

This opinion piece by PCI Vice President, Tom Plate, appeared in the South China Morning Post on Tuesday, December 17, 2019.



Opinion

The trade war, North Korea's nuclear provocations and Hong Kong's protests all show what happens when 'principle' triumphs over reason



- Unyielding principles are often indistinguishable from stubbornness, especially when it results in diplomatic disaster
- All sides in the North Korean nuclear talks, the US-China rivalry and Hong Kong have shown unwillingness to compromise

Tom Plate

Published: 11:00am, 17 Dec, 2019



Illustration: Craig Stephens

There's often little more than a thin line between admirable principle and stubbornness, and that line is not always easy to identify. Lost in the miasma of mutually exclusive righteousness, each side says the other is wrong, evil or both.

The tragic consequence is that both interlocutors, each smugly with the "truth" that's entirely theirs alone, concoct a paradigm in their minds to bolster the legitimacy of their disagreement. Insanity brews – chaos beckons.

For starters, we submit for consideration the Korean peninsula impasse. As the Pyongyang regime looks ready to proceed with amplifying its nuclear weapons capabilities, some Seoul factions propose that South Korea respond with a tit-for-tat nuclear start-up of its own. And so, from the dashed hopes of the North Korea-US summit in Singapore in 2018, which might well have brought the world a nuclear freeze, or more, had it not been so poorly prepared, we now face the spectre of expanded nuclearisation in the wider neighbourhood.

No one doubts that were Seoul to go nuclear, before long Tokyo would want to go too. This could push the region to the edge of nuclear paranoia.

Only rigorous diplomacy, conducted with commitment and skill, offers an antidote to international instability. From Stanford University, we have the wisdom of legendary North Korean nuclear expert Siegfried Heckler, one of the few outsiders to have examined the country's main nuclear facility. His view is that while technical nuclear issues are indeed complex, the political obstacles require the skills not so much of a rocket scientist as of a Taoist diplomat.

The recurring hurdle has been Pyongyang's distrust of the US, going back decades, and the corresponding mistrust from Washington, with its position insisting on "complete, verifiable and irreversible [nuclear] dismantlement" before the slightest measure of sanctions relief. Everyone in the world knows this is a poseur "principled" position – utterly unrealistic, particularly in the absence of a peace treaty and security guarantees.

More than anything, it mirrors, arguably, the psychological instability of America's domestic politics, in which reason, compromise and harmony are often coded as symptoms of disloyalty or deficiencies of patriotism. And for its part, North Korea, well aware of the "principled" hatred of communism in President Donald Trump's right-wing base, turns away from publicly prioritising the economy to brandishing anew its menacing military profile – as self-defeating and morally hollow as that ploy will prove.

Research shows that "the rate of North Korea's nuclear development has slowed when diplomacy is working and sped up [when] diplomacy is halted", according to Heckler. Except in rare cases of deliberate diplomatic duplicity, wouldn't this always have to be the case? Nations talk through problems in the belief that diplomacy can produce sensible results to which the parties can adjust.



A Chinese Coast Guard ship is seen near a Vietnam Marine Guard vessel in the South China Sea. Photo: Reuters

Consider the South China Sea imbroglio. Having achieved many of its core objectives, Beijing is starting to talk to Hanoi in a professional manner. This is a significant development, exclusively reported by the *Post's* Laura Zhou.

For years, nothing has more reflected the pushy prow of the Xi administration's naval presence than its "principled" reassertion of a special place under the South China Sea sun. After the "century of humiliation", Beijing seems geared up for a "century of assertion". Aside from the nationalistic appeal, this approach recalls the indelicacy of the former Soviet Union and will do less to accomplish a healthy Chinese rejuvenation than would a more determined diplomacy.

"Principles" that are little more than painful remembrances of slights past can tie up nations in a haunting resurrection of that past. (It would not be just a weak joke to suggest that Adolf Hitler and his Reich would have done better had they forgotten all about the humiliation of Versailles and instead economically invaded Europe with marvellous exports like their Volkswagen.)

A "diplomacy century", led by China in Asia, would be a worthy successor to the "humiliation century". Yes, America should be leading the world in the negotiating arts but instead seems to lead with the right uppercut of diplomatic insult. You can declare a trade or any other sort of war against China that you want, but it doesn't mean you can win it. Now the Trump administration looks eager to wind down the idiotic tariff tussle that it started.

The current president's economic-trade team, seemingly on academic steroids, reminds one of former president George W. Bush's pro-war team – always gung-ho for another "principled" but fatally confused mission. Claiming that it was always a position of US principle to call out China for unfair trade tricks is not the same thing as efficiently correcting the problem: nations and individuals sometimes have to choose between being right or being effective. Washington is no longer at the head of the class – the teacher who commands rule-breaking student-nations to detention.

Almost everything of international consequence will require negotiations or very little will get done for peace and stability. To this end, we admire Beijing's start-up talks with Hanoi and pray they succeed.

Another set of talks that would be a relief to see would be in Hong Kong, where almost everyone makes claims to righteousness and hardly anyone ever admits to wrongheadedness.

Locating the thin line between principle and stubbornness may be hard to do but unless all sides find and accept the limits of their own vision, they might well wake up divided by a virtual demilitarised zone, in abject communal misery: the twilight of reason cowering in the face of unchecked "principle".

Professor Tom Plate is the founder of Asia Media International (asiamedia.lmu.edu) and vice-president of the Pacific Century Institute, both based in Los Angeles