

CHINA COLUMNIST

THE SOUTH CHINA MORNING POST COLUMNS OF TOM PLATE

JUNE-DECEMBER 2015



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COLUMNS OF TOM PLATE
JUNE-DECEMBER 2015

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

A Note from Columnist Tom Plate.....	<i>i</i>
Stoking up Great Power-Rivalry only Fuels South China Sea Tensions.....	1
Zhu Rongji's light touch is sorely missing in today's China.....	4
China and US must Include Japan in Talks on security of East Asia.....	7
Western Media's Callous Delight at China's stock market crash is totally uncalled for	10
China Needs to Deploy a more silken touch with its Neighbours	13
Common Sense and Patience Needed as Election Fever fans Americans' fears about China	16
Amid the Economic and Political Storms, China and the US must Realize they are Inextricably bound Together.....	19
Why Should the World Fear a Powerful Xi Jinping	22
Ruling Party's Resounding Win in Singapore Elections reflects the success of its political model.....	25
Of Dinners and Deals: The Different Diplomatic Styles of China and the US make Negotiations all the more Necessary.....	28
Slow and Stead is how China is Liberalizing the Renminbi – As it Should	32
Dealing with the Rise of China: The US should learn from the British the Art of the Deal.....	36
In Deal Making, Handshake Xi Jinping, China Finds a New Face of Smart Diplomacy	40
For Good Sino-US Relations, the Americans must Learn to Listen, While the Chinese must Learn to Talk.....	54

A NOTE FROM COLUMNIST TOM PLATE

These columns, which started 1 June, began another long march of mine toward understanding and perhaps even marginally influencing the climate for a much more mature and safe China-U.S. relationship. My first march (and it was a long one) was noted in a book of selected columns (1995-2004) titled *'In the Middle of China's Future'*.

It is true that even the best journalism can help only so much; but enough of the worst can overwhelm common sense and make reconciliation next to impossible.

I know I have avoided the worst. It is up to you, the reader, to decide if I have done any better than that.

My main problem has been that the China issue is too complicated for any one commentator to make total sense of – but that hasn't stopped me from trying, has it?

My main asset now (and it is – in my mind - huge) is a fortnightly platform courtesy of the South China Morning Post, a vital daily newspaper precariously balanced on the fault line between Hong Kong and China. I consider it an honor to be a SCMP columnist.

But while these columns have been regularly published in Hong Kong since June, they were conceived, written and fine-tuned in Los Angeles, where I devote as much quality time as I can to the committed students who staff Asia Media International, the website of Loyola Marymount University's Asian and Pacific Studies program. These young students are the work-in-progress agents of our future, and they deserve the very best that our elders can give them.

As regards the issue of China and its relationship with the U.S., this has been the best that I have been able to do. I do believe that the intellectual atmosphere at LMU, as well as the support of professorial colleagues as well as Asia Media students, has helped these columns avoid the mundane by exercising what has been termed 'global imagination'. That, in any event, has been the aim.

Sincerely,

TOM PLATE
Distinguished Scholar of
Asian and Pacific Studies,
Loyola Marymount University
Los Angeles

STOKING UP GREAT-POWER RIVALRY ONLY FUELS SOUTH CHINA SEA TENSIONS

Tom Plate says a peaceful and more secure South China Sea depends on clear-eyed Sino-US relations

Published: June 1, 2015



Why always view China as some giant shark of evil and the US as some Moby Dick of goodness? Real life is not that binary-simple.

Regarding the scary swirl in the South China Sea: whatever happened to our peace-loving, consensus-driven East Asia? Why did Washington cry itself a river over China's infrastructure bank idea? And what's going on with roiling Sino-US relations?

Let's play the blame game, it's so much fun. For starters, Chinese diplomacy has been anything but suave. The Japanese had to re-elect a nationalist prime minister. And a bunch of Asian nations sweating over their mineral and fishing rights just have to rush into the waiting arms of Mother America. Then, the US has to don its superman cape and jump in to make even bigger waves. And so it goes.

The current scramble for resources and their control is being played out as a proxy game. Shabby shoals, flimsy sandbars, erector-set lighthouses and uninviting outcrops of seaweed and coral are being - in effect - Botoxed up like an ageing actor to simulate fresh faces of sovereignty justifying exclusivity claims. The Chinese are by far the most proactive of the geopolitical plastic surgeons, but almost everyone else is playing some game or other. But it's all China's fault, don't you just know?

With something like 1.4 billion mouths to feed, China's lunge to beat others to resources is hardly a sign of irrationality - it might even be a symptom of a massive survival instinct. Consider that China has to feed, house and keep employed more people than Indonesia by a factor of five. This cannot be the easiest task in the history of governance. This is certainly not a case of Russia grabbing Crimea. This is a nation with 22 per cent of the global population trying to grab three meals a day.

The tensions between China and its neighbours are substantive enough. One is the issue of who should have access to what oceanic resources - and by what reasonable process. Another is who owns what shoal or what cluster of sand or dumb rock so as to claim sovereign undersea rights in the area.

And a third factor is the role of the US, which is starting to surface like some great white whale. It has no real territory to speak of, but operates many bases in the Pacific, has a small school of treaty partners, and harbours the growing suspicion that China's rise looks to be less peaceful, as famously bannered by Beijing, than potent. (Superpowers worry about others' potency.) It worries that China's tactical shoring up of shoals has the strategic aim of blocking vital shipping lanes.

Let's look at these issues one by one. First, we accept that the sovereignty issues will not be resolved in the near future. Too many lines have been drawn in the sand and around the shoals; too many publics have been riled. After all, China dredged up that nine-dash line of sovereignty that, at first glance, looks to take in almost everything under the South China Sea sun.

At some point, control issues will have to be negotiated; other nations have too much stake in the outcome for China, however enormous its needs, to have everything it wants. Were a few of its nine dashes somehow to fade into irrelevance, as a calming potion for others, the basis of a serious regional negotiation might materialize.

Still relevant is the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, which more than 160 member states have ratified. But Beijing is adamant about not appearing to be negotiating the status of what it views as historically sovereign territories. So that, for now, is that.

In the meantime, we face immediate access issues - to seafood, oil and minerals, vital needs for all Pacific countries, not just China. Will China swallow hard and accept the 10-nation Association of Southeast Asian Nations as the sole negotiator for the "smaller" countries? This is where Chinese diplomacy needs to take a deep breath, raise its game, and unleash its best and brightest diplomats to take on the daunting challenges of Asean. John F. Kennedy once said: "Never negotiate out of fear; but never fear to negotiate."

As for the US: officially, it says it is not taking sides in any of the disputes. No? But it is taking orders for new arms, is flying surveillance planes, and so on. Of course it is taking Asean's side. And it is here that you worry: further high-profile American

involvement could push the South China Sea quarrel into that dreaded superpower showdown that no one wants.

Rather than raise its South China Sea profile, the US should bob and weave out there with the utmost care, no matter how allegedly saintly its intentions. Asia watcher Bill Hayton, in his invaluable book *The South China Sea*, quotes a well-regarded Asian diplomat as warning:

“If you bring in one superpower to oppose the other, then superpower dynamics begins to push the issue and marginalizes a peaceful settlement.”

To be sure, rivalry between great powers doesn't always have to portend foul weather. Competition can produce excellence - even an occasional new idea. A prime example is the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. While almost everyone liked the general idea from the start, Washington sulkily opposed it, badgering allies not to. It wasn't, after all, its idea - it was China's. So what? Maybe other good ideas will come from China - maybe even an idea for taming the South China Sea tempest. Then reason could rule the waves and the mad struggle for resources funneled into channels of diplomacy.

Why always view China as some giant shark of evil and the US as some Moby Dick of goodness? It's a jungle out there; real life is just not that binary-simple. China - we note with some embarrassment - formally ratified the UN convention a long time ago but guess which nation still has not? Pardon, if you can, the clunky imagery, but Moby Dick had better be careful not to fall off its high seahorse.

ZHU RONGJI'S LIGHT TOUCH IS SORELY MISSING IN TODAY'S CHINA

Tom Plate says China today could do with the foresight and calm self-confidence of a Zhu Rongji

Published: June 15, 2015



The strength of the light touch reflects self-confidence that breeds flexibility.

Because we're human, we sometimes imagine nations as human beings - and babble on about their personality failures as if indulging in serious psycho-political analysis. We envision them as human-like, and declaim their boldness or weakness, or whatever, as if they were a singular personality.

Take the United States, for example - it's an ongoing, semi-functional jumble of competing forces, interests and partisanships that roil above and below constitutionally entrenched layers of competing government authorities. And yet we will depict the America of today as no more complex than - say - Barack Obama without the Harry Truman.

Even though China has four times America's population, it draws comparable anthropomorphic caricature as well. And yet it is such an endlessly sprawling kaleidoscope of the rural and the urban, Confucian/capitalist, central-party/deeply

engrained native culture that it's folly to try to sum it up in fewer than a few billion words and a thousand metaphors.

But that doesn't stop us, because when thinking of Beijing, the anthropomorphic feeling is especially pressing: you feel in your heart that some important dimension in its current political personality is missing.

It is just a feeling, not a Princeton PhD thesis. Yes, China is not just emerging, it is emergent; it is no longer weak, and its diplomacy is starting to flex as muscularly as the well-photographed exercises of the People's Liberation Army. And, no question, even with the economy cooling, it is already a powerhouse. We all get this.

But, at the same time, we have the sense of an absent dimension and we glance back in time for something, or someone, to fill in the blank. No, it's not Mao Zedong ; the last thing we'd long for is a neo-Maoist figure; Deng Xiaoping was fine, but that's not it. And the current president, Xi Jinping , has been providing strong direction and making tough decisions - generally getting good marks from many international as well as domestic observers.

Still, something is missing - a top-level political personality who listens carefully, with a sense of subtlety and nuance, with placid self-confidence; even the ability to take a blow or two and not get instantly psyched up for war; some supreme serenity, with a brain born for geopolitics.

Here's a hint: Who on the mainland recently has said anything like this - and obviously meant it? "What we want to do is to work for the people's welfare and build China into a strong and prosperous country with democracy and the rule of law. We absolutely won't engage in hegemony or power politics as some other countries do, as we've suffered enough from these. What good can come from bullying and oppressing others? We can become rich and strong through our own efforts, and we won't bully others."

Yes, this was said in June 2001 by the same man who in 1989 refused to unleash troops onto Shanghai's streets to smash demonstrations, as had been done in that other metropolis up north; who wasn't afraid to meet students; who guided China into the great globalised unknown of the World Trade Organisation, despite a million honest doubts back home; and who managed to settle down his fellow Politburo colleagues after the "accidental" US bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999 - just one month after his White House humiliation by Bill Clinton, who cravenly back-pedalled and reneged over his promises on the WTO.

Through all this, Zhu Rongji , then the fifth premier of China, now in retirement, kept China cool simply by keeping his own; by averting his eyes from the inevitable setback, no matter how bitter, and affixing them to where China needed to be 10, 20, 30 years down the road. He was then - and now - exactly what was - and is - needed: a visionary with foresight.

It is no doubt an extreme case of anthropomorphic romanticising to want to believe that a Zhu-type figure would handle "bratty" Hong Kong with the same tactical deftness and insight as Zhu himself did with those 1989 demonstrators in Shanghai. The strength of the light touch reflects the core of self-confidence that breeds flexibility.

So when, as many expect, Hong Kong's legislature later this week fails to pass the electoral overhaul package for the chief executive election of 2017, many also expect Beijing to turn predictably cold - and sullen - and somewhat forbidding. Or will it shock the world and offer an unexpected but utterly self-confident turn of warm understanding?

Some countries are grand but not great, others are great but not grand; the rare ones are both great and grand.

The late Noel Annan, a Cambridge don, was famously insistent that the legendary thinker Isaiah Berlin's relentless emphasis on the impact of leaders on history was tragically underappreciated, particularly by academics.

He once lampooned them this way: "Social scientists have depersonalised acres of human experience so that history resembles a ranch on which herds move, driven they know not why by impersonal forces, munching their way across the prairie."

Real life takes place on no such barren ranch but on vast windy steppes of difficult historical realities. The exceptional leader can prove a huge value-added force. As authors Orville Schell and John Delury put it in their deeply illuminating book *Wealth and Power*:

"Zhu ensured that China would enter the 21st century poised to advance ever more rapidly..."

China faces great historic challenges and decision-crossroads now. If only its complex political personality contained a visible dimension of the Zhu Rongji touch.

CHINA AND US MUST INCLUDE JAPAN IN TALKS ON SECURITY OF EAST ASIA

Tom Plate says Beijing needs to rethink its policy towards Japan for the good of the region

Published: June 29, 2015



Trilateral issues require triangular diplomacy. No one should be excluded.

Let us divide tense East Asia, Caesarean fashion, into three geopolitical parts. One is Chinese, the other is Japanese, and the third is - yes - American (even though, as the Chinese are inclined to point out, America is not exactly native to East Asia, right?). By the way, no disrespect intended towards Koreans, but they cannot compose a fourth because of their own division into two parts - a peculiar Korean-style Caesarean sectioning.

Last week, representatives of two-thirds of geopolitical East Asia met to calm tensions. The occasion was the worthy US-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue, with both sides in Washington hoping to talk through bilateral differences and potential confrontations. An excellent idea: the world doesn't need any more wars, and East Asia doesn't need any. But the issues are tough, complicated and the Sino-US relationship continues to need immense work. It is to the credit of the two governments that this urgent task is not lost on them.

But it is also fair to ask how betterment of the East Asian neighbourhood can be achieved if a third of it is excluded from the management committee. No doubt, if East Asia's remaining third had been sitting at the table as well, Beijing wouldn't have shown up at all; or if it had, the talks would have been nightmarish. Even so, it might also be speculated that sectioning Japan off to the side might well prove a serious miscalculation.

Japan, after all, is not remotely a Greece, suddenly the world's saddest modern economy. On the contrary, its per capita income dwarfs China's, and for a population of a mere 127 million, the fact is that its overall economy probably ranks No3 worldwide, even above powerhouse Germany. What's more, the Japanese people, according to opinion polls, while remaining pacifist and anti-nuclear, have begun to worry about the soundness of their China tack: go with the prevailing winds, just sell and buy, don't argue, and everything will be A-OK.

China is now Japan's No 1 foreign preoccupation, and the US second. The political impact is titanic. "To be successful, Japanese leaders must persuade their public that cooperation with China will reduce Japan's vulnerabilities rather than exacerbate them," advises Japan expert Sheila Smith, senior fellow on the US Council on Foreign Relations, via her surpassingly comprehensive book *Intimate Rivals*: "The old ways of managing its relationship with China are no longer effective."

Japan has begun viewing China more as an existential challenge than as just a jolly-good super-big-time importer and exporter. The causes of this sea change are many, but of course the various claims and counter-claims - and bumps - in the East China Sea have scarcely bolstered bilateral comity. Another is that China's advocacy of a worldwide policy of non-interference in a country's internal affairs (especially its own) tends not to apply to Japan's internal affairs.

Japan is certainly vulnerable to criticism, as is any country. China and others often complain about its "bulimic" memory, especially regarding war atrocities. But as Smith points out, the unintended result of all the nagging is to harden domestic sentiment against China. It is no coincidence that the two most politically significant Japanese prime ministers in recent times have been the showy war-shrine-visiting Junichiro Koizumi and the overtly nationalistic Shinzo Abe. Note, too, that indignant right-wing pressure groups and lobbies that do wish China serious ill have juicy new leases on political life and the Japanese are now debating whether to revise their constitution to expand their military space and, presumably, jump into an East Asian arms race with that good old fighting spirit.

There is immense irony here, and it is truly heart-breaking. Smith points out with poignant perspective that support from the Japanese public for grandstanding PM visits to war shrines and the like actually has been undergoing structural erosion due to generational turnover. And, she reports, the nation's nationalistic right wing is actually less unified than fragmented: all Japanese conservatives are not cut from the same grumpy cloth. But harrowing sea confrontations between fishing vessels and military ships serve to narrow differences; loud rhetoric from Beijing plays into

the wrong political hands. Instead of winning over public opinion, Chinese policy would appear to be making the Japanese wonder about their military readiness. Wasn't it Sun Tzu who wrote: "The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting"?

Beijing's policy towards Japan needs to be rethought. Smith's definitive book nails the point that Japanese foreign policy in general (and towards China in particular) is almost entirely driven by domestic politics, pressures and lobbies. There is no overall conceptual framework; the national emotion is becoming increasingly existential.

The problem for Chinese as well as Japanese diplomacy is daunting. Both nations field diplomats of exceptional talent and cosmopolitan subtlety; they understand each other's domestic problems; and, when the two sides do talk, they come away believing that deft diplomacy can somehow heal all wounds. That might be true if the bilateral relationship were being left entirely to the diplomats. But it's not. Pugnacious groups on both sides are gaining leverage, and mutually respectful diplomacy loses out to petty pugnacity, especially over stupid territorial issues. As Smith concludes:

"The potential for heightened tension – and perhaps even conflict – will make it increasingly difficult to go back to Deng Xiaoping's approach to leaving the problem to future generations to resolve."

And so to recycle Caesar yet again: all East Asia will remain in three unhappy parts until and unless all three parts get their acts together. Without that, there surely will be conflict. Trilateral issues require triangular diplomacy. No one should be excluded. It is very dangerous. China's Japan policy is in a box that Beijing has got to begin thinking itself out of. That won't be easy, but it is mandatory for East Asian peace and security.

WESTERN MEDIA'S CALLOUS DELIGHT AT CHINA'S STOCK MARKET CRASH IS TOTALLY UNCALLED FOR

Tom Plate criticises unfair Western reporting on China's market troubles, not least its almost gleeful tone

Published: July 13, 2015



If China were somehow to collapse, it would not just be the Chinese people who would suffer. The fallout would cause pain for people elsewhere.

If you were greatly annoyed or disappointed by the largely cold and unsympathetic Western media commentary about China's stock market plunge, this didn't mean you had to be a member of the State Council or an uncritical panda-hugger. All you'd have to have been was a fair-minded person.

Even quality Western newspapers were dispensing dismissive decrees with unseemly glee. Press punsters could not resist the cheap headline ("The great fall of China"). Instant-analysis types were practically dancing in the pubs watching the "prestige of the party" allegedly shrink along with the Shanghai and Shenzhen composites. Even respected press portals were positively entertained by "the government's frenzied attempts", "dodgy intervention" and "helplessness".

Let us leave aside for the moment whether we Western journalists are capable, in the face of a rough patch for China and its people, of summoning our empathy. The other question is whether Western journalists were being journalistic: it was as if the media had never before seen a stock market bubble burst, or ever witnessed a scary gigantic sell-off.

It was as if something this messy could only have occurred on the watch of a primitive Communist government failing to fit into the fancy pants of sophisticated Western free-marketers.

Waves of low-grade ideological journalism kept coming at you. Beijing's counter-measures were "desperate", and only the country's "compliant press" would find them credible, as the authorities were "in danger of losing credibility" and China's market began to look "more like the Wild West". And of course there was near unanimity on this core point: "the collapse in confidence ... is a sharp indictment of the party's prestige", "a grave economic blemish on Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang, China's leaders".

Precious few helpful or positive suggestions were offered - why care about 1.4 billion people assembled in the world's most populous country, which happens also to include a most glamorous and fascinating special administrative region? Let them melt on their margins! Even well-meaning recommendations reeked of an absolutely extraordinary deficit of self-awareness. "The [Chinese] government should ... be trying to strengthen the foundations of its economy and financial system," scolded a famous US newspaper, as if such measures were appropriate solely for China.

"It could do so by better regulating and policing its securities market to root out fraud and speculation."

Hmm ... can we think of any other major economy that has suffered through similar traumas for which such a remedy would be appropriate?

The Western news media always proposed that the world get down on hands and knees and offer fundamentalist worship to the "free market". But even if the god of an absolutely free market existed, which of course it doesn't, is this imaginary god not the same one that has failed us again and again? It takes no Marxist to point to the lack of the market's magic in 2007-2008, when US avarice, incompetence and deregulation helped seed a global crisis - widely viewed in retrospect as the worst since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

This god that continually fails was surely less than magical in 1997-99, when relatively open stock and equity markets in Asia had the life wrung out of them by avaricious Western funds viciously shorting even otherwise well-regulated markets.

The famous example was Hong Kong itself, which rebounded when the alert local government of then chief executive Tung Chee-hwa counter-attacked with equities purchases, an astute ploy personally approved by then premier Zhu Rongji . Western financial media were so quick to denounce the SAR government's bold intervention as a betrayal of "free-market" ideals. But the effort worked wonders to bee-sting the short sellers, scaring them off to go buzzing for easy honey elsewhere.

And the West was so very quick to denounce then Malaysian prime minister Mahathir Mohamad, when he erected overnight capital controls to push back on Western speculation against the country. But history was to rate that pragmatic ploy well: the definitive 2001 Harvard Kennedy School study praised the intervention for yielding a faster economic recovery, smaller declines in employment and wages, and a more rapid turnaround in the market.

In a serious financial or market crisis, positive government intervention is a moral necessity. Leaving everything to the magic of the "free market" is like banning quarantines and vaccines in an epidemic. No doubt the efforts of the Chinese government, so very new to the game, lacked the discipline and coherence of - say - a municipal fire department with vast experience in conflagration containment. So the Western media was not wrong to note that the central government's thrown-together fire drill lacked the seamlessness of a Balanchine ballet. What was so troubling was the evident delight scarcely hidden in the reportage. It was as if the media were almost rooting for China to fail.

It might have been hoped that we in the US had moved beyond crowing over the problems of others, whether to psychologically distance the pain of our own problems, or out of absolute malice towards China simply because of its global upsurge, or because it has a Communist government.

As a general observation, what (little) the American public knows about China comes largely from media attitudes and assumptions. This endless cycle of stale air and superior attitudes is malicious and pernicious - a perpetual process that is not in anyone's national interest.

If China were somehow utterly to collapse (as improbable as that scenario would seem by all reckoning), it would not just be the Chinese people who would suffer. The fallout would cause pain for the people of every country in Asia, and in every country in North America, especially in the US, itself having been so buoyed by China's economic surge.

Why anyone would root for China to keel over is beyond understanding. It is not only dumb, from the standpoint of economic self-interest; it is a moral wrong. Where was our decency and cosmopolitanism?

At the very least, Western reports of China's market crash suggested a disturbing callousness and unmerited cultural superiority.

CHINA NEEDS TO DEPLOY A MORE SILKEN TOUCH WITH ITS NEIGHBOURS

Tom Plate says China cannot escape the blame for regional tensions, given its clumsy diplomacy so far

Published: July 28, 2015



Beijing might consider that it would be in its best national interest to treat its neighbours with a more tender touch.

Let's play the blame game. Let's bash the Japanese government for ratcheting up tension. Bad, bad Japanese, right? Isn't it just that simple?

Since May 3, 1947, Japanese people have lived (and on the whole lived graciously and productively) under the embrace of an American-concocted constitution that with determination tied its defence forces up in restrictive Article 9. But look how well it worked out: Japan became one of the world's greatest economies - until very recently, the No1 economy in Asia.

But now Shinzo Abe, working to realise his dream of dumping this iconic and ironic legacy of the second world war in history's dustbin, looks to be on the verge of ... triumph! The prime minister has his party and party allies just a legislative click or two away from expanding the leeway (and budget) of the Self-Defence Forces when they have a need to "defend Japan", or help out allies, or whatever.

Abe's move elicited such a tepid response from the Japanese people – seemingly far from a gung-ho one in which they pull their samurai swords from the attic.

Of course, Japan-bashers are quick with the mean-genes argument: isn't it telling that Abe's mother was the daughter of Nobusuke Kishi, who, before becoming the 37th prime minister, distinguished himself as a member of the Tojo cabinet. No escaping those genes, eh?

Maybe, but here is what is far more interesting to me: that in his moment of political triumph, Abe's move elicited such a tepid response from the Japanese people - seemingly far from a gung-ho one in which they pull their samurai swords from the attic. One can imagine that colossally losing a world war - including a pair of atomic bombs dropped on two of their cities, leaving survivors and their children with a grim genetic legacy - might just take the fizz out of the champagne.

So how in the world did Abe carry the day against the admirably noble (and smartly pragmatic) pacifism of the Japanese people? What was the secret behind his mini-coup? Someone must have stepped up big time to help him peddle the idea of military renewal to a populace that on the whole had been saying:

"No, we've been down that road before – never again."

What in the world happened? Part of the answer is to be found in the government's recent defence white paper, its message as obvious as the Great Wall of China. At its centre is general obsession, and in the text are many particulars. There's the well-documented Chinese naval build-up, the potent policy influence of a possibly semi-sovereign People's Liberation Army (reflected in Chinese President Xi Jinping's campaign to tame it), and China's fast and furious land reclamation and sandbar resurrection projects, which Beijing says are more like open-to-all neighbourhood recreation centres, but which most normal people say surely look like burgeoning military bases.

Japan's white paper concludes: Beijing is "poised to fulfil its unilateral demands without compromise" by the blunt instrumentality of "coercive attempts to change the status quo".

Is it just Orwellian-style propaganda, hyped-up fodder to justify a major Japanese arms build-up? Or is it the plausible worry of a concerned government responsibly warning its people? If your inclination is to go Orwellian, fine, but half of non-Chinese Asia agrees with the idea that the challenge of China is no joke. Most of the other half doesn't know what to think but is nonetheless unnerved. (What's left is a few countries quietly pocketing aid from Beijing and remaining dutifully silent.)

So whatever Abe is up to, he is not the only guy in Asia who's got China on his mind. The Philippines, not exactly in the forefront of diplomatic pugnacity, has its bright lawyers at The Hague bringing questions before the UN-backed Permanent Court of Arbitration. Other governments are siding with Manila. Arms-buying binges are in progress. Governments are snapping up surveillance planes and naval equipment, as if to ensure no more lonely reefs or sandbars are sand-castled up overnight into landing strips without anyone knowing about it.

And then you have the senior head of the Communist Party of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, obviously rattled and trying for all the world to seem sincere and contrite, showing up at the White House the other day, looking for a little love.

There you have it: the changing geopolitical landscape of Asia.

To be fair, China does have plausible cases for much of what it's doing in the East and South China seas, along with the gut belief that it is its historical right to take whatever it can before anyone stops them, which is exactly what some neighbours had been doing decades before.

One thing is certain: all these moves have started to make Abe look less like a menace than a responsible leader. And who should get credit if that remarkable image transformation comes into full focus? It does take two to tango. In the last year or so, China has presented to the world not the "peaceful rising" image but the "we're rising and you're not" image.

China's new Asia-wide infrastructure investment programme and its hope to take the lead in forging a modern Silk Road and all the rest might someday add up to a kind of Central Asian Marshall Plan. If so, this will be applauded by all and greatly honoured by history. But in the meantime, Beijing might consider that it would be in its best national interest to treat its neighbours with a more tender touch. Abe could be made to look like a political moderate if China proceeds apace on its current course. Yes, China has such power. But that's not diplomacy. And it is not smart. Its diplomacy needs to be woven of much finer Chinese silk.

COMMON SENSE AND PATIENCE NEEDED AS US ELECTION FEVER FANS AMERICANS' FEARS ABOUT CHINA

Tom Plate warns against believing all the tough talk about China as the US presidential race heats up

Publisher: August 11, 2015



Many Americans worry about the Sino-US relationship, are either puzzled or troubled about China, or are convinced they know all the answers.

The US presidential election circus is getting started, and so is the China debate. The first stop of many on the presidential debate trail produced smashing TV ratings. Like much of the world, Americans are worried about where the US is headed and what quality of person should lead it. In 15 months' time, our decision will be foisted on the world, and everyone will have to live with it.

One direction to which our debate has not yet turned is the China-relations question. The only candidate who seemed to make much of it last week was bombastic billionaire businessman Donald Trump. He muttered about how "we lose to China ... we don't beat China in trade", whatever that might mean. (What, should the US manufacture more cheap toys?)

But what is sure to surface over the long campaign is that many Americans worry about the Sino-US relationship, are either puzzled or troubled about China, or are convinced that they know all the answers.

The know-it-all constituency believes it has China all figured out: it claims that, despite Beijing's charm offensives and rollicking pandas, Beijing is up to no good. This paranoid perspective permits the imagining of a destructive Red conspiracy behind every move China makes, and everything it says and might dream of.

Are the paranoids for real? Many make you worry and want to find a bomb shelter; but one exception is veteran defense official and analyst Michael Pillsbury, who is very smart, knows his China stuff and worked for years at the think tank Rand Corporation. His new book, *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower*, offers ominous views on "evil" China that cannot be ignored, and out-thumps Trump and others in the "we're losing to China" department.

Pillsbury is absolutely sold on the idea that America is naive to believe China is aiming for anything other than to emerge as the biggest elephant in the jungle: the globe's sole superpower. Economic espionage and deceptive diplomacy will be constant. While deferring actual military confrontation for the time being, China's hawks flutter and strut behind the takeover strategy.

What should be the response of the American *ba* (a multi-layered Chinese term that Pillsbury believes captures the Chinese view of America, and which he takes to mean "tyrant")? Start by creating a credible and cohesive anti-China coalition of those unwilling to kowtow, and at every step confront Beijing, it being one canny competitor and no cuddly panda.

Pillsbury warns:

"Western elites and opinion shapers provide the public with rose-coloured glasses when it comes to looking at China. That, of course, is just as the Chinese have planned it."

If there is any comfort in the Pillsbury perspective, it's that China's new unipolar world order could well take 100 years to realize. That's a long stretch of tick-tock even by a Chinese clock. Our best multinational corporations are lucky to keep even five-year plans in one piece.

Pillsbury and others like him are entitled to their conspiracy view, but common sense suggests that China's policy, like America's, is more a patchwork of daily challenges to ever-changing pressures than some master plan hatched in some secret basement room of the Central Party School.

So the rest of us compose our minds from the hard work of more patient China evaluators. One is Dr Charles Wolf Jnr, who for many decades has starred as Rand's senior economist. He views China much like the US: as a mixed bag of the smart and the dumb, the good and the bad, the old and the new. But, rather than a conspiracy theory, he promotes social-science methodology.

Wolf's most recent book, *Puzzles, Paradoxes and Controversies, and the Global Economy*, offers sane deductions and reasoned correctives for geopolitical emotional insecurity. At the outset, he wearily reminds us that presidential candidates will "talk tough" about China but "toughness is not a policy". For panicky types, he counsels patience, sometimes inspirationally abandoning the temptation to power-point a point by welcoming in the warming glow of historical perspective.

Cleverly, Mao's droll reservation about the limitations of anti-corruption campaigns - "it's hard to squeeze out all the toothpaste from the tube" - enlivens his view that too much anti-corruption activity can cause as much trouble as too much corruption. Anti-China nagging about the "undervalued renminbi" lacks intellectual fairness by ignoring the severe structural asymmetry between the world's two biggest economies.

As for Beijing's blustery plunge into the foreign aid game (a favourite subject of alarmist Western media), Wolf predicts for China considerable frustration. Foreign aid recipients, Beijing will find, tend to have amazingly short memories about what they promised in return for the aid, as the US has found to its melancholy.

The Rand Corporation, often dubbed little more than a paid-in-full policy-scout team for the money-bags Pentagon, is increasingly working the peace side of the all-important Sino-US relationship. But it takes two to play this good and noble game.

For starters, Beijing could embrace a carefully framed Rand proposal, recently tendered confidentially to high-level Chinese officialdom, of methodologies for the serial expanding of overlapping mutual national interests. This might read like a mouthful, but the idea is clear enough - and might even prove a game changer. Who knows unless it is tried?

AMID THE ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL STORMS, CHINA AND THE US MUST REALIZE THEY ARE INEXTRICABLY BOUND TOGETHER

Tom Plate says the pair will have to learn to better manage their differences, to keep the peace

Published: August 24, 2015



Both sides need to accept their limits so as to expand their possibilities.

China, it seems, cannot win for losing. Exports-predator China is always "beating us", bombastic billionaire businessman Donald Trump declaimed yet again on the campaign trail. But his timing on this point could have been better as last week was not exactly the best possible moment to hold up China's economy as any world-beater. What with the mainland's growth rate slowing and its stock markets roiling, the panda seems to be heading in a direction more lumbering bearish than takeover bullish.

It would have been more far perversely astute to point out that, even when the panda is hurting, the US somehow still takes a "beating". By the end of last week's

China slide, the Dow Jones followed in step, falling to its lowest level since 2011. (This was not due to Greece!) Suddenly, the US Federal Reserve has to rethink its plan to push abnormally low interest rates onto a higher shelf. So we conclude that, no matter what China does (shine or slump), its "beating" of America proceeds apace.

Let us not replace irrational exuberance with irrational pessimism. How to foment a historic Sino-US partnership that could save us all a lot of grief? For that, we reach back through history for a consultation with Niccolo Machiavelli, historically cunning adviser, who always tells leaders to look at the world as it is, not as they might like it to be. Sure, some Americans would only be comfortable in a world dominated, as it were, by one huge Trump Tower, looking down on the globe's minions, including all 1.4 billion Chinese and a billion-plus Indians. But this is not the world as it is, or as it will be - ever. Ill winds of all kinds travel in both directions: What our Fed does next will be felt in Shanghai

The world as it is, and as it will remain for the foreseeable future, is one vast network of co-dependencies (environmental, economic, health) plugged into a common fate. But, judging from the warrior-like roars wafting up from the pit stops of the US presidential trail, adjustments may prove even harder for America than China in the attitude department. "We are now all in the soup together," muttered one of my smartest friends, an international barrister, reacting to the latest Sino-US market mash-ups.

China is not going to vanish, no matter how much its markets stumble or its yuan tumbles. Its economic downdrafts will be felt as tornado-like downpours in places as far away as Oklahoma, just as its cheap exports have put smiles on the faces of children under Oklahoma's Christmas trees for years. Ill winds of all kinds travel in both directions: What our Fed does next will be felt in Shanghai.

So, what do we mean when we talk about a better Sino-US relationship, especially in the middle of this uncertain economic turn? Almost no one offers clearer thinking than George Yeo, the former Singapore foreign minister, who in his just published book, *Bonsai, Banyan and the Tao*, writes:

"The two countries are now bound together at so many points, a serious rupture is almost unthinkable. But it is going to be a very difficult relationship; it will be the single most important relationship for both countries in this century. If it's badly managed there could be war; if it's properly managed there will be another generation of peace."

Without hysteria, we need to accept that this "shotgun" geo-political marriage (forced, rather than loving) will be an inconvenient affair, at times stormy, but at all

times so desperately necessary. Both parties will need to make adjustments in attitude as well as policy, and they will have to do it on their own, together. For, where will they find a "couples counsellor" with experience of this extraordinary kind to mediate competently?

Might there be some silver linings in the current economic clouds? Here's one possible sliver: maybe both sides tamp down grandiose plans for endless defence spending. Competing choices have to be made, tough priorities set. The US must accept that if it tries to do too much globally, it may accomplish little anywhere. Beijing must accept that if it bets half the Bank of China on a dumb fleet of aircraft carriers, it will sink the ideal of lifting up all its people, not just the elite's yachts.

A keen observer of our oddest couple is Hugh White, of Australian National University, whose provocative 2013 book *The China Choice*, made the case for a US resizing of its Asia profile. The professor still holds this view, as he told me last week: "As the seriousness of China's challenge to US primacy in Asia becomes clearer to Washington officials, the choice in how to respond becomes starker. The more they understand the huge costs and risks of containing China, and the better they see the scale of concessions needed to accommodate its ambitions, the more likely they will find themselves drifting towards an option of accepting a much reduced strategic role in Asia. Yet each continues to assume that the other will give way so they can get what they want without having to confront the other militarily. Each is almost certainly wrong."

Politicians on either side of the Pacific who propose to "beat" the other offer an unrealistic option, a potentially tragic vision and a loser's game plan. America must accept the validity of China's strength, as it overcomes setbacks and grows, and not foolishly imagine its rise to be little more than the product of an American decline. Beijing must keep its silliest generals quiet and contain its naval build-up that's eating away at its future. Both sides need to accept their limits so as to expand their possibilities. When push comes to shove, real trouble will always (pardon the verb) trump imagined trouble; and of real trouble there will be plenty. Threat invention, on the campaign trail or inside governments, is quite unnecessary.

WHY SHOULD THE WORLD FEAR A POWERFUL XI JINPING?

Tom Plate says critics of Xi Jinping's apparent moves to strengthen his rule should also see the positives

Published: September 7, 2015



The West is sounding the alarm that Xi may turn into a Stalin. But it would be simplistic to assume that a stronger Xi is automatically a bad thing.

As Hongkongers can certainly testify, political parades in the public square or citizen protests occupying a thoroughfare can hide as much as they reveal. Last week, Beijing put together for all the world to see a titanic military show, the first such lavish one in years, designed to knock people's eyes out - perhaps especially on the mainland. Yet just before that, in central Tokyo, worried citizens ginned up a vastly smaller but still potent peace appeal that caught the eye of a world more familiar with Japan's former militarism than widespread pacifism.

The Beijing celebration was an official government showing; the Tokyo protest was anything but. Both events raise pressing questions for East Asia and the West.

Japan, once Asia's leading military power, held the region in fear until the cataclysmic end of the second world war. Its abject surrender was what the Beijing

display was cheering; but the Japanese need no help from anyone to recall that the end of their military era was punctuated with the atomic levelling of two cities.

Surely the collective conscience of the Japanese people (though not of insensitive, posturing politicians) can honestly say to the world: what is war for? The Abe government's aim to remilitarise by eviscerating its anti-war constitution strikes many Japanese as brutish arrogance, if not pathetic psychological denial.

If the main point of the hardware show in Tiananmen Square was to spotlight Xi as a man not to mess with, don't assume the worst.

Chinese who claim or brag they loathe all Japanese may not fully appreciate that their closest archipelago neighbour in fact looks, in an anti-war respect, to be further along the evolutionary tunnel than China is. "War is the sword of Damocles that still hangs over the head of mankind," said President Xi Jinping at the parade. He hit the nail on the head. The question now is whether his government will steer a wise course that makes the militarism of the Abe government look primitive and retro, or goad Japan into tragic but seemingly justifiable action.

Indisputably, China was well within its rights to organise a showboat parade on the 70th anniversary of the war's end. After all, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon himself, no noted warmonger, took his spot on the reviewing stand; and that was a good decision. But no high-ranking US official from Washington was to be found; and that was a bad decision.

What's more, let me argue that a truly far-thinking Japanese prime minister would be up there, too. At some point, East Asia needs to come together, if it's not to come apart.

What is Beijing's game? On the exact occasion of President Barack Obama's well-publicised environmental fact-finding visit to Alaska, five Chinese navy ships were bobbing off that state's coast. Yes, the naval quintet was totally within its rights to be in international waters; and we all know the US Pacific Command floats its own boats around China. But this ill-timed if harmless exercise invited ominous speculation. The Pentagon announced that Chinese ships had never been spotted in the Bering Sea before; others asserted China was "getting tougher in maritime space", as one US analyst put it.

Xi's seemingly dramatic announcement of a 13 per cent cutback in People's Liberation Army manpower did not elicit swoons of gratitude in the US. One senior policy insider, who nonetheless urges efforts to tone down tensions with Beijing, said: "His cuts suggest only a greater and continuing emphasis on PLA modernisation, with a focus on advanced technology, including anti-access, area-denial and other dimensions of security. These are more threatening and hazardous for the US than the 300,000 manpower cut."

Maybe so, but Xi's cut was not slight, and underscored his determined campaign to plant the military snugly under the umbrella of the Communist Party.

Predictably, the West is sounding the alarm that Xi may turn into a Stalin. But it would be simplistic to assume that a stronger Xi is automatically a bad thing. A seamlessly unified Beijing command would have the ability to unplug hot-headed sectors of the military spoiling for a good dust-up with the US. A stronger Xi can take a broader national-interest view in a serious crisis and communicate authoritatively to Washington - not to mention to the PLA - a decision to negotiate, not escalate.

Keeping the military under control during a crisis is not always the easiest part of a leader's job, as revealed in president John F. Kennedy's struggle to contain the feral testosterone of his Joint Chiefs of Staff during the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. Today, it may be that it is China that has the control-of-escalation problem, not Washington.

So if the main point of the hardware show in Tiananmen Square was to spotlight Xi as a man not to mess with, don't assume the worst. As defence analyst Michael Swaine, of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and one of the most prominent American analysts of Chinese security issues, has put it:

"During the Mao and Deng eras, the power and prestige of the paramount leader were generally sufficient to permit him to compromise on principle when necessary without admitting he was doing so."

The historic example, of course, was when Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai executed that famous turn to Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger as if suddenly among dear friends. It is hard to imagine a Politburo committee coming to a timely decision of that magnitude and imagination. So perhaps we need to observe Xi with more careful attentiveness - and less ideology. We might even struggle to imagine that he understands his China at least as well as we do.

RULING PARTY'S RESOUNDING WIN IN SINGAPORE ELECTIONS REFLECTS THE SUCCESS OF ITS POLITICAL MODEL

Tom Plate finds reasons in Singapore's latest election results for taking its governance model seriously

Published: September 14, 2015



Two decades later, much of the Western media finally got that story right - that Singapore is a huge success, with a verifiable reason: it offers good governance.

You don't automatically think of "elections" when thinking of Singapore; many will come to a stop at "authoritarian". Blame the latter perception, if you want, on the first prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, for whom dissenting views were an obstacle which a state on a fast-track course of economic development could ill afford, especially if the ruling party had all the right answers, or at least many of them.

But after the iron-willed Lee died, at 91 in March, if you thought that was the beginning of the end of his People's Action Party (PAP), you thought wrong. Last week, the government, led by his son Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, surprised the world (and maybe even himself) with a landslide election win that has to be viewed as a vindication of father, son, party and policies - all bound together.

Being bound together is not necessarily so terrible a political thing. Outsiders ridiculed the "nanny state", as the Lees' Singapore has been dubbed. But when it turns out that the "nannies" sport high IQs and aren't stashing the people's money in foreign bank accounts but are on the whole producing positive public policy, such "binding" feels more like the special social glue (or social capital) that is the essence of a successful society.

You know all about the sparkling statistics - a high per capita income, low crime rate, highly rated health system, solid schools and almost a cultural fever for higher education. Problems? There are plenty, including the rich-poor gap, immigrant workers, high-cost housing and so on; but none are remotely unique in the region, much less worldwide; and the Lee government had "street cred" in pushing to solve them.

The late Lee Kuan Yew could be grumpily frank about his tepidity for one-person, one-vote elections. But he also accepted that it gave people a sense of purpose in the polity

To quote a former cabinet member: "The world is changing fast. Governance can't stop changing." To that end, the new government to be formed should, in this post-Lee-Kuan-Yew era, dial up a little more tolerance for dissent and media latitude.

Another anti-Singapore sling has been that it is so tiny, its success is no big deal at all. Wrong again. Half the world's countries - the UN recognises 193 - have populations fewer than 10 million, and many have fewer than Singapore's, including Ireland, Uruguay, Norway, Kuwait and New Zealand. So instead of criticising it for electoral impurity, why not take an open-minded look at its overall governance philosophy.

Policies are to be hatched not in the bowels of multinational corporations or in conference rooms of musty parliaments and half-bought congresses, where the sun rarely shines; but in venues that honour intellect and aim to hatch best practices (such as the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy); and with bright and honest government officials who are paid well.

Yet, despite the 50-year streak of achievement, the PAP had feared the worst. The party was still shaking in self-doubt from the 2011 elections, in which a handful of parliamentary seats were lost (a big, big deal in Singapore), the PAP lost some of its halo and Lee Kuan Yew, among other grandees, retired from the government.

Suddenly, the party that had been running things for so long feared voters would tilt for opposition candidates just for the sake of change.

Note that a meaner, more incompetent kind of government - think, oh, of Thailand's - might have pushed panic buttons of delay. Or have risked the system's integrity by sanctioning only well-vetted, like-minded candidates with near-identical perspectives (see Hong Kong's rejection of the 2017 election proposal).

OF DINNERS AND DEALS: THE DIFFERENT DIPLOMATIC STYLES OF CHINA AND THE US MAKE NEGOTIATION ALL THE MORE NECESSARY

Tom Plate says relentless engagement, rather than aggressive containment, offers China and the US the best chance of achieving their ends

Published: September 28, 2015



The US and China have recently shown true maturity in their diplomatic relations.

All's well that ends well? Start with this: guess who's been coming to dinner? In the otherwise Diet Coke blue-jeans Barack Obama years, a hip span showcasing the fewest number of formal White House state dinners of any administration since Harry Truman, only China has been graced with two prandial extravaganzas - just one for Japan, just one for anyone else. It's been a double dollop of dinner-party diplomacy for China. Let us all - including the anti-US faction in Beijing - dwell on this.

Each of the two state White House mega events for China - the first in 2011 with Hu Jintao when he was president, then last week with President Xi Jinping - produced results, which, mixed or unmixed, were better than no results. Right now, the US media is picking holes in the cyber warfare agreement - but, really, who understands this problem fully? Notably, the Xi government's commitment to climate control and global de-warming increases with every diplomatic event.



Michelle Obama, Hu Jintao and Barack Obama before their 2011 state dinner.
Photo: AP

Perhaps Chinese people don't like breathing filthy air any more than anyone else. Western media critics continually - if correctly - point out that China's anti-earth emissions are double those of the US; but with its economy under stress in many sectors, and its population more than three times that of the US, how could it be otherwise? (Maybe China should stick with tea farming and forget all about modernisation?)

If Xi returned home believing his diplomatic venture was a success - it was - in part that's because he is Chinese, the Western business suit notwithstanding. What counts for him and his government is not so much the trip's actuarial pluses and minuses but the very fact that it took place - twice. Chinese needs are different from the American.

Americans go for quarterly reports and five-year plans that tend to get scrambled every 18 months. By contrast, the bottom line for the Chinese is harder to achieve but more enduring: they want to get totally re-established as what their country centuries ago was, before (in their eyes) the rest of the world

was walking all over them.

The American leans towards (to quote a book title) "the art of the deal". Specific commitments of time must yield specific payoffs; otherwise the effort is seen to have been a flop. Some patently obvious metric assesses the result; computations are binary. This can annoy a true Chinese. When James Baker was secretary of state under president George H.W. Bush, he had his admirers, but not Chinese foreign minister Qian Qichen, who would cringe whenever his US counterpart would approach him with "let's make a deal". His view was that Sino-US relations belonged, by their nature, in a higher realm of being than, say, organising a stock swap or pricing a used car.

The goal for Sino-US diplomacy is not to trump the other with some headlining win-lose gambit, but to work together to create some enduring liveable space in which both can find oxygen for their core needs.

Relentless relating between China and the US is an end in itself, because what else might lead to bilateral bonding? Not pushing it is to risk accepting, inadvertently or not, a new cold war - or worse. Sure, not everyone in Beijing thinks America is as great as America thinks it is; and sure, US domestic political pressures will limit the



Qian Qichen (left) and James Baker, whose views of diplomacy were very different.
Photo: AFP

options of any president. And - let us note - China's leaders somehow need to ignore every bit of the inevitable anti-China campaign rhetoric for the idiocy that it will represent. Trying to contain China in its own backyard - as if to slap onto such a vast people and civilisation an ankle bracelet of geopolitical house arrest - is a fool's errand. What Chinese government (Communist or not) would allow it? Smart Americans know that.

A mutual commitment to aggressive engagement has a far better chance of success than one of ill-conceived aggressive containment. At a minimum, it shows reciprocal respect rather than enmity. But where is the wise American voice that can convince the quick-hit American mentality that such is the best way? How can anyone in China really believe the path will not be a lot harder if America goes totally sour?

Consider the issue of the South and East China seas. News reports said there was no progress, the Chinese were obdurate, etc; but the very fact that both sides are working on this mess without stalking away in a showy huff suggests adults, not children, are at the negotiating table. The goal for Sino-US diplomacy is not to trump the other with some headlining win-lose gambit, but to work together to create some enduring liveable space in which both can find oxygen for their core needs.

If the US moves arrogantly, it may find more of its allies tacking towards the pragmatic British position, leaving Washington looking petulant and old-fashioned

This goes for both sides: if Beijing moves arrogantly, the Americans will be back in the barracks of Subic Bay, a non-sandy patch as big as Singapore - and rather closer

to China than, say, Hawaii. And if the US moves arrogantly, it may find more of its allies tacking towards the pragmatic British position, leaving Washington looking petulant and old-fashioned.



Qian Qichen (left) and James Baker, whose views of diplomacy were very different.
Photo: AFP

The Philippines and others are alarmed by Chinese naval expansionism and seek relief from an international tribunal based on the UN Law of the Seas. But Beijing points out that the convention is too vague to be definitive. With contrary legal positions hardening, a smarter approach is needed: perhaps a grand bargain for Asian resource sharing. The path to that historic, needed settlement won't be found in "the art of the deal". China doesn't work that way, and in its most careful diplomacy the US doesn't - or shouldn't - either. What all sides need is a persistent process of relentless engagement that offers everyone something valuable and no one party everything under the sky. That would be real deal-making.

Let's say it again: all's well that ends well.

SLOW AND STEADY IS HOW CHINA IS LIBERALISING THE RENMINBI - AS IT SHOULD

Tom Plate says China is right to delay opening up its capital account before reforms are fully carried out

Published: October 12, 2015



Beijing's reluctance about swinging wide open its currency to global interchange is certainly understandable.

The long march of the American campaign that ends in the crowning of our new president is well under way, as you have noticed. But I am not sure the great Chinese people should be allowed to watch.

Former top US national security official Zbigniew Brzezinski, who, at a fairly bouncy 87, is moving into the professor-ish throne of foreign-policy zen master, the one long filled by 92-year-old Henry Kissinger, said he worries about "an increasing uncertainty as to what exactly ought to be the definition of China's role in the world".

Tell me about it! The more the US can talk to China "seriously and responsibly", he said, "the greater the chance that perhaps we can do more together instead of increasingly becoming preoccupied with suspicions that each is deliberately turning against the other". Let us give that a standing ovation - but also note the limitations of a process that works best only when trust is maximised.

Beijing would be doing everyone a favour - not just itself - by staying the course that is best for it, even if it seems slow for us. US advice to China hasn't always been that great, and its conduct hasn't always been that inspirational. The Chinese are as aware of our flaws as we of theirs. Neither one of us always does the walk after giving the talk.

In the bad advice category, let's start with the early 1990s when Washington began pounding Beijing on the need to swing open its capital-conversion door. Then comes the Asian financial crisis to reveal exactly what happens when you mix wide-open currencies with pathetically weak institutions. Surveying all the currency carnage around Asia back then, Beijing drew back.

That financial crisis may well have been the tipping point. "Chinese policymakers studied the 1997-98 financial storms, and they drew the right lessons," admitted Barry Eichengreen, professor of economics and political science at the University of California, Berkeley, in an enlightening interview in the October issue of *The Oriental Economist*, the smart New York-based monthly newsletter.

He added: "More than a century of historical experience teaches that open capital accounts can be an engine of volatility, that capital flows can reverse on a dime, and that financial markets, economies, and political systems can find it hard to cope with the consequences."



Without strong markets and financial institutions, opening up the capital account would entail huge risks. The Chinese are not there yet.

Photo: Reuters

Even so, there would be a big upside to easy convertibility of the renminbi. Banks and corporations have a constant need to accumulate reserves in real money or liquid securities. Over the past several decades, something like 60 per cent of all central bank reserves have been deposits of dollars, which account for no less than 85 per cent of worldwide foreign-exchange transactions. Close to half the world's exports get priced in dollars.

In Washington and New York, this amounts to a tremendous ego trip, and yields absolutely enormous global US financial leverage. But given the pressures of the expanding global economy, the smart money is betting that, before long, another currency will have to step up to the plate; by itself, the US dollar is spread too thin. Would logic not suggest that the currency of the world's other largest economy should be an option? The euro has been a weak player, and the world long ago lost its yen for the yen when the Japanese economy went sleepy-weepy in the 1990s. So who's left? The franc?



A solid renminbi as an option for currency holders is a desirable development. On this issue, Beijing will be listening to its own best voices, not US advice. Photo: EPA

Beijing's reluctance about swinging wide open its currency to global interchange is certainly understandable. You run

huge risks if you have an open capital account without strong markets and financial institutions. No one needs to lecture the Chinese that they're not there yet. "China is trying to build deeper and more liquid financial markets, but in the last few weeks, it's tightened a variety of capital controls because of the weakness of the currency and the instability of financial markets," Eichengreen explains.

Rocked by sinking equity price levels and a slowing economy, the Chinese have been knocked off balance.

They do want to rely less on foreign trade and grow more from domestic demand. So Beijing would be doing everyone a favour - not just itself - by staying the course that is best for it, even if it seems slow for us. Internationalizing the renminbi has to follow reform. Go the other way and you might just blow up the stability of the world economy in trying to "firecracker" reform into existence overnight.

Beijing is the first to admit much is to be done. The dark side - the shadow banking system - needs to be lit up like the Lunar New Year; the corporate bond market has to move towards international standards; and the stock market brought into at least some measure of transparency before the Chinese currency can go major-league global. After all, a prematurely totally open currency could trigger floodgates of renminbi outflow - and would have the wholly ironic effect of reducing its value in international currency markets. (Tired congressional hectoring about the evils of an artificially weakened renminbi has no real currency today - and from the get-go was always overstated by US politicians fronting for Wall Street.)

A solid Chinese renminbi as an international option for currency holders could be a very desirable development. But on this issue - unlike, for instance, global warming - Beijing will be listening to its own best voices and not US advice.

They have heard it from us all before. As Brzezinski put it, in a larger context:

"We have to face the fact that we're now living in a world that has the United States preeminent but not really dominant."

Our money still talks but we're getting near bottom with the dollar as the only real glue for the international currency system.

DEALING WITH THE RISE OF CHINA: THE US SHOULD LEARN FROM THE BRITISH THE ART OF THE DEAL

Tom Plate says the US would be wise to follow in pragmatic Britain's footsteps and learn the art of the deal

Published: October 26, 2015



Let us recall that, almost two decades ago, a cocky William Jefferson Clinton, then president of a country but two-centuries-plus old, bluntly informed Jiang Zemin that his country of many millennia, with a memory constructed, like the Great Wall itself, mainly along east-west lines, was "on the wrong side of history". This was in 1997.

Whatever the then general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party might have thought, he decided not to return the volley by impolitely laughing in the American's face. The exchange, after all, took place in Washington. But since then, the former Chinese president, now 89, has presumably enjoyed a few chortles with colleagues. China, governed by one-party communist rule that's often depicted in the West as the root of all possible political evil, may be on history's wrong side; but if so, isn't it rather odd that governments will jump to the Sino side quickly enough these days - or at least seek to play both sides of the ideological street?

With their own long history of hard knocks, the British are not about to permit past loyalty to block future survivability

And so let us also recall that, almost two decades ago, on a sodden night filled with images of British dignitaries all but holding their noses as they reluctantly handed over the keys to Hong Kong and tearfully boarded their outbound yacht, China looked to be less on the losing side than the receiving side of history. This was also in 1997.

So what do we have today? What we have is Brits cheering, as if he were David Beckham, the visiting President Xi Jinping, as if for all the world one big jolly Chinese Santa Claus - with Great Britain greedily peering into his goody-bag. You just had to love the sight of Xi's triumphant victory parade to Buckingham Palace (he and his glamorous wife Peng Liyuan royal guest-ing overnight), riding in a royal carriage, not to mention the solemnly attentive joint session of Parliament.

So history is flipping over on its back and landing on its "wrong" side?



Britain's Queen Elizabeth and President Xi Jinping are driven by carriage to Buckingham Palace.
Photo: Reuters

The Brits know what they are doing. Outside of the average successful Hollywood mogul, hardly anyone is better at feigning deep sincerity than a British official. With their own long history of hard knocks, the British are not about to permit past loyalty to block future survivability. The business bonding that took place between the British prime minister and the Chinese president was hardly designed as a geopolitical terrorist act to blow up the US-British alliance. But without rewriting the Magna Carta or slapping a Karl Marx wing onto the British Museum, London

looks to be cutting commercial deals with the People's Republic of China as if there was no space for "ideology" on its bottom line.

America, fumbling anew in the Middle East, and well mired in its quadrennial domestic presidential campaign, seems off-balance. It is as if the US - despite all its carrier fleets and policy pivots to Asia - remains psychologically unprepared for the rise of China. Too bad America failed to hear out Asia's wiser voices, such as Kishore Mahbubani, the Singaporean policy-school dean and widely admired UN diplomat who back in the '90s was to lay out for the West the coming new global reality.

But precisely because they were forced out of Hong Kong, the British got that message and have been mulling it over ever since. London, despite the vaunted "special relationship" with Washington, was the first to break ranks and join the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank that's key to Beijing's neo-Marshall Plan for the 21st century; and so now the city of London looks to be China's chosen pad for the launch of offshore renminbi bonds.

Who exactly are these Parliamentary reds cozying up to the Commies and yanking down the trans-Atlantic relationship? It's the blue-blooded Tory party of Winston Churchill and Harold Macmillan, not the crazy party with its dusty socialist tendencies and - Tony Blair aside - uncanny ability to scare the life out of most voters. It's the party of Margaret Thatcher, the Iron Lady who turned into silly putty at the hands of Deng Xiaoping when he insisted on the return of Hong Kong.



Hong Kong may not be the centre of the geopolitical universe but it is not hard to make the case that the handover in 1997 was the political starting line of the 21st Asian Century.

Photo: Robert Ng

It is just possible, I admit, that Hong Kong is not the centre of the geopolitical universe, as many of its dwellers sometimes imagine. But it is not hard to make the case that the handover in 1997 was the political starting line of the 21st Asian Century.

And so here we are today, the pragmatic English cutting special deals to create a new relationship with the rising power of Asia. This is plainly smart, and I can only congratulate them on their historical consistency. Let me worshipfully recall Lord Palmerston's famous mantra (as nearly everyone does these days):

"Therefore I say that it is a narrow policy to suppose that this country or that is to be marked out as the eternal ally or the perpetual enemy of England. We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow."

It's probably easier to wind up on the wrong side of history if you haven't lived through that much of it. Perhaps the British, with their gloried past as a naval power, can sense a sea change coming better than anyone. The Americans have not really begun to chart their own coherent course in the wake of the surfacing new Asian Century. And so the future going seems destined to get rough. Maybe, if the Americans won't listen to the Mahbubanis, they'll listen to the Brits? Maybe.

IN DEAL-MAKING, HANDSHAKING XI JINPING, CHINA FINDS A NEW FACE OF SMART DIPLOMACY

Tom Plate says deal-making, handshaking Xi Jinping has injected welcome vigour to Chinese diplomacy

Published: November 9, 2015



China's new focused diplomacy, as viewed in an off-balance US, is close to remarkable. After all the past foreign-policy fog, through which it was sometimes hard to see where Beijing stood, we now have the Xi Jinping roadshow taking all sorts of stands at all sorts of splashy stops. It is an amazement of activity.

Today in the US, there may be almost as many think tanks, from Washington to Santa Monica, trying to parse Xi's new chess moves as pollsters tracking our many presidential candidates.

Geopolitically speaking, the Taiwan impasse is one of the toughest on the diplomatic discord list

In recent weeks, you saw China's president in the US, addressing its business best and richest, then heading to Washington D.C. for a formal state visit; in London, hobnobbing with the queen, then all but being knighted by seal-the-deal Brits; in Hanoi, quick-stepping and happy-speaking; and in Singapore, shaking hands with Taiwan's leader, all in seeming respect.

Activity is not the same thing as achievement, of course. You can trot around the globe until your eardrums feel permanently popped and yet wind up with little more to show for it than yet more frequent-flier miles and business cards. Personal diplomacy that's solely personal won't stick unless a nation's core interests are behind the smiles. China's president and his glamorous wife Peng Liyuan, as much



Taiwanese newspaper gave the meeting extensive coverage. Maybe half the people on the island oppose integration, and maybe the other half support it.
Photo: EPA

as they may relish the high life of first-class travel, are on a serious, if sometimes entertaining, mission to hike China's diplomacy to the next level.

Geopolitically speaking, the Taiwan impasse is one of the toughest on the diplomatic discord list, as it is the declared core interest of the People's Republic of China to lure, or compel, Taiwan to accept the sovereignty of Beijing.

Maybe half the people on the substantial island of Taiwan oppose integration, and maybe the other half support it - as

(no maybes here) do countless mainland inhabitants, hoping for a kind of "come home again" sequel to the unforgettable 1997 Hong Kong handover.

Since 2008, Taipei and Beijing have not been getting in one another's hair, all things considered. One plus has been the Obama administration's inclination to keep its nose mainly out of it - and our annoyingly preachy voice mainly down. That has helped a lot: US diplomacy is sometimes best when publicly it says least (we are not always good at this). A related plus was the programmatic pragmatism of the greatly underappreciated President Ma Ying-jeou. Taking office in 2008, and immediately seeking out trade, tourism and other easy connections, Ma managed to downplay the icy-dicey stuff, particularly the fraught matter of sovereignty.

But in Taiwan's politics, as so often in life, no good deed tends to go unpunished for long: Ma can expect to leave next year after two terms with pitiful public opinion ratings - and the probability of his presidency ignominiously falling into the hands of the opposition whose independence party platform places Taipei directly at odds with Beijing and could try to undo everything Ma has achieved.



Activists in Taipei protest against the Singapore meeting between Ma Ying-jeou and Xi Jinping.
Photo: Reuters

Xi would love to see his Singapore handshake somehow scare up the necessary votes to help Ma's Kuomintang party. Ah, but Beijing's track record is not good: the mainland's last run at Taiwanese voters, by unsubtly shooting off rockets in the island's very general direction before the 1996 election, only insured a romp for the very candidate Beijing loathed. Xi's weekend play in Singapore was far more subtle and statesmanlike, and commendable.

Beyond the January election, which every expert says is lost to the anti-integration opposition (and Xi knows this too), the Chinese president has now laid down a minimum standard of cross-strait diplomatic conduct - and one of his own making. Hold back no applause: sure, it's a charm offensive, no question, but it could help.

Regarding speculation that Xi timed the pulling of the Singapore rabbit out of his hat in anticipation of the Taiwanese election: maybe. But it's just as possible the Chinese are focused on the unfolding American election.



Activists in Taipei protest against the Singapore meeting between Ma Ying-jeou and Xi Jinping.
Photo: Reuters

Taiwan has been a campaign issue in the US before, notably in 1960 when Quemoy (Kinmen) and Matsu came under fire. Taiwan could come up as an issue again, but Xi's extension of respect to the leader of Taiwan puts his government in a better position to claim its rise remains peaceful, even over this issue.

The "one-minute handshake", as dubbed by the media, produced photos that offered a lot better image of China than missile tantrums.

In 2002, then Chinese vice-president Hu Jintao bluntly warned America:

"If any trouble occurs on the Taiwan question, it would be difficult for China-US relations to move forward, and a retrogression may even occur."

Everyone knows that the US military's backing of Taiwan annoys Beijing no end, but Xi's decision to shake that off, for the time being anyhow, suggests that quality relations with the US remain the higher priority.

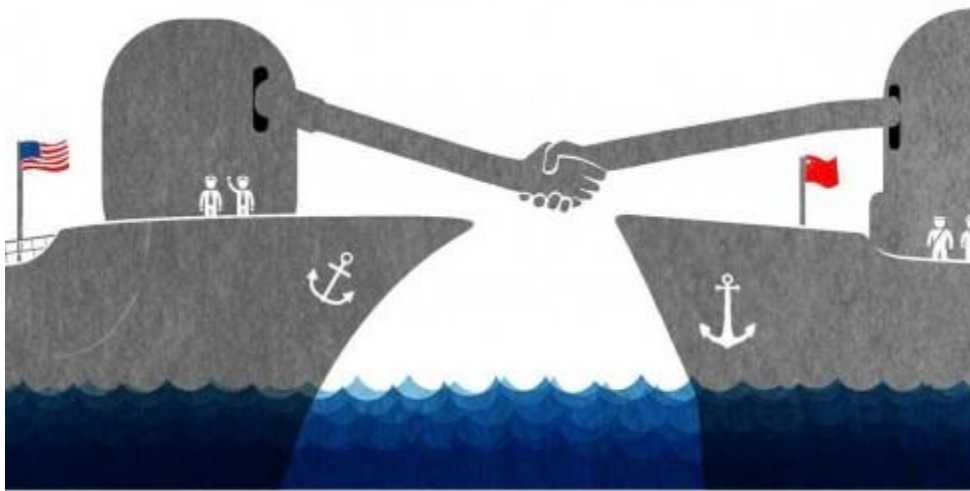
The Democratic Progressive Party may well triumph in January, but Beijing is placing the bet that if China-US relations do deteriorate over new Taiwan tensions, the fault will be seen to rest with neither Xi nor Ma's party, but with people inside Taiwan who refuse to accept the reality of the 21st century.

In fact, Tsai Ing-wen, the DPP opposition leader, actually condemned the Xi-Ma meeting. This is unconscionable. China's rise proceeds apace, whether you like it or not. Everyone has to adjust positions accordingly - and preferably peacefully. No one will get everything they want.

THE BEAUTY OF RESTRAINT IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

Tom Plate welcomes the toning down of rhetoric and says Beijing should now consider taking the diplomatic initiative, given the need for China and the US to break through fossilised thinking to improve relations

Published: November 23, 2015



Beijing takes the view that it is simply reclaiming what it used to own; Washington views the reclamation projects as archipelago empire-building. Both sides box themselves in at the very moment they need to construct a new box.

When feisty Chinese admirals or American generals fire off verbal macho-missiles, I either consider sliding under my earthquake-reinforced university desk or slipping over into the comfy contentment of denial that all is actually under control. And sometimes the latter is actually the case, as I hoped last week about China's admiral, Wu Shengli (吳勝利). While informing his countrymen and women that the PLA Navy deserved their patriotic acclaim for its "enormous restraint" in the face of US provocations in the South China Sea, its commander brassily added that China's navy would "defend our national sovereignty". This is the large mass of ocean that Chinese cartographic experts are allegedly thinking of renaming (or so goes the rumour) "Xi's Sea".

The American side balked, of course, but its rhetoric seemed more level-headed than boat-rocking. At one stop during his latest Asia “pivot”, President Barack Obama simply said:

“For the sake of regional stability, the claimants should halt reclamation, construction and militarisation of disputed areas.”

This pitch was to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, which includes lesser powers that have been doing their own share of land reclamation in “Xi’s Sea”. But the main target of Obama’s remarks was the world leader in land, atoll and shoal reclaiming, China.

It’s possible that Beijing is starting to understand that it has pushed itself into such strong bargaining positions that it can now proceed with a newfound diplomatic amity

Even added up, these verbal shots across the bow from Wu and Obama did not sound like opening salvos to war. It’s possible that Beijing is starting to understand that it has pushed itself into such strong bargaining positions (possession being nine-tenths of international law) that it can now artfully proceed, in the wake of its blitzkrieg build-up, with a newfound diplomatic amity.



Chinese dredging vessels are purportedly seen in the waters around Mischief Reef in the disputed Spratly Islands in the South China Sea in this still image from a video taken by a US surveillance aircraft in May this year.

Photo: Reuters

from the US Pacific Command pokes its nose into what the Chinese believe is their righteous space, it creates a fateful opportunity for some trigger-happy PLA Navy officer (or some equally ill-advised American counterpart) to unleash bedlam. The risk would have no reward. With his former secretary of state leading the pack, not even our cautious and deliberative US president could turn a blind eye, much less

The timing for magnanimity is good. The US public, enduring the presidential campaign, would take notice of a Chinese bid to smooth South China Sea waters; and Hillary Clinton, the presumed Democratic nominee and poll leader, would benefit from a silencing, however temporary, of the Republican non-lambs (Donald Trump et al).

But supreme naval commander Wu is right about one thing: every time a probing warship or warplane

the other cheek. But neither could Beijing, facing public opinion pressures of its own, afford to appear a pitiless, helpless giant. Both sides know this.

Beijing's top people don't like surprises any more than America's; behind-the-scenes choreography can work to reduce risk. The next US peacock-in-the-Pacific show is scheduled later this month; a pair of US warships will pop over to Mischief Reef to test the waters. But ask yourself: is this the best our two "biggs" can do? Whatever happened to President Xi Jinping's (习近平) clarion call for "a new type of great power relationship"? Such a nice idea. And why not?

Sure, blame Washington, which, whether it's under an Obama or a Bush, cannot seem to escape the Dante's Inferno of the Middle East, so as to focus more on Asia. But the Xi administration needs to take a long look in the mirror, too. China may be destined to become the 21st-century power, but that doesn't have to happen tomorrow. Wanting something quickly sometimes means it takes longer for it to come to pass.



PLA Navy commander Admiral Wu Shengli and US Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Jonathan Greenert talk at a meeting in July last year.
Photo: Reuters

In his deeply wise new book *Restraint: A New Foundation for US Grand Strategy*, MIT professor Barry Posen agrees that powers that have the might will always believe they have the right. That China is climbing closer to the US on the power ladder requires us to understand that it figures it's in the right no matter what anyone says. Yet the US will stay in Asia as long as China thinks it shouldn't. Even Posen, who wants the chore list of the US military substantially downsized (now in the network:

some 800 extraterritorial bases, ports and airfields in more than 80 countries), puts it this way:

“Asia is a more difficult case [than other issues for the US] ... China may reach a point where it has sufficient power to bid for hegemony.”

But, speaking directly to Beijing, the professor notes that China “does not yet possess much offensive capability; it can punish and harass, but not crush or conquer. Its options are limited.”

Logically, Beijing and Washington need each other and ought to do better by themselves. But how? Thinking out of the box is not easy when you are cooped up inside it. The Chinese act as if the South China Sea is their personal sandbox, triggering the inevitable US reply of “No, it’s mine, too”. Beijing takes the view that it is simply reclaiming what it used to own; Washington views the reclamation projects as archipelago empire-building. Both sides box themselves in at the very moment they need to construct a new box. Let China make the first move; showing a measure of flexibility might actually work to firm up its position, particularly in the court of world opinion. Two “rights” can make a big wrong when it comes to the bilateral relationship.

US PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES' MISSTEPS ON CHINA A WORRYING REMINDER OF AMERICA'S INTERNATIONAL IGNORANCE

Tom Plate says Republican Ben Carson's spurious claim about Chinese involvement in Syria raises disturbing questions about some White House hopefuls' lack of knowledge on foreign policy issues, and proves it's past time for the US to refine its thinking

Published: December 7, 2015



Do Americans have the right to require presidential candidates to present at least a responsible level of knowledge about the big issues if they want the big job?

At times, China and its ways are viewed from America as if little has changed. One of those times is now. This is our quadrennial US presidential campaign season. Sometimes, it is our silliest season.

One spurious claim about China recently marinated into a campaign issue and produced its first candidacy casualty – without Beijing having to lift more than one pinky of denial. Here's the story and the background:

In the arduous process of installing a new US president in January 2017, the China question has been simmering on the back-burner of the debate but not front and centre, yet. Several reasons explain.

One is the current US focus on Islamic extremism.

None of the candidates, except for Hillary Clinton, former US secretary of state, can honestly say they know much of anything about China

Another is that a non-posturing, truly substantive debate on any foreign policy issue is difficult to achieve when scoring voter points rather than unravelling complexities is the task at hand; but complexities are at the heart of all significant foreign issues, especially relations with China.

Yet another is that none of the candidates, except Hillary Clinton, former US secretary of state, can honestly say they know much of anything about China.

Of the two Republicans who in fact have chalked up headlines knocking Beijing, it looks as if only one will remain standing much longer. That would be Donald Trump. His campaign line, avoiding subtleties as any pitchman would, has been reductionist: Little good can come to the US when substantial good goes China's way. It's a one-way street. The Sino-US relationship functions as a competitive struggle, not as a common cause. You either beat them, or they beat you. At the



The otherwise soft-spoken and provincial Republican Ben Carson, until recently close to Donald Trump in the polls, may have hit his tripping point when he slipped badly on the China question.

Photo: AP

moment they are "beating us". So we have got to beat them back.

It is true that, in America, domestic rather than foreign issues usually dominate presidential campaigns. But with skill, Trump has set up China primarily as a nexus issue of economic rather than geopolitical disadvantage. The real-estate tycoon's analysis is bogus, to be sure, but it is rather politically clever, and demonstrates anew his towering capacity for teeing up entertaining oversimplifications that capture some voters' rapture.

Less skillfully, the otherwise soft-spoken and provincial Republican Ben Carson, until recently close to Trump in the ever-roiling opinion polling, may have hit his tripping point when he slipped badly on the China question. Almost out of nowhere, the former neurosurgeon rhetorically wandered off the campaign trail into the Syrian desert, claiming to detect a sighting in that maelstrom of vast tragedy that no one else had: the presence of China.

The odd assertion, made about a month ago during a Republican TV debate, has been sticking to Carson like a celebrity medical malpractice suit. His Syria misstep was: “You know, the Chinese are there, as well as the Russians...” With that inadvertent revelation of incompetency, Carson strongly reinforced the point that not every American, not even a board-certified neurosurgeon, should be permitted to operate in the White House.



The otherwise soft-spoken and provincial Republican Ben Carson, until recently close to Donald Trump in the polls, may have hit his tripping point when he slipped badly on the China question.
Photo: AP

It is true that as it obviously is, the poor doctor is anything but unique in ahistorically conflating China and Russia. For, something like a computer virus on the US political hard drive invariably prompts an automatic psychic recall of the former Soviet Union whenever the subject of China arises. The recall protocol includes the absurd notion that any country run by a communist party poses an inherent threat, as the former Soviet Union once did. But times change; even former “pure” Communists can marinate into BMW roadster capitalists; today’s communist Vietnam, former all-out evil enemy, is now practically whimpering at the White House back door in a lost dog’s effort to find a new pal; and lately Russia (these days

terribly non-communist indeed) seems more the thorn in Washington's side than China.

Carson's clumsy Syrian slip prompted the question: Do we – or do we not – have the right to require presidential candidates to present at least a responsible level of knowledge about the big issues if they want the big job? America, which is not a dishonest society, knows in its heart that it must own up to aspects of its own international ignorance.

Every sane American now recognises that absolutely zero weapons of mass destruction were found in Iraq after we invaded, and that was the stated reason for the operation. And so now we have had tendered by a presidential candidate a phoney claim that Chinese forces or agents (or ... Chinese restaurants...) are in Syria, when they are not there and almost certainly never will be.

This unprepared candidate, blithely unfamiliar with core international fact, looks to have seriously deflated his presidential balloon. It's not often we see a candidate implode on a foreign-policy issue, but with the world getting smaller with every new, gruesome terrorist explosion, foreign policy questions no longer seem so foreign and ignorance no longer such bliss.



The otherwise soft-spoken and provincial Republican Ben Carson, until recently close to Donald Trump in the polls, may have hit his tripping point when he slipped badly on the China question.

Photo: AP

The instinct to conflate China with Russia is what mainland Chinese term America's "cold war mentality". I have always thought this criticism a fair point, notwithstanding our differences with Beijing. So, in a sense, we should thank Carson for his inadvertent illustration of a recurring intellectual error and agree that it's past time our national thinking were updated and refined if we want to understand China and the world properly. Sure, China needs to understand America better – this too is true. But, sometimes, what our White House-ambitious politicians say and do seems inexplicable, incomprehensible and incompetent, even to Americans who, after all, are more or less used to this sort of nonsense, especially during campaigns.

FOR GOOD SINO-US RELATIONS, THE AMERICANS MUST LEARN TO LISTEN, WHILE THE CHINESE MUST LEARN TO TALK

Tom Plate says China's government officials need to begin to speak up, and speak their minds, to foster understanding

Published: December 21, 2015



In all fairness to the US, it is hard to listen and learn when the other side all too often prefers not to talk.

As the influential sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas was right to lecture us: conversations continuously conducted with rationality and thoughtfulness can ferment into a kind of symphonic repertoire for the civilised polity. You learn so little by talking: only the wickedly witty Oscar Wilde could get away with claiming to prefer talking to himself on the grounds that it saves time and prevents arguments!

That's perhaps an option for the poet or the playwright but not for the journalist; or for nations in their interrelations. We need to talk the talk before we walk the walk. To quote Habermas: "Society is dependent upon a criticism of its own traditions." This is now as true for our global society as for any nation state; and it is definitely true of the Sino-US relationship.

*Listening to others – nations as well as people – requires respect.
Without it, exchanges sour into shouting matches as if between the
deliberately and defiantly deaf*

Listening to others – nations as well as people – requires respect. Without it, exchanges sour into shouting matches as if between the deliberately and defiantly deaf. Respect requires humility about one's own views and modesty about the universal applicability of one's own experiences. I know I've said this before – but there are always reasons for saying it again: America will never understand China if it talks and listens only to itself.

Sure, we have “track two” institutions (smart non-profits, heady think tanks) trying their best to engineer a two-way, 24-hour fast train to Beijing. But, overall, the project is not working well enough. Just one example: a former prime minister from Asia came to Los Angeles for a chat after an appointment-filled Washington visit. Basically depressed, he told me the American establishment will never understand the dynamics behind China's rise as long as it's viewing things through its usual military and adversarial periscopes. But did you not explain all this to them? “They hear but ...[he paused]... they do not listen.”



The Chinese flag was displayed next to the US flag on the side of a building in the White House complex in Washington on the day before a state visit by Xi Jinping.
Photo: AP

Arrogance can be a substantial bar to a healthy grip on reality. Listening to others is a time-honoured method of maintaining a measure of balance between the ears – a

way of getting out of one's own head, which, as we all know, is sometimes a very strange and isolated place. All this by way of reiterating the obvious about China: if you want to understand it, you have to listen to it. But – and here's the "but", and it is a very big "but" – in all fairness to us in the US, it is hard to listen and learn when the other side all too often prefers not to talk.

And, yes, I'm getting a bit steamy now on this point: when Chinese officials do decide to say something, it is usually said so long after the fact that you feel you have heard it before. China needs to open up, at the highest levels, or – I believe – it may lose out in the global civic-conversation race.

Let me explain why we should worry. Looking back on my own occasional in-depth conversations with iconic Chinese officials makes the case – to me at least – that this Chinese government ought to be doing a lot more with its VIPs. I recall one session with then vice-premier Qian Qichen (錢其琛), China's well-respected foreign minister in the 1990s. In a Diaoyutai guest cabin in Beijing, he laid out the core elements of Chinese internationalist thinking that served as invaluable markers for me for years. Then, in a Shanghai foreign ministry office, China's top official on cross-strait relations, Wang Daohan, offered up a riveting 90 minutes of emotional as well as intellectual context that had to be felt as well as heard. He took the listener from the depths of the Cultural Revolution to the heights of – well – the skyscrapers of Shanghai.



A journalist takes a photo of Chinese President Xi Jinping during a media conference in Pretoria, South Africa. Canned press conferences offer none of the insights that frank, in-depth interviews do.

Photo: AP

Canned press conferences do not measure up to real deals like these. But landing such sessions is rare; worse yet, this situation doesn't seem to be improving under

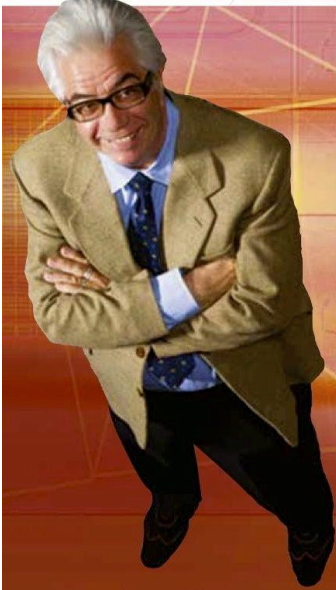
the Xi Jinping (習近平) government. So when China's top officials complain about being misunderstood, and while their complaint may well be valid, an available remedy seems not to occur to them: they should take their chances and open up. Heck, this is the globalised information age, not the Silk Road epoch of a thousand ox-carts.

When China's top officials complain about being misunderstood, an available remedy seems not to occur to them: they should take their chances and open up
Here's another illustration: Not long ago, the much-admired East West Centre of Honolulu, in alliance with the mainland's venerable All-China Journalists Association, brought to my university a VIP delegation of more than a dozen Chinese journalists and media executives. Represented institutions included China Central TV, China Radio International, *People's Daily*, Sichuan Daily Group, United Media Group of Shanghai, *Worker's Daily*, Xinhua News Agency and other mainland media megastars.

The topic of our seminar was "How China's rise is impacting its relation with regional neighbours; and China's future as a world power'. It was a fascinating session that ended with the usual exchange of gifts. Mine were copies of the Chinese edition of my *Conversations with Lee Kuan Yew*. One journalist, noting that the book was part of the "Giants of Asia" series, asked why no mainland officials have yet been included: Is China not important – and is Singapore not so very tiny?

I answered as politely as possible: whereas Singapore and other governments reply to media requests for VIP interviews, yours ignores them. The journos shook their heads in dismay, for they knew I was right. I understand the longstanding official mentality on media relations, but I will stick to my guns: this is no good for China.

Extracting truth from powerful political leaders—not many journalists do this better than American columnist and university professor, Tom Plate.



For decades veteran journalist Tom Plate, and author of the 'Giants of Asia' series, has been engineering headline-making interviews with presidents to prime ministers to mob figures. Some were easy to deal with; others were complicated challenges.

Tom Plate is an experienced writer, journalist and syndicated columnist. He is currently Distinguished Scholar of Asian and Pacific Studies at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, where he founded the new Asia Media website.

The mission of the new Asia Media aims to help deepen LMU's overall institutional understanding of – and relationship with – Asia. To this end, this weekly news-site, launched in November 2011, will also serve as a real-world media lab for Professor Plate's courses as well as students at LMU. This innovation is inspired by the philosophy of internationalized education that is pursued with such great spirit at LMU's Bellarmine College of Liberal Arts.

This is Asia's century. As the world's center of gravity is inevitably shifting to the East, this site seeks to place its spotlight on the media of Asia as a method of focusing on trends within its society and politics.

You can follow Asia Media and its staffers' work at:
<http://asiamedia.lmu.edu/>

Prof Tom's work with South China Morning Post (SCMP) originated many years ago, but on a very occasional basis; it was not until June of this year that it became regularized into a fortnightly column focusing on China.

The South China Morning Post (SCMP) has been Hong Kong's leading English-language newspaper ever since its first issue was published on 6 November 1903. Having kept our finger on the pulse of the local community's development for more than 100 years, we have accumulated a treasure trove of information about every facet of Hong Kong.