

This opinion piece by PCI Vice President, Tom Plate, appeared in the South China Morning Post on Tuesday, September 8, 2020.

China must avoid repeating Trump, US' history of bellicose diplomacy

- Xi Jinping has so far not emulated his US counterpart's disdain for war and the military, instead hailing China's return to being a dominant military power
- As China's leaders swell with pride, though, they run the risk of failing to see themselves as others are starting to see them – as prideful and pushy



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President Donald Trump listens to a reporter's question during a news conference at the White House on September 4. Trump has come under heavy criticism from across the political spectrum after reports he mocked dead US soldiers as "losers". Photo: Reuters

There's little mystique to US President Donald Trump. He says more or less exactly what he's thinking, particularly when he's being thoughtless, which is too often.

If all 328 million Americans received US\$1 for every dumb, callous or factually incorrect outburst he's uttered since January 20, 2017, they could probably collectively afford to buy out Mar-a-Largo, convert it into a home for parentless immigrant children and still have plenty left over.

It's a serious question whether Joe Biden, as gaffe-prone as he sometimes is, will be able to provide anything like the quantity of material in the enormous Trump incredibility archive. Last week, the US president classified soldiers, sailors and military pilots who died in battle as "losers". He previously disrespected prisoners of war by saying: "I like people who weren't captured."

Predictable denials came from the White House, but the comments stuck like blood on winter ice. Teary-eyed war widows were interviewed all over cable TV news, and veterans' organisations exploded in hurt. What will the American news media do without this leaning tower of blunder? It was the biggest domestic story of the week and made headlines worldwide.

The sole conceivable silver lining is the remote possibility the Trump campaign, losing support faster than polar ice is melting, is making a play for the hidden pacifist vote, a constituency for whom war is always a "loser". At this point, two months before the election, the polls have Trump needing every vote he can get. Why not aim for pacifists who hate the military and war?

On a serious philosophical level, the pacifist approach does appeal. Wars are indeed hell on earth, like Covid-19. For the former, there are available vaccines – skilled diplomacy, clever diplomats, prolonged periods of peace, balanced alliances, peace pacts and so on. For a Covid-19 cure, we wait and hold our breath.

The challenge with pacificism is it only enhances international security if the other relevant actors are on the same, peace-loving wavelength. If more leaders echoed Trump's evident disdain for military valour and national sacrifice, and if the US president's put-down of soldiering somehow infected and demoralised militaries all over the world, how great would that be?

You might even envision a new pacifist world order. Perhaps there would be a coveted Nobel Peace Prize for the man who degraded the value of wartime heroism with characteristic contempt.

Enter President Xi Jinping and his raft of impressive leadership titles, none with mandated end dates. His position as chairman of the Central Military Commission puts him atop a growing military establishment whose overall capability within East Asia, especially in the naval arena, is regarded by American military experts with alarm. There is still the US 7th Fleet, of course, which patrols the South and East China Seas, annoying Beijing while reassuring US allies.

To date, however, China's leader has offered no Trump-ish hint of philosophical disdain for war. His rhetoric overflows with loving allusions to China's emergence as a power no one should mess with.

Xi is willing to put his missiles where his mouthfuls of metaphors are. On August 26, for instance, the Chinese military fired off a set of missiles reportedly able to sink an American aircraft carrier or obliterate the US territory of Guam.

This display might puzzle many Americans, who can hardly be faulted for hoping to inhabit a world with just one Vladimir Putin. But to the mainland crowd, Xi's steady crescendo of making China great again surely plays as music to the ears.

The purpose of this escalation may even be seen as self-defence, comparable to the US not tolerating Soviet missiles in Cuba. Only a narrow-minded American could fail to see a geopolitical analogy with US naval hegemony in the Caribbean.

But as China's leaders swell with nationalistic pride while looking back in anger at their troubled recent past and tracing every move of US ships in the region, they run the risk of failing to look far enough to see the rest of the world. They are not seeing themselves as others are starting to see them – as prideful and pushy.

Consider how the otherwise skilful Foreign Minister Wang Yi triggered resentment from European counterparts on his fractious “charm offensive” trip for lecturing as if he was some smug American diplomat doing what US diplomacy became notorious for in decades past and present.

This brings one back to the charm-challenged European diplomacy of the Trump White House. It rarely has a bad word for the pugnacious Putin but takes a snide attitude towards nearly everyone else, especially German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

She is an extraordinary woman, perhaps one of the greatest leaders in German history. The Chinese government – which hardly has an abundance of women in top positions – should listen to her carefully. That neither Trump nor Putin do are two especially important reasons to do so. What could be more compelling?

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