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Why Donald Trump's escapes to Mar-a-Lago are good for America and the rest of the world

Tom Plate says the gains from Trump's much-criticised weekend retreats at his Florida estate outweigh any costs



There is not the slightest doubt that the emotional mentality of the West Coast versus the East Coast of the US on a vital East-West issue such as the China relationship is different. The reason for bringing this up has to do with our currently besieged American president, his beloved Mar-a-Lago weekend retreats, and China.

First things first. The West Coast is obviously different from the East Coast. The latter represents fraying, unhappy cities propped up against the washed-up Atlantic Ocean, seaway to the past (Europe). By contrast, consider West Coast cities – Santa Barbara, San Francisco and San Diego, not to mention Seattle, Vancouver and Los Angeles, which are sprightly and pleasant, all set against the Pacific Ocean, super sea-lane to the future (Asia).

Geography may not be destiny but it sets a tone. One is outlook. The West Coast is generally sunny; the East Coast is generally gloomy. Consider the weather factor on the human psyche: it's happy-go-lucky Hawaiians versus Kierkegaardian Scandinavians.

Not surprisingly, there are more Asians here than anywhere else outside Asia. More and more, from all over Asia – and nowadays especially from the mainland – they come and settle here. In

Southern California, there are more people of Korean heritage than anywhere outside Seoul. There are so many Vietnamese-Americans that a freeway exit-sign on our 405 interstate highway reads “Little Saigon”. Asian student musicians overwhelm our high school orchestras. There are so many Asian college students around here that one of our universities is sometimes dubbed the “University of Caucasians Lost among Asians” and another the “University of Spoiled Chinese”. In Los Angeles, Caucasians are now officially in the minority.

There is much optimism in the air, from Silicon Valley to up-and-coming Silicon Beach, just south of Los Angeles. New-age non-profits – such as the Pacific Council on International Policy and the Pacific Century Institute – add fresh wind to old policy storms. The effect of all this is to nurture a politics of possibility regarding China and Asia, rather than a politics of impossibility.

Perhaps this summary of West versus East coasts is somewhat hyped – but not out of all proportion. This brings us to the topic of Donald Trump and his merry Mar-a-Lago retreat. The East Coast news media in New York and Washington has been merciless about the president’s weekend escapes to Florida. Why can’t he stay put in Washington? Why must he always escape to Mar-a-Lago? Consider the mounting costs! The security issues! And on and on and on.

Let me say this about Washington, understating it a little: it is a horrible place – maybe the meanest political town in a first-world country, fully in the feral class of a Seoul, Paris or other notably mean-spirited capital cities. Many from the West Coast, when in Washington on business, stay no longer than they have to. From Trump’s perspective, Mar-a-Lago is his West Coast paradise.

That Trump in fact does escape to it every possible weekend seems to me a sign less of indulgence than a presidential psychological necessity (to the people’s possible benefit). Perhaps future historians will conclude he did much of his best work there. One notes that the February round of “fairway diplomacy” at a Trump golf course near Mar-a-Lago, where Japan’s Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and his wife stayed, followed the lightning-fast pre-inauguration summit in New York between the two leaders. Deals were sealed. Perhaps at least as successful was the summit with President Xi Jinping (习近平). Between granddaughter Arabella and first lady Peng Liyuan (彭麗媛), the event was a getting-to-know-you blockbuster.

Let’s face it: the 45th US president, for all his macho talk, is scarily inexperienced. Yes, Trump does learn things in Washington – such as why Congress has so far not been more productive under a Republican president than the prior Democratic one. So, if I were Trump, I would probably want to get out of that town most weekends, too. In what venue other than his Florida millionaire’s crib would this impetuous real estate mogul be mellow enough to politely absorb a pointed lecture on Chinese-Korean history from China’s leader? The unschooled Trump seems to come away from these encounters with Asian leaders with a newfound sense that foreign issues are not remotely amenable to solution via campaign slogans, or to idiotic advice from right-wing nut jobs.

In serious people like Abe and Xi, Trump more than meets his equal. These tough-minded, well-informed politicians are emblematic of leaders that can help Trump and the rest of us chart our future, if only we can work together peacefully. I only hope the leaders of strategically vital Indonesia and highly successful Singapore will soon check in for a chat, too – especially if it’s in Mar-a-Lago, not Washington.

Trump has to peddle his goods as president to this smart new class of customer, not just to young couples going through life with Daddy's money sticking out of their ears. They will not be remotely as easy to sell. What each Asian leader said to his intimates on returning home to Tokyo or Beijing is not known. But I doubt they were bad-mouthing the Mar-a-Lago experience that had Trump in a good mood. Getting and keeping the volatile Trump in the right frame of mind – relaxed and open to reason – is nothing less than in the national and global interest.

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