

FORUM

The parallel universe of peace



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Guest Columnist

Pentagon war room, then responds to the “challenge code” the war room officer presents to him. The correct response is “on a little card” the president carries.

“It takes five minutes to launch a war ... It’s as easy as ordering a pizza.” And there’s no way to stop a missile once it’s been launched. “The whole process, from the president opening his briefcase to missiles being launched, can take as little as five minutes. Millions of people will be dead faster than Domino’s can get there with your pizza.”

Human progress! This is the world we have created in our pursuit of dominance over Planet Earth and one another, lo these past ten thousand or so years. We have made it to the edge of the void, the brink of global suicide and non-existence, pushed along by a sense of glory and power and fear of the enemy who, it turns out, is none other than ourselves. Humanity has pursued the opposite of this as well, but peace — connectedness, “love thy enemy as thyself” — is profoundly more complex to grasp and understand, and those who believe in war have successfully contained it

so far.

This is the context in which I consider the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, which was approved by the U.N. General Assembly in July 2017 by a vote of 122-1. The debate on this treaty — which proclaims that no nation can “develop, test, produce, acquire, possess, stockpile, use or threaten to use nuclear weapons” and holds nations responsible to remediate the environmental and human damage they’ve caused by nuclear testing over the last 75 years — was boycotted by the United States, Russia, China, the U.K., France, India, Pakistan, Israel and North Korea ... hmmm, what do these countries have in common? Oh yeah, they all possess nuclear weapons. Also boycotting the debate and vote were their allies, including all the NATO countries.

After its passage, the treaty then had to be ratified by 50 countries before it could become international law. That happened in the past week, when Honduras became the fiftieth nation to do so. That means, according to the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons:

“In 90 days, the treaty will enter into force, cementing a categorical ban on nuclear weapons, 75 years after their first use.”

OK, but what does that actually mean? First of all, the prohibition against development and use of nukes applies only to the treaty’s signatories, which only include countries that are nuke-free anyway — which means this isn’t a law in any pragmatic way but, rather, a commitment. And while I do not disparage such a commitment, I have to ask how it brings us the least bit closer to actual global nuclear disarmament.

Well, according to The Guardian, “campaigners hope the treaty will have the same impact as previous international treaties on landmines and cluster munitions, bringing a stigma to their stockpiling and use, and thereby a change in behavior even in countries that did not sign up.” They also suggest that military-industrial companies will begin feeling pressure to stop producing nuclear weapons because financial institutions will stop investing in them.

This adds up to an enormous imbalance between war and peace. We

can start a nuclear war in five minutes, faster than we can order a pizza. But it took the world 72 years after Hiroshima and Nagasaki to officially declare nukes illegal (for some), and another three years to ratify that declaration, followed by a hope that this is the beginning of stigmatizing nukes sufficiently so that someday the nuclear powers will surrender their weapons voluntarily, or at least stop developing new ones.

Meanwhile, the Trump Administration has declared this treaty “dangerous” and has urged signatories to withdraw their support. I note also that the U.S. president is famous for his fear and hatred of non-white potential immigrants, be they Muslim or Mexican or African, and — speaking of stigmatization — has said that a lot of them are from “shithole countries.” And he has no problem with putting them, or at least their children, in cages.

Think of it! The guy who could start a nuclear war has, in his own mind, already dehumanized a huge percentage of the world’s population. Doing so makes it so much easier to kill them when neces-

sary.

Creating peace requires an enormous growing up, politically and every other way. Those who are committed to peace and global equality are forced to work for it in a world that is seriously prejudiced in favor of war. The path to war is easy and smooth, and nuclear war is easiest of all. The level of spiritual growing up necessary to embrace nuclear disarmament is perhaps best exemplified by South Africa, which played a crucial role in the passage of the U.N. Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.

South Africa is also the only country on the planet that gave up its nuclear weapons after being in full control of them. When did this happen? Around the same time that it transitioned from an apartheid government to one of racial equality.

Is there a lesson to be learned here?

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In defense of Confucius Institutes



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Guest Columnist

cil under the Chinese education ministry. It provides teachers and textbooks free of charge to university students and K-12 schools, where they are known as Confucius Classrooms.

In the U.S., there were once more than 100 CIs; now there are fewer than 60, and if Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has his way—he has accused the CIs, without evidence, of seeking to recruit “spies and collaborators,” and in August had them designated as “foreign missions”—there soon will be none. Where once Confucius Institutes were welcomed as part of a thriving U.S.-China people-to-people exchange program, now they are viewed in the context of a bipartisan consensus to treat China as a “strategic competitor.”

Pompeo has been the stalking horse, touring the world with a Cold War message on China that extends well beyond CIs. Working through various U.S. agencies, as well as his department, Pompeo seeks to limit visas for Chinese (and other international) students, scholars, even doctors, and begin sending home those already here on the basis of “national security.”

Imagine: Last year there were nearly 370,000 Chinese students in the U.S. Those who would normally be eligible for work under the government’s Optional Practical Training program will no longer have that option. Visa requirements are being tightened with the obvious aim of preventing Chinese language teachers, as well as students and visiting scholars, from entering or returning to the U.S. A proposed

law passed in the Senate would require interrogation of every Chinese in the U.S. to assess whether or not they pose a security risk. Another bill (S.939), introduced in the Senate by Republican John Kennedy and Democrat Doug Jones, would deny federal funds to universities that fail to meet new ground rules on Confucius Institutes they host, such as that CIs must agree to be governed by both Chinese and U.S. law; that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) must approve all CI events and speakers; and that CI teachers cannot teach CCP versions of “Chinese history, culture and current events.”

None of the rules is fact-based, but if they become law, they will be one way to force CIs to close. There are still other ways, such as preventing CI teachers from obtaining a U.S. visa, and using the National Defense Authorization Act for FY2019 to force universities to choose between continuing to receive defense department money and hosting a CI—a choice with a predictable outcome.

CIs are closing not because of poor performance or political intrigue, but because of political pressure, sometimes from Washington and sometimes from academia. The pressure reflects ideological passion, however, not an investigation of actual circumstances. In the context of my work, I have participated in nearly 100 interviews of CI and university officers and staff, and American teachers in communities with Confucius Classrooms. No one mentioned Chinese political interference. Academic

freedom was not violated, financial dependence on China was not created, and China was not presented one-sidedly by its teachers. To the contrary, CIs performed exactly as promised. Besides promoting Chinese language and cultural learning in communities small and large across the country, each CI has taken on some additional or more specialized role, such as partnering with other community organizations on cultural themes, teaching noncredit on-line classes in addition to K-12 classes, or providing study abroad opportunities. The American interviewees uniformly expressed gratitude for their CI’s contributions to the community’s cultural awareness and students’ international competency.

Virtually all the accusations against CIs are based on isolated Chinese statements extolling China’s soft power, the opaque relationship between Hanban and China’s education ministry, or a rare charge of bias against Taiwan or Tibet. Behind the charges is the presumption that money and teachers coming from China give the Chinese Communist Party access to young American minds—in short, guilt by association, as in Senator Chuck Grassley’s advice to 74 universities and colleges which at that time (March 2020) were home to CIs, to seek an FBI briefing on “the threats posed by the Chinese Government” generally, and CIs specifically. “Based upon information gathered from unclassified briefings,” said Grassley, “we know that Confucius Institutes are an arm of the Chinese Government. ... The ac-

tivities of Confucius Institutes are inherently political in nature and intended to influence U.S. policy and public opinion.”

Such warnings not only ignore the benefits of educational exchanges with China, they also confuse CIs with other Chinese activities that may be nefarious if proven. FBI and Justice Department officials have testified about threats posed to research labs and universities by researchers with “undisclosed ties to Chinese institutions and conflicted loyalties.” Other U.S. officials are demanding highly detailed reporting from universities about foreign donations, with China especially in mind, in the belief they are sources of political influence. So far, however, the only “threats” concern undisclosed arrangements that some U.S. biomedical professors with National Institutes of Health grants made with Chinese entities. Several of those professors have been punished. But as the president of MIT has said, the wide net cast by the U.S. government in search of disloyal people has made anyone of Chinese ethnicity “feel unfairly scrutinized, stigmatized and on edge.”

What the administration is doing, in our name, is cutting off our nose to spite our face—denying communities, schools, and laboratories the opportunities for cultural enrichment, people-to-people interaction, and mutual understanding precisely at a moment when these are desperately needed. In past years, China was accepted as an economic partner despite its communist system. Now we are back to

McCarthyism. No wonder Beijing accuses the Trump Administration of inciting a new Cold War—and is responding with its own exaggeration of the U.S. threat. It’s a dangerous and unnecessary escalation that will be difficult for a new U.S. leadership to get beyond, assuming it is so inclined.

Strange to have to make an argument about the value of learning a foreign language and knowing more about another country’s culture. Just a few decades ago, that debate seemed to end with calls for “internationalizing” curricula in recognition of how our insular educational system was making students uncompetitive in the global marketplace. Now a huge backward leap is taking place with, of all countries, China. And it is being accompanied by an equally narrow-minded attempt by Betsy Vos’s education department to limit all foreign students’ time to pursue degrees and work in technical fields not being filled by Americans.

The Chinese educational authorities see the handwriting on the wall and in July reorganized their approach in the U.S., creating two new organizations to take the place of Hanban and CIs. But that step will not resolve the political issue: Whether or not a U.S. entity may accept Chinese money for language and cultural learning without coming under official scrutiny.

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