

This opinion piece by PCI Vice President, Professor Tom Plate, appeared in the South China Morning Post, Monday, May 8, 2017.

Donald Trump's moves on North Korea and China defy convention, but who says they can't be right?

Tom Plate says not all of Trump's unconventional conduct in foreign policy is deserving of condemnation, as most of the US media seems to believe



There is a funny but technically accurate saying to the effect that even a broken clock is right twice a day. This adage comes to mind in looking at Donald Trump's emerging foreign policy.

Consider the US president's efforts to engage with Chinese President Xi Jinping (习近平) and with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. They are not unfolding according to normal practice. So protocol purists are in a dither. International theorists are in high dudgeon. The anti-Trump US media (which is most of it) is heaping scorn.

In the case of Xi and China, the complaint is not over a paucity of communication between the two leaders but a plethora. Some reporters joke that Trump phones Xi almost as often as first lady Melania. Ordinarily, personal diplomacy is applauded but, collectively, our media commentariat and talk-show hosts are so negative on Trump, that if famous cold war strategist George Kennan rose from the dead and offered a good word for the new president on personal engagement, the media would probably paint this as a Russian trick or the like.

One US media story suggested, with thin sourcing, that Xi was feeling “pestered” by Trump’s near-constant phoning and hardly knows what to do with his new, clueless pal. But is this credible? China’s hard-working president is obviously no slacker but he’d have to be just that to feel “pestered” by calls from the president of the US. On the contrary, it’s a feather in Xi’s Mao cap. It’s not as if he’s being “pestered” by some minister from the Maldives. In China-US relations, continuing communication is vital. Less is not more.

Perhaps the fraught issue of the Korean peninsula “crisis” accounts in part for the hotline upsurge. Trump, clearly agitated by the Pyongyang bee in his bonnet, has declaimed that the “crisis” will be solved by the US alone, if Beijing decides not to pitch in. Nobody anywhere seems to know what this might mean. But it cannot be good: for starters, a US Navy carrier group is bobbing near the Korean peninsula; the head of the CIA recently visited Seoul; and a THAAD anti-missile system is now operational in South Korea. The fact is that most South Koreans don’t want the thing and the Chinese hate the thing – it’s an obnoxiously offensive intrusion into their neighbourhood. Trump doesn’t seem to care.

Then there is worry over the ideological objectivity of Xi’s tutoring of Trump on issues in Asia during their transpacific chats. But I don’t see a downside here: Who would we prefer as tutor, Kim Jong-un? Don’t be too quick to laugh! Consider that the president, defying protocol yet again with an off-the-cuff remark that he’d be “honoured” to meet Kim, whom he has curiously (or even accurately, who knows?) described as a “pretty smart cookie”.

For these procedural and diplomatic apostasies, the US news media jumps all over Trump. I’m not sure this is right. Should invitations be reserved only for leaders with whom the US has no tense issues? Talking mainly to those with whom you agree is, of course, one way to limit contradiction; but it can also be a boring time-waster. On this one, I side with our nonplussed “leader of the free world”.

The instinct to meet Kim accords with all we know of the North Korean mentality. Its extremely centralised government responds only to big-time, top-level engagement.

In 1994, on the edge of a serious nuclear blow-up, former president Jimmy Carter landed in Pyongyang and saved the day.

In 2009, former president Bill Clinton landed in Pyongyang and secured the pardon and release of two young American journalists who had been imprisoned for something or other.

Ask yourself what the six-party talks accomplished? Next to nothing. Why? They were not at the highest possible level. With North Korea, nothing happens of consequence at any level lower than the highest. Trump’s proposal to meet Supreme Leader Kim – for all the American foreign-policy establishment’s tut-tutting – is worth a shot. Alas, with Pyongyang of late claiming to have foiled a CIA plot to assassinate the supreme leader, Kim perhaps doubts America will necessarily honour the return visa back to Pyongyang.

That said, the notion that our wildly unprepared American president cannot ever be right, even if he were but a broken clock, is pervasive in our media. In a stunning essay in the current *London Review of Books*, American historian Jackson Lears, editor of the quarterly journal *Raritan*, echoes this. Referring to the outcry over Trump's suggestion in a TV interview that, while Vladimir Putin might be a "killer", the United States was not so innocent, Professor Lears says: "Defenders of conventional wisdom were livid at any hint that the 'indispensable nation' might be as imperfect as any other."

The good news about Trump (and I agree, a lot of it there is not) is that he is an out-of-the-box thinker, though – it is admitted – this may be because he doesn't know where the boxes are in the first place, so he may not realise he's outside them. Maybe if his clock were ticking normally, he'd never get anything right. Who knows? But twice a day is better than nothing, especially when the right ticks happen to concern the future of Asia and America.

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Right on time?*