

This opinion piece by PCI Vice President, Professor Tom Plate, appeared in the South China Morning Post, Monday, August 14, 2017.

No one, whether in the US or North Korea, has the moral right to drive the world to nuclear war

Tom Plate says in the era of weapons of mass destruction, America's outdated foreign policy machine must face new realities.



With regard to North Korea as a target of the West, if a pre-emptive attack were to be on the cards (and one hopes not), it might be less sleep-depriving to imagine that such would proceed only as part of a kind of larger across-the-board adult concordat between China and the US. None such exists, of course, and, tragically, for other vital issues, perhaps never will. Without at least that, an intelligent and stable world order will continue to elude this troubled planet.

About North Korea, the Chinese government, for its part, has been clear: while it will not bail out Pyongyang if it foolishly struck at US or Japanese territories, Beijing cannot accept regime change by foreign force. This narrow-vision view will not make the short list for the next Nobel Peace Prize. But it is not insane, it errs on the side of caution, and, after all, the US position is no prize-winner either. This, in place well before US President Donald Trump, is that this sovereign state, recognised by and seated at the UN, must give up its nukes, even though North Korea never signed the Treaty on the

Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons, and, if nuke-less, believes the West, which includes Japan, would move in for the kill (think Libya and think – the Chinese always add – how well that turned out).

So the problem is not just that Trump as president is in over his head; it's also that the US foreign policy machine is out of gas. It impresses no one, and its motoring manual is outdated. Even our most seasoned foreign-policy brains lack spark; even if you gifted our president a very good foreign policy book – such as Richard Haass' *A World in Disarray* – and make him actually read it, you'd still have this problem: America hasn't figured out the 21st century and is still operating within the fumes of the 20th. A potential Thucydides Trap is not the biggest worry, the "Back to the Future Trap" is: the US proposes to cope with the future by living in the past.

The well-respected Dr Haass is wise on the diminishing utility of sanctions as a weapon; on the need to downplay major-policy rivalries; and on the need to regard the military option with gimlet-eyed scepticism (he is the well-schooled head of the Council on Foreign Relations and former adviser to both president Bushes).

But our times have become revolutionary, and America must face new realities. There is no iron correlation between a so-termed "open society" and a prosperous economy; no future in believing that the US can "give them" (in Haass' patronising phrase) this or that to encourage and shape global order to its liking; no wisdom in assuming that the desire to avoid confrontation at all costs means by definition appeasement (the overused Hitler-Germany analogy should be declared illegal) – when in this weapons-of-mass-destruction era, such a Machiavellian manoeuvre might prove, at times, the most rational option.

China, thankfully, is treated with more care by Dr. Haass than by many of his contemporary colleagues swinging from the upper branches of the US policy Banyan tree; but why no love or even genuine respect for the Chinese of 5,000 years? For instance, with regard to the roiling waters of the South China Sea, offered is the same old puffed-up delusional unipolar poppycock: the US priority has to be "shutting down the idea of temptation that aggression or coercion will succeed". Huh? China's many new installations and bases there are up and running quite nicely, thank you.

US expectations about the upside of the bilateral relationship are low. Many analysts seem to accept how little we have achieved as par for the course, as does Haass: "History would have predicted far more friction." But history is not over just yet and its end is nowhere in sight, unless it runs bang into the nuclear option. This is the prospect that the world might now be facing in the Kim-Trump psychodrama.

But the rational military-intervention ship has sailed. One prays the American president's obsession with North Korea's Kim Jong-un (and vice versa) will remain all

talk and no action. For there on the dock he stands, almost forlorn in military macho, as if waiting for history's tide to splash back and deposit a military strike option at the emperor's feet. This is living in the past. In the presence of weapons of mass destruction, thermonuclear or otherwise, mimetic behaviour – as in the formulation of philosopher/anthropologist Rene Girard – can lead to no good if “homo mimeticus” adds up to little more than wild copycats in jungle rage.

Imitation here is no form of flattery but a kind of insanity. The morbid mimetics of Kim and Trump are potentially more code-ingrained than suspected. Argued the late, great Girard, who capped his career at Stanford University: “To escape responsibility for violence we imagine it is enough to pledge never to be the first to do violence. But no one ever sees himself as casting the first stone. Even the most violent persons believe that they are always reacting to a violence committed in the first instance by someone else.”

He concluded: “In a truly global world, the renunciation of violent reprisal is bound to become, in a more and more obvious way, the indispensable condition of our survival.”

No one has the moral right to risk plunging the world into nuclear war, no matter how fierce the belief that one is in the right.

Columnist and professor Tom Plate, Loyola Marymount University's Distinguished Scholar of Asian and Pacific Studies, has a new book on US-China relations: *Yo-Yo Diplomacy*

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