhaustible wisdom."

Yet, for noodle-brain elements here in the United States, Francis's diplomatic charm offensive may come across as classic kowtowing – an unseemly, un-audacious genuflection to the rising power of communist China. But effective diplomacy, especially when in public light, usually requires a premeditated emphasis on the positive (the negative comes later, behind closed doors). What's more, a posture of kowtowing can be potent when the target is known to be susceptible to it – as shown throughout the history of China.



*A woman is baptised during an Easter service in Beijing. The pope wants to be able to improve the condition of Catholics in their spiritual development.*  
Photo: AFP

So the pope's kowtow diplomacy towards China is smart stuff. What he wants is to be able to improve the condition of his Catholics in their spiritual development; so he not only dreams of a semi-normal relationship between the Vatican and Beijing, he also envisions his church and the Chinese state working in polite, respectful parallel on the appointment of mainland bishops. Such accords would hardly undermine Beijing's national security and would certainly boost China's global image.

Diplomacy takes patience; you could come up short this year but come out long the year after. "Dialogue does not mean that we end up with a compromise, half the cake for you and the other half for me," the pope has adroitly explained. "Dialogue means: Look, we have got to this point, I may or may not agree, but let us walk together; this is what it means to build. And the cake stays whole, walking together." If President Xi Jinping ( 习近平 ) and the pontiff are able to crack the Catholic mainland problem, they will take the cake – and maybe a joint Nobel Peace Prize as well.



AFP[4]Far from all international issues are cakewalks, of course. The South China Sea continues to boil and bubble like a perfect storm, where almost all boats are taking on trouble. China has moved too quickly to reclaim old littoral territory and manufacture new ones, scaring the daylights out of lesser area powers. Even communist Vietnam is now playing both sides of the diplomatic street – “kowtowing” to Washington! The South China Sea policy of the US is little better. Its knee-jerk pushback against China's reclamation campaign might make sense were we still in the last century when America ruled the world and China was still asleep.

But that was then, and this is now. Long-time Asia-watcher and economist Kenneth Curtis, chairman of Starfort Investment Holdings and managing partner of Curtis Global & Associates, is coruscating: “We note from history that a rising power, to be integrated into the system, changes perforce the balance of power ex ante. However, the status quo powers seldom, if ever, accept such change willingly ... virtually always to their regret later. This is precisely what is occurring today.”

America will fall on its face over its “pivot” to Asia, if it is based on the premise that China must rise no more and must be made to lose face. With the clarity of great scholarship, Professor Graham Allison and Harvard's Belfer Centre research team have laid down the markers of catastrophe for status quo powers that blindly oppose rather than cleverly adjust to rising powers.

And why pick on China? Americans might recall from its Asian experience last century that it was not China that launched a surprise attack on America; but it was China that worked as our ally in the second global war. The US has had a serious – and disastrous – military problem with communist

China only during the Korean war, when UN/US forces brainlessly pushed towards the Chinese border. That triggered a massive ground counter-attack from insecure Beijing, easily spooked when barbarian foreign forces are at its gate.



*This US Navy photo shows the destroyer USS Curtis Wilbur as it conducts a live fire gunnery exercise in the South China Sea. The US pushback in the South China Sea is less than shipshape and might even reactivate China's insecurities. Photo: AFP*

The overly advertised US pushback in the South China Sea is less than shipshape and might even reactivate China's insecurities. Flaunting our naval capabilities in East Asian waters (and inviting the likes of CNN along to show all the world) is to shove the ghost of General Douglas MacArthur into China's face. One hopes our well-educated Pacific commanders will reflect on history and curb their confrontational enthusiasm.

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Not all the world's geopolitical fish worth frying bob within the dark depths of the South China Sea. Last week at the United Nations, China stood with the US and others on the Security Council to pile yet more sanctions on erstwhile ally North Korea for its unwelcome nuclear weapon testing. Sino-US cooperation of this kind could prove the wave of the future if both sides avoid assuming they can continue to live in the past.

China knows it does not want to return to a condition of poverty. And the US, which sometimes doesn't seem to know what it wants, might wish to formulate policy around this pithy, pointed remark from the pope: China is "a great culture, with an inexhaustible wisdom". With an attitude like that, Francis will get some good things done with Beijing, while the US, with all its military might, splashes around pointlessly in the South China Sea.

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