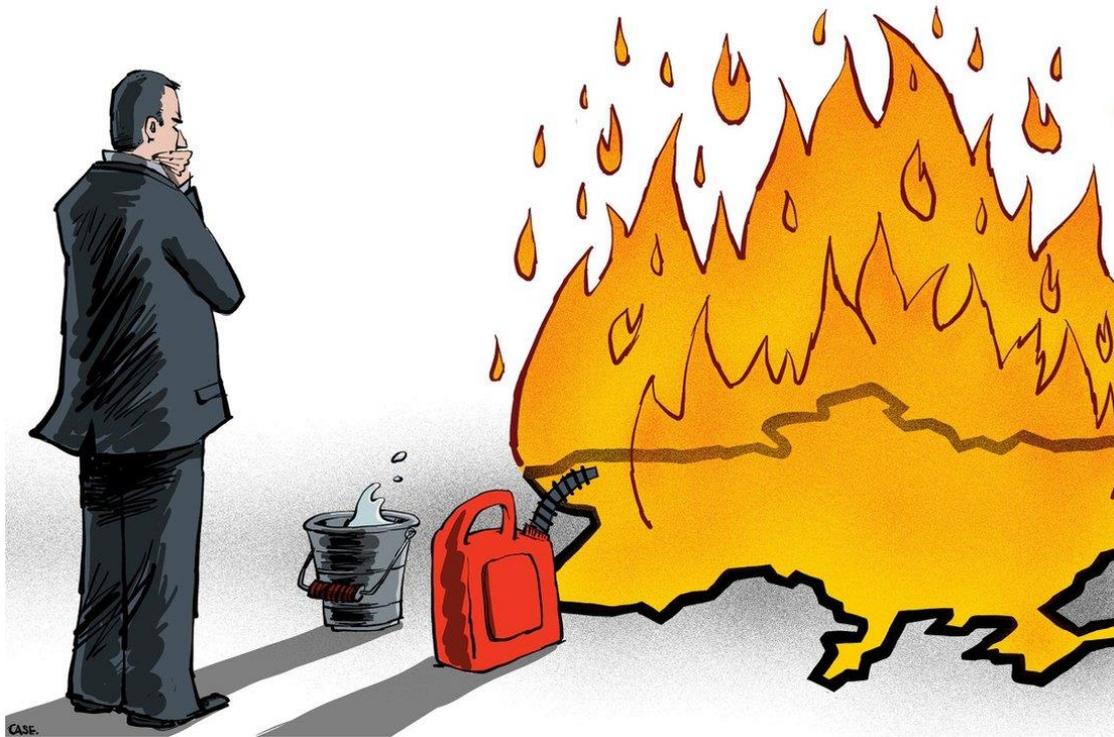


# Diplomacy failed in Ukraine. US and China must not let it happen twice



By Terry Su

7<sup>th</sup> April, 2022

The new US ambassador to China, Nicholas Burns, finally arrived in Beijing last month, and set about attending to business after a required spell of Covid-19 quarantine in the capital. Indeed, for the most important bilateral relationship in the world, it is extraordinary that the ambassador's post had been left vacant for nearly a year before Burns was appointed to fill it in December.

Supposedly personifying diplomacy – defined as “the established method of influencing the decisions and behaviour of foreign governments and peoples through dialogue, negotiation and other measures short of war or violence” by *Encyclopaedia Britannica* – Burns instead made his stage debut at the US Senate nomination hearing with a show of outright hostility towards Beijing.

He called China an “aggressor”; denounced its alleged bad behaviour in Xinjiang, Tibet and Hong Kong, saying that its actions “are unjust and must stop”; and, regarding Taiwan, declared that “we certainly cannot trust the Chinese” and that “our responsibility is to make Taiwan a tough nut to crack”.

Hardly the rhetoric expected from an envoy in this context. The sentiment was reciprocated by Cui Tiankai, China’s longest-serving ambassador to the US who retired from the post last June, when he spoke at a forum in Beijing two months later.

Having been characteristically soft-spoken as the face of China in Washington, Cui finally seemed unable to repress his strong conviction that “the US will not willingly accept the rise of a power with a very different social system, ideology, cultural traditions and even ethnicity”, accusing the US of “a very strong element of racism” in its China policy.

The open tit-for-tat between the veteran diplomats offers just one example of diplomacy being enervated at a time when it is more in demand than at any other moment since the end of the Cold War.

Look no further than Ukraine to observe the consequences of failed diplomacy: a war on a scale not seen in Europe since the end of World War II, launched by Russia, a permanent member of the UN Security Council and retainer of the world’s largest nuclear stockpile.

Added to this conflict is a narrative spread with missionary zeal by the US government and media in which Vladimir Putin’s Russia is depicted as Hitler’s Germany and China is accused of being “on the wrong side of history” (by Secretary of State Antony Blinken, for instance) for its refusal to condemn, and willingness to tilt towards, Russia.

This is no recipe for world peace because to look at today’s world through the prism of Manichean dualism is to misread “an inflection point in history”, as Mathew Burrows and Robert A. Manning noted in *Foreign Policy* recently, at which international relations show clear signs of moving away from the US-dominated liberal order towards a state of multipolarity.

In this shifting environment, the urge of individual powers to pursue their own national interests compels rule-defying or even risk-incurring actions, as evidenced by Russia’s invasion and nuclear trigger-readiness.

In addressing this issue of paramount importance, the US is entitled to, as well as responsible for, a lion's share of the endeavour, if for no other reason than that it is the world's sole superpower in every measurement of global indexes – with great power comes great responsibility, as the ancient adage goes.

First and foremost, America needs to realise that, even if a Russia in Ukraine is still manageable – a big if indeed – a China provoked over Taiwan and the South China Sea in all likelihood will not be.

Washington should therefore actively seek to end the war in Ukraine through direct diplomacy, or alternatively, let the EU broker peace there and invite China to help.

In the meantime, concrete diplomatic efforts need to be made to put in place the “guardrails” of bilateral relations advocated by US President Joe Biden to President Xi Jinping during their virtual summit last November, lest another, potentially more disruptive, Ukraine-like crisis brews and blows to nobody's liking.

With these concerted undertakings, the international community may look to initiate a rhetorical shift in global politics, away from “the end of history” and “Liberal Leviathan” and back towards a more encompassing “realism”, as first systematically conceptualised by Hans Morgenthau in his magnum opus *Politics Among Nations*.

Henry Kissinger made ample references to this concept by, for instance, pointing to the ability “to exploit every available option without constraint of ideology” as the key to realpolitik. Closer to hand is the “strategic empathy” promoted by Burrows and Manning in their above-mentioned article.

President John F. Kennedy, after a staff meeting during the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962, said to his press secretary, “do you think the people in that room realise that if we make a mistake, there may be 200 million dead?” That shows how much is staked on diplomacy.

Kennedy's task, however, pales in comparison with what is demanded by streams of global contingencies today, which tend to be complicated, multifaceted and fatiguingly prolonged in their unfolding; and that gives us an especially compelling reason to be vigilant and persevering in the pursuit of diplomacy.

Or, as Susan Thornton, a former senior US State Department official, pleaded tersely at the end of a recent interview: “Save diplomacy!”

*Terry Su is president of Lulu Derivation Data Ltd, a Hong Kong-based online publishing house and think tank specialising in geopolitics*

From: <https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3173134/diplomacy-failed-ukraine-us-and-china-must-not-let-it-happen-twice>