

This opinion piece by PCI Vice President, Professor Tom Plate, appeared in the Korea Times, Sunday, March 5, 2017.

## **US-China collaboration on N. Korea**

By Tom Plate

The need for China and the United States to come together in a persistently adult geopolitical two-some has never been more urgent. Gamesmanship must be minimized. Statesmanship must be maximized. Just ask Mr. Ban Ki-moon, career diplomat.

The other night in Los Angeles, Mr Cool-Cautious brought the point home well, as perhaps only someone who had scaled the heights to UN Secretary General could. His venue was a hotel-ballroom where the Pacific Century Institute, which works behind the scenes for peace and understanding between America and East Asia, presented Ban with its 2017 'Building Bridges' Award, and Ban returned the compliment with a thoughtful discourse. Now in private life, this workaholic Korean, so respectful of the high office he was privileged to hold for a decade, was thus able to loosen up a bit on a subject dear to his heartburn: North Korea. And what the adoring audience got was a glimpse of Ban at his best.

By now, North Korea has ticked off almost everyone. That recent missile test-shot in the face of our new and unnervingly inexperienced U.S. president unsettled many; the Kuala Lumpur airport assassination operation evidently orchestrated by Pyongyang turned stomachs all over the world. And so Ban laid it on the line: the young DPRK leader Kim Jong Un is pushing his luck big-time.

This was not characteristic Ban, in public at least; and it had bite because the Korean diplomat, only the second UNSG from Asia ever, is known to know China and its leaders as well as anyone not Chinese. On the whole they like him, they respect him, and they supported him.

For his part, Ban understands how they think and why they think it. When poorly informed Western commentators and leaders unctuously pile on the cheap rhetoric and demand that "China do more," as if it could push over unloved but nuclear-armed Pyongyang with a pair of chopsticks, Ban rolls his eyes. But they went wide open when the Xi Jinping government announced the suspension of all North Korean imports, including even coal.

Something new may be up. Beijing looks down on Pyongyang, and the North Koreans have little use for China (except, it seems, to escape to it). But the Chinese Communist Party, not unlike (in the oddest way) our American Tea Party, fears change. Regime collapse on its

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borders conjures up nightmares of an implosion of Syrian proportions; or of an ominously united Korea (North and South) under Western umbrella (Americans, try to imagine this: Canada goes Communist!). The PRC government is religious on the principle of inviolable sovereignty and beyond skeptical of forced regime change option (Here, Americans should listen more to China).

Even so, some kind of thoroughly worked out China-U.S. approach to Pyongyang could not only promote future stability of the Korean Peninsula; it could prove positively salient for the future Sino-US relationship. China would deserve all the credit in the world if it made a move to close the gap further. The truth is that even when Beijing takes sensible positions, Beijing rarely gets respect. The worst is assumed even if the original intention might well have been otherwise.

President Xi, it seems to me, could fairly complain that his job is tougher than President Trump's. China's population, he could note, is something like 1.3 billion; America's is like 325 million. With four times as many people, Xi may say he has to endure four times as many headaches as Trump, who doesn't even have feisty, self-absorbed Hong Kong screaming in his face. But both do share the common headache of Pyongyang.

The U.S. and China need to work it together –better, closer, sooner. What Ban Ki-moon is trying to tell Kim Jong Un is that this looks to become the next chapter in the Korean Peninsula ordeal. His sense is that maybe the time has come to get real.

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