

This opinion piece by PCI vice president Tom Plate appeared in South China Morning Post on September 12, 2016.

Why ‘macho’ Putin has the lead over Xi when it comes to American minds

Tom Plate says US media and the likes of Donald Trump have made Russia’s president a hero while Xi and his China remain a somewhat unfathomable mystery



Perhaps you’re not going to believe this. The fact is that if a poll were taken of American public opinion about Russia’s Vladimir Putin and China’s Xi Jinping (习近平), Putin would get the higher recognition rating, and easily.

Two cheers for Putin? In part, credit Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump. With odd consistency in a campaign otherwise peppy with inconsistency, the garrulous New York real estate mogul has been peddling the notion of Russia’s autocratic president as a great leader, inspiring some Republican Americans to whine (utterly without irony) that President Barack Obama is no Putin.



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And what a lovely thing that is! “Few leaders have caused more suffering and conflict today than Vladimir Putin. It shows just how far down the rabbit hole some Trump fans will go to defend their guy,” sighed one dispirited Republican national security expert. “It’s a national case of Stockholm syndrome, one that makes decent Americans turn their backs on values and traditions that they’ve held dear for their entire lives.”

There are deeper reasons why hardly anyone in America knows Xi

Against Putin, Xi lies second, not because he is not as “strong” a leader (he is undoubtedly the more formidable, more steeped in the complexities of Chinese civilisation); but because he is not as readily categorisable or as identifiable. At a seminar with *China Daily* journalists in Beijing, I once asked if most Chinese citizens could summon up the name of the US president; and they looked at me as if I were nuts – of course they could! I then asked if they could guess the percentage of Americans that could name their leader. A guess came in at “50 per cent?” I tried

not to laugh: “Sorry, it would be less than 10 per cent.” The journalists gasped in dismay, and, as an American, I was embarrassed.

Blame our national ignorance entirely on our news media – why not? Almost everyone, from academics to taxi drivers, makes it the go-to culprit for almost everything. But there are deeper reasons why hardly anyone in America knows Xi, and we might as well start with this: if China’s obviously talented president does care a great deal about his international image, he might try harder to soften it.

He is certainly no baby-kisser like former premier Wen Jiabao (溫家寶), or self-effacing press conference jokester like, say, Wen’s predecessor Zhu Rongji (朱鎔基). In all fairness, Xi is obviously no faceless bureaucrat putting in time to retirement; and in conversations with Chinese officials, I hear only praise for his bold strikes against corruption. But in America there is doubt – doubt as to whether his campaign aims to destroy, impartially, only the corrupt.



One expert’s view: “Within China, President Xi Jinping’s anti-corruption campaign has targeted previously untouchable members of the ruling Politburo Standing Committee, though it remains

unclear whether the campaign is motivated by a desire to truly root out corruption or to weaken Xi's political opponents." That assessment comes from Kurt Campbell, a famous US diplomat, in his valuable book, *The Pivot: The Future of American Statecraft in Asia*.

The truth of the matter is that Xi is the most important world leader that Americans know least about, when as head of China he should be a world leader about whom they are at least knowledgeable.

Might China's public diplomacy do a better job of conveying what Xi is trying to do? For all anyone knows, Xi may have the softest heart and sharpest brain of anyone in his fifth-generation class. Or he might make Putin look like a positive pussycat by comparison – who knows? Does Xi receive the best possible advice on America from the experts in his party and government on which he must draw? Sometimes leaders are told by their minions only that which it is known they prefer to hear.



In life, as we say, timing can be everything. Xi took power as general secretary of the Communist Party of China and chairman of the CPC Central Committee in the aftermath of the convulsive worldwide economic downturn of 2008-2009, triggered mainly by serious evils in the ethics and operating systems of Wall Street America. Here is the problem: since this epiphany of evil, almost everyone from the mainland I talk to views the US as in historic decline. But, in fact, are America's best days only yesterdays? I wish some Chinese would not be so quick to count America out. After all, China's elite still sends a generational avalanche of its children to our colleges and universities, and there's good reason for this. It's that many in China's moneyed elite are smart, not dumb, in advancing their children's prospects. It would be a serious error if the government were making decisions on the simple-minded presumption that America were slowly crumbling like some exhausted cracking wall, when its elite is dramatically voting with its tuition chequebooks the other way.



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It is painful to believe that China and Xi do not respect the US. The flap over Obama's disembarking from Air Force One when it landed at Hangzhou (杭州) for the G20 summit last week cannot be anything but a regrettable one-off botch job. With characteristic forbearance, Obama reacted to the tempest on the tarmac with a well-considered shrug.

Too bad some Americans jumped on the incident as if looking for a serious punch-up opportunity with China. Foremost among the jumpers was Trump. Presumably he figured that his hero Putin would have reacted with more machismo. But the US president's cool conveyed self-confidence, not frailty. It's bullies who lose their cool. Smart Americans have figured Putin out; but, alas, Xi, from an entirely different system with different political values, is still a mystery, at least to Americans.

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