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Why China should reach out to the US to counter Kim Jong-un

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Comment\Insight & Opinion

Tom Plate

Tom Plate says Beijing should follow up its stunning move to suspend North Korean imports with an overture to Washington, given its high stakes in the stability of the Korean peninsula



There is a time to be dainty and subtle, but this is not that time. There is a time to be blunt and brassy, and that time is now. The need for China and the United States to come together in a persistently adult geopolitical twosome has never been more urgent. Gamesmanship must be minimised. Statesmanship must be maximised.

Just ask career diplomat Ban Ki-moon. The other night in Los Angeles, he 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](#) [1] in the face of our new and unnervingly inexperienced US president unsettled many; the

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Kuala Lumpur [airport assassination operation](#) [2] evidently orchestrated by Pyongyang turned stomachs all over the world. And so Ban laid it on the line: the young North Korean leader, [Kim Jong-un](#) [3], 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 UN secretary general from Asia, 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 (习近平) government announced the suspension of all North Korean imports, including even coal.

China turns the screw on North Korea with its coal ban, but will the tough restrictions last? [4]

Something new may be up. Beijing looks down on Pyongyang, and the North Koreans have little use for China. But the Chinese Communist Party, not unlike (in the oddest way) our American Tea Party, fears change. Regime collapse on its borders conjures up nightmares of an implosion of Syrian proportions; or of an ominously united Korea (North and South) under a Western umbrella. The Chinese government is religious on

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the principle of inviolable sovereignty and beyond sceptical of forced regime change option.



The cover of a Chinese magazine, seen at a newsagent in Beijing, features a portrait of Kim Jong-nam, the murdered half-brother of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. Photo: Reuters

With Trump in power, Pyongyang playing up, it's time for the US and China to act on North Korea [5]

Even so, some kind of thoroughly worked-out China-US 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

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.

Let me give this point a Hong Kong twist: take “one country, two systems”. Many people imagine a late-night office somewhere in Zhongnanhai, lights burning long into the black night, an anti-autonomy squad creepily plotting the next evil move to erode Hong Kong’s identity.

After all, a multibillionaire businessman, recently snatched from his Hong Kong hotel by mainland agents, is taken somewhere – but where, who knows? Was this cliché movie

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scene no more than another chapter in the ongoing mainland power struggle? Or was the snatch-and-go operation a deliberate dagger into the heart and soul of “one country, two systems”?



Former Hong Kong chief executive Donald Tsang is escorted in a prison bus leaving the High Court last week. Tsang’s conviction and jailing is a high-profile example of the local Hong Kong justice system in action, not quashed by mainland intervention. Photo: AP

[Donald Tsang’s loss is a victory for Hong Kong’s rule of law \[6\]](#)

Anything’s possible; but note that the sensational trial of [Donald Tsang Yam-kuen](#) [7] (who’d served as the special administrative region’s chief executive for seven years with Beijing’s overt blessing) proceeded apace within Hong Kong’s indigenous legal system. No mainland intervention was reported. And it was a huge case. Tsang – one of the most intelligent leaders I have ever interviewed – has been jailed. That’s a pity; but it’s a high-profile example of the local Hong Kong justice system in action, not quashed by mainland intervention.

As important as it is, Hong Kong is just one major problem on the big worry list for President Xi

The SAR, like Singapore, worries about its survival as an autonomous entity precisely because it is so small. But from the mainland’s point of view, something like half a dozen of its cities are even more populous than Hong Kong. So, as important as it is, Hong Kong is just one major problem on the big worry list for President Xi. Beijing

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simply does not have anywhere near as much time to focus as exclusively on Hong Kong as Hongkongers appear to have to focus on themselves.

Xi, it seems to me, could fairly complain that his job is tougher than President Donald Trump's. China's population, he could note, is something like 1.3 billion; America's is about 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 US and China need to work on the problem together – better, closer, sooner. What Ban Ki-moon is trying to tell Kim Jong-un is that this looks set to become the next chapter in the Korean peninsula ordeal. His sense is that maybe the time has come to get real.

Columnist Tom Plate, a career American journalist, is Clinical Professor of Asian and Asian American Studies at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. His next book, Peace Columnist, will be out in August