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## HONG KONG

Column by [Tom Plate](#)

# Xi and Trump have both made their point. It's time to end the posturing, and the trade war

- Tom Plate says the two leaders seem to be making policy moves based not on what's best for their countries, but on how they can run down their predecessors
- Both the Chinese and US governments should be humble and remember to put the people first



[Tom Plate](#)

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It's not easy being a superpower – whoever would imagine that might be the case? Sometimes, one almost feels an odd twang of sympathy for the leaders

of China and the US. Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown of the superpower.

Could any of us do a better job? I have no idea, but with regard to the moral responsibility of steadying the vital relationship, the current mood is leaning towards the bizarre. Lately, it is as if both are determined not so much to run their countries as to run down their predecessors – and in the process risk careering into each other while undoing past good. It's like President [Xi Jinping](#) is running against the legacy of historic icon Deng Xiaoping, and President [Donald Trump](#) is running against the legacy of contemporary icon Barack Obama.

Increasingly, I'm convinced, no one understands China well enough to possess an honest sense of what may lie in its future. Not, certainly, in Washington, which tends to imagine China as rooted at one extreme or the other (these days, more feral Han Godzilla than peaceful Pearl of the Orient). Imagine a middle ground for the Middle Kingdom – inconceivable!

How are the Chinese doing with their own assessment? This month's shock was the revelation that Deng, heretofore revered for edging China away from dogmatic Marxist economics, though not from party-government control, might no longer be accorded the same reverence in high circles. This, at least, is the view from some sources – added credibility by a [recent statement](#) to this effect by the late Deng's eldest son.

A bit of a retreat to central state-owned enterprises may be looming. Perhaps Beijing figures that the injection of some retro will foster more central control over the economy's trajectory, which has created not only wealth but also geopolitical tension (such as the current trade surplus with the US). Now that China is, happily, no longer dirt poor, its leaders perhaps feel they can afford to taper the wealth-accumulation trajectory a tad if it pays off in political stability.

More power to Beijing. But to press further the implacable role of the party and the state is not a new idea. Even Deng would not hold that, just because Chinese citizens can afford to choose among fancy cars, they must be

provided with a menu of competing political parties. At the same time, too much centralism can ruin any party.

As it is, the latest growth projection for China – a flat 6 per cent – would rate a standing ovation almost anywhere else; in China, this is seen as reason to compel political tightening. The US growth rate rolls up to only about half that – not China’s fault, of course, though Trump’s tirades might make you think that if China somehow just went away, so would a dimension of US economic mediocrity.

This crazy nonsense has to stop. Maybe the beginning of enlightenment will come at the end of the month in Buenos Aires, over dessert, at an overdue [face-to-face dinner-plus between Xi and Trump](#).

Battered by [US legislative elections](#) that chopped Congress into “[one branch, two twigs](#)”, former real-estate mogul Trump may be sensing that the reputation of his presidency is now in a kind of ethical escrow. He needs some “wins” to boost his credit rating. The tariff stand-off has done all it can: he and Xi should settle on good terms.

Possible good news out of Washington that Peter Navarro and his “nationalistic-economic” views have been quietly quarantined raised my spirits – and perhaps Xi’s. There are, as far as anyone can tell, many right nationalists, but few bright nationalists; but while Professor Navarro is bright enough, his postmodern grumpiness is not right for the 21st century. We need to bridge gaps, not create them.

It is not America’s core job to help China realise its “Chinese Dream”. But it would be immoral to stand in the way simply because, whatever it is, it is not an American Dream. “To realise the great renewal of the Chinese nation is the greatest dream for the Chinese nation in modern history,” Xi [declared in 2012](#), at the National Museum of China.

What exactly does that mean? In combing through the poetic texts of early Chinese thought, scholars such as University of Chicago Professor Edward L. Shaughnessy have been struck not by the simplicity of that phrase in antiquity

but by its opacity. “Renewal of the Chinese nation” may not be contingent on making Marxism permanent, but then again, it may be. But if it lacks true Chinese characteristics, it will be no more than a temporary transplant. Unlike some mullahs who make the claim that only they know the right way, Zhongnanhai might accept that the virtue best suited to keep the dream vibrant is to display humility in the service of the people.

The other day, President Xi and US Vice-President Mike Pence [traded “unpleasantries”](#) at a summit in Asia. They blamed each other for the trade war and the revival of geopolitical tensions. Xi made the most sense: “History has shown that confrontation, whether in the form of a cold war, a hot war or a trade war, will produce no winners.”

But note that a former top Chinese government trade negotiator has [publicly knocked](#) Beijing’s retaliatory decision to impose tariffs on US soybeans. Maybe everyone is feeling it’s time to dance? In Argentina, Trump should cut one of his artistic “deals”. He has made his point – and so has Xi. More of this is utterly pointless – and seriously dangerous. Alas, humility does not come so easily to superpowers.

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