

By Invitation

# Freeze, talk and trade: the 3 principles of peace

Each of these three principles can help to prevent wars – a matter of great relevance in Asia, where the biggest dangers of major inter-state conflict are to be found



**Kishore Mahbubani**

For *The Straits Times*

Presidents Joe Biden and Xi Jinping finally had a 90-minute conversation on the ninth day of the ninth month of the year. The whole world should breathe a huge sigh of relief. Such direct talks can prevent wars. Indeed, in this case, we may have prevented a nuclear war.

This is not an exaggeration. There is only one issue that can trigger a nuclear war in the world today: Taiwan. This is where the red lines of China and the United States cross.

China has made it abundantly clear that it will go to war if Taiwan declares independence. The US is committed, through the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) of 1979, to defend Taiwan if it is attacked.

For the record, the TRA states that “the United States will make available to Taiwan such defence articles and defence services in such quantity as may be necessary to enable Taiwan to maintain a sufficient self-defence capability” and that it would “maintain the capacity of the United States to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardise the security, or the social or economic system, of the people on Taiwan”.

Few in the world are aware that the Trump administration was

flirting with nuclear war in the last nine months of 2020.

## NUCLEAR CALAMITY AVERTED

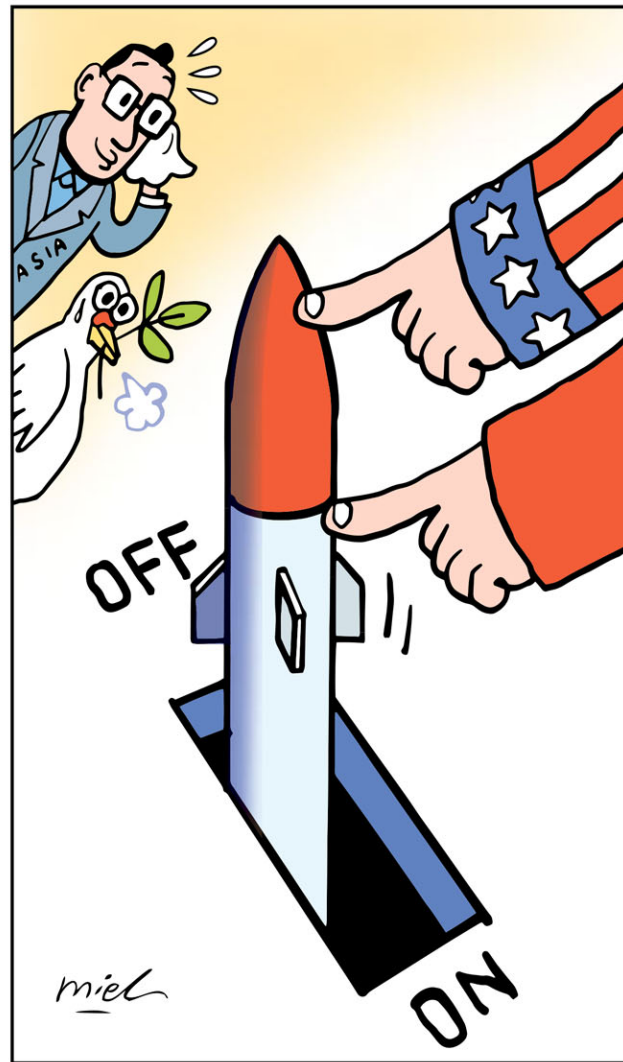
After president Donald Trump declared in March last year that China was responsible for unleashing Covid-19 on the US (and thereby, in his view, seriously hurting his prospects for re-election), the anti-China hawks in the Trump administration also unleashed themselves from previous restraints. Very dangerously, they came close to abandoning the “one-China policy” (whereby the US recognised that China and Taiwan were one country, not two).

A new book, *Aftershocks: Pandemic Politics And The End of the Old International Order* by Dr Thomas Wright of the Brookings Institute and Dr Colin Kahl, Under-Secretary of Defence for Policy in the Biden administration, documents how the anti-China hawks felt unleashed.

As they say in the book: “Two Trump administration officials who favoured continued engagement with China and pushed back against the hardliners told us that before Covid-19, Trump was something of a moderating force on China policy but he was so upset at how it (Covid-19) had jeopardised his re-election prospects that he was willing to endorse everything the hardliners wanted.”

In direct violation of the clear understanding that Washington would maintain “official” ties with Beijing and “unofficial” ties with Taipei, the Trump administration – led recklessly by then Secretary of State Mike Pompeo – tried to send serving officials to Taipei. As a result, there were demands from nationalists on Chinese social media that China should enforce its red lines and shoot down or block American planes carrying the “serving officials” to Taipei.

Amazingly, when Mr Pompeo and other anti-China hawks in the Trump administration were clearly trying to abandon the critical one-China policy, they



were either unaware of or disregarded evidence that they could have started a nuclear war.

Fortunately, some thoughtful American observers spotted this danger. Political commentator Peter Beinart posed the following question in a *New York Times* article: “Ask them how many American lives they’re willing to risk so the US can have official diplomatic relations with Taiwan.”

Mr Beinart further added: “Some of America’s most experienced China experts – including former ambassador to Beijing J. Stapleton Roy and Chas Freeman, who served as Richard Nixon’s interpreter on his 1972 trip to China – believe such a conflict (between the US and China over Taiwan) would risk nuclear war.”

The sense that the world teetered on the brink is reinforced by revelations in another book, *Peril*, by Mr Bob Woodward and Mr Robert Costa. In their account, the Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman, General Mark Milley, was so fearful that Mr Trump would “go rogue” after losing the presidential election last year that he took secret measures to limit the president’s ability to launch a nuclear strike and even made a phone call to China to assuage its worries of being a target.

## THREE PRINCIPLES OF PEACE

That we have reached this precarious juncture in US-China ties and the specific danger that the Taiwan issue poses vividly illustrate the importance of three

principles of peace that I put across when I delivered the 10th Singapore Mediation Lecture on Sept 6, namely, Freeze, Talk and Trade.

Each of these three principles can help to prevent wars, especially wars in Asia.

Few in Asia are aware that while inter-state wars are unlikely in North or South America, Europe or Africa, they remain dangerous threats all across Asia (which is why we established the Asian Peace Programme in the National University of Singapore last year).

Why Freeze? The Taiwan issue explains this principle well. The one-China policy has kept peace across the Taiwan Strait since the US and China established diplomatic relations on Jan 1, 1979, when the US recognised that the legitimate government of China resided in Beijing, not Taipei.

Despite all the ups and downs in the US-China relationship, there was no danger of a direct war, as long as the one-China policy was respected. Mr Pompeo could have unleashed a nuclear war by “unfreezing” the one-China policy.

Why Talk? History teaches us that the best way to improve understanding (and subsequently trust) and reduce the prospects of war is through direct conversations among leaders, especially leaders of major powers.

Indeed, Mr Biden should be considered for the Nobel Peace Prize of 2021, for he may have single-handedly reduced the danger of a nuclear war by reiterating that the US remained

committed to a one-China policy in his conversation with Mr Xi last week.

The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ press release states that Mr Biden reiterated adherence to the one-China policy: “Biden noted that the world is changing fast... The US side has no intention to change the one-China policy.” This echoes what Mr Kurt Campbell, the most senior official on Asian matters in the Biden administration, said in July. He reaffirmed that the US stands by the one-China policy and does not recognise Taiwan as an independent country.

Why Trade? Trade has always prevented wars. One of the greatest Western philosophers of all time, Immanuel Kant, explains why in his famous essay on *Perpetual Peace* in 1795: “The state of peace among men living side by side is not the natural state; the natural state is one of war. This does not always mean open hostilities, but at least an unceasing threat of war... The spirit of commerce, which is incompatible with war, sooner or later takes hold of every nation. As the power of money is perhaps the most dependable of all the powers included under the state power, states see themselves forced, without any moral urge, to promote honourable peace and by mediation to prevent war wherever it threatens to break out.”

Empirical evidence from Asia backs this up. Two of the most difficult bilateral relationships in the world are those between India and Pakistan and between China and Vietnam. Major wars have been fought on both borders.

Yet, overall, there have been fewer border incidents and clashes at the China-Vietnam border. Why? Here’s the data. Between 1991 and this year, trade between India and Pakistan went from US\$97 million to US\$285 million (\$383 million), a nearly threefold increase.

By contrast, in the same period, trade between China and Vietnam went up from US\$32 million to US\$133 billion, an increase of over 4,000 times. Just note the difference: three times versus 4,000 times. It is not surprising that the China-Vietnam border is more peaceful as a result.

This is the great paradox about living in Asia today. On the one hand, in terms of economic and social development, the past 30 years have been the best 30 years in three thousand years of Asian history. On the other hand, the greatest dangers of major inter-state wars are also to be found in Asia.

How Asia manages this paradox will determine its future. The bottom line here is that peace in Asia can never be taken for granted. Let’s work hard together to promote Freeze, Talk and Trade.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• Kishore Mahbubani, a veteran diplomat, is a distinguished fellow at the Asia Research Institute at the National University of Singapore, and the author of *Has The West Lost It?* and *Has China Won?*