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Opinion

Looming Korean nuclear crisis shows world's need for deep thinking like George Yeo's



- North Korea's nuclear development and South Korea's interest in its own nuclear weapons programme bode ill for hopes of denuclearising the peninsula
- Bringing China and the US together to make the world safer requires sharp observations like those of Singapore's former foreign minister

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A news programme on a TV screen at Seoul Railway Station shows images of a North Korean missile launch on February 20. North Korea's continued nuclear development and growing South Korean interest in starting a nuclear weapons programme have further dimmed hopes of denuclearising the Korean peninsula. Photo: AP

Geopolitical commentary can be invaluable, but not all analyses return good payback for your time and attention. Commentary that is done quick on the draw can lack perspective and twist in the wind; even those drawn from deeper wells can take too long to surface. Then there is a brand that says it knows what it thinks without knowing much at all.

Rare is the public intellectual who is able to be quick, deep and sharp, but that is [George Yeo](#), who was Singapore's foreign minister from 2004 to 2011. *Musings*, his second volume of policy thoughts and personal recollections, now graces bookstores in Asia and across the world. Among his many banquet memories are geopolitical commentaries of high calibre.

Intellectually, Yeo hails from an exceptional generation of Singapore practitioner-thinkers. Under the mantle of successive prime ministers starting from Lee Kuan Yew, the country also raised to prominence [Chan Heng Chee](#), [Tommy Koh](#) and [Kishore Mahbubani](#), among others.

These diplomats are respected across a global range of geopolitics and ideologies. Western journalists with the desire to want to know what Asians think would learn more from this quartet than from the usual sources.

Yeo, educated at Cambridge and Harvard, stitches his wide-ranging musings into a rich tapestry of conversational observations about people, places and policies which gives lie to the stereotype of little Singapore as some state asylum of mental provincials. His writings reflect almost everything under the sun with which his Singapore was involved during his career, which, as it turns out, was just about everything out there worth reflection.

This included unpublicised forays to North Korea. [Singaporean foreign policy](#) is highly internationalist, the country having managed to get on well by riding economic globalisation as far out as possible on the yield curve of pragmatism.



Former Singapore foreign minister George Yeo speaks at an event at the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre in Wan Chai on September 2, 2019. Photo: David Wong

Human rights are [less its thing](#) than free-trade agreements. Its aim is to get along with any nation that will help it get along. This includes having to execute tight manoeuvres with China, with whom it must carefully play cards, and with the United States, the only power equipped to stand up to China.

The calibration of China's own game comes across especially well in Yeo's musings about the Korean peninsula. He begins by stating China's default view – "no war, no instability, no nuclear weapons".

One implied question is: why aren't China and the US working more as a team if their core goals overlap that much? China, a UN Security Council permanent member, has voted for some, though not all, UN sanctions on [nuclear-equipped North Korea](#), openly supported talks between Kim Jong-un and Donald Trump in Singapore and Hanoi and played host in Beijing to the initially promising six-party talks.

Just a year ago, Yeo says, Seoul and Beijing worked together so President Xi Jinping would be among the first on the diplomatic phone [to tender congratulations](#) to the new South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol on his election victory.

There is no future for South Korea, not to mention North Korea, in taking the anti-China line any more than, for example, Canada becoming noxiously anti-American. Asian nations must live with China as a gigantic neighbour that cannot be trifled with.

When not foolishly engaging in ["wolf warrior" diplomacy](#), China will value diplomacy with Singapore and others, which aims to stretch to both sides of the street without weakening a long-held emphasis on stability and not trading in old friends for new ones.

In terms of missile capabilities, Beijing is closer to Pyongyang than Washington. The US approach towards North Korea for many years has aimed at achieving denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula but has failed to deliver. Meanwhile, Pyongyang's nuclear weapons programme has continued to develop and no one – not even a pair of supposed superpowers – can seem to stop it.

North Korea has established itself as one of the world's few states capable of nuclear warfare. South Korea is much further along economically – its GDP rivals that of Russia's – yet it lives under the US nuclear umbrella, and this has emerged as a big issue.

There is much chatter now in South Korea about the country's need to fashion [its own nuclear option](#). The idea is outrageous – the last thing the world needs is another nuclear power, with both halves of the Korean peninsula having the ability to wreak monstrous destruction.

This would make for a bleak future. As I follow Yeo's passage across Asia, I see the disarmament of the Korean peninsula only beginning if China and the US can put aside their fighting and astonish the world – not to mention themselves – with a transcendent joint commitment to take the steam out of nuclear proliferation.

Who else can do the job? That is my view rather than Yeo's, but I might not have come to it without the former foreign minister's musings. Deep thinking is vital.

Tom Plate, Pacific Century Institute vice-president, is the distinguished scholar of Asian and Pacific Studies at Loyola Marymount University and the author, among a dozen other books, of Conversations with Lee Kuan Yew, in the Giants of Asia series