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As America heads back to a future of small-minded thinking, can China seize the chance to lead?

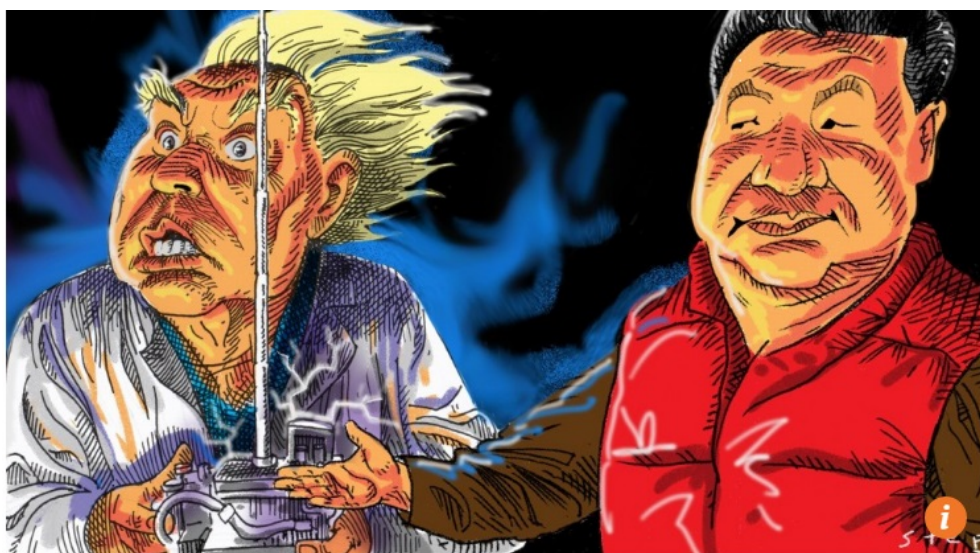
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Tom Plate

Tom Plate says the US' latest foreign policy ideas of 'America First', war preparations and a single winner are not actually new, and are not well thought out



In the pantheon of American movies, 1985's *Back to the Future* does not rank at the top of temple Hollywood, as do canonical masterpieces such as *Casablanca*, *Gone With the Wind*, *Lawrence of Arabia*, etc. Yet the movie title alone enriched American argot, and works perfectly to capture the latest turn in US foreign policy. Yes, it looks like it may be “back to the future” again, as in ... war preparation.

The Trump administration has revealed defence priorities that have the chilling feel of a cold war emphasis – rather than a no-war aspiration. The world has just been told that the 2019 Pentagon budget – topped up at US \$716 billion – comes packaged as an “aggressive defence strategy”. Defence Secretary James “Mad Dog” Mattis, viewed as one of this bizarre administration’s more balanced brains, cites threats from China and Russia. Both political left and right, argue some US think-tank types, seem in increasing concurrence on two nostrums. One is that the Indo-Pacific region is the globe’s number one geopolitical theatre (agree). The second is that America must do much more to counter an “increasingly authoritarian, mercantilist and aggressive” China.

Who knows what the US now wants, but what is worrisome is the ever-hovering Law of Unintended Consequences: one builds up for peace but winds up with war.

This depressing drift reflects conceptual minimalism – an ideology of win-lose, the default of us-vs-them, and rejection of visionary global leadership for petty policy provincialism. “America First does not mean America alone”, President Donald Trump insisted at the World Economic Forum summit in Davos, Switzerland. “When the United States grows, so does the world.” But how can that be the case if it grows small-minded?

Trump in Davos for World Economic Forum

Small minds tend not to beget big ideas. One of America's great diplomats was the late George Kennan, who coined – and mostly even defined – the iconic policy of “containment” as the needed antidote to the poison of the former Soviet Union. And though Kennan's excoriation of Soviet communism never waned one bit at Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School, where he retired to become an unforgettable teacher, the true genius of the containment notion was its aim: not to provoke uncertainty but offer a bedrock of predictability.

But when the USSR collapsed from internal decay, the simplicity of this organising idea went poof as well. One day, out of frustration, a few Washington influentials trekked to Princeton hoping the master might give birth to a new trope, as it were, to reframe US policy. But according to dinner participants (alas, I was not present), Kennan resisted the challenge with the sigh that world was exploding in too many directions for conceptual miniaturisation. At the same time Kennan, who died in 1995 aged 101, had little appetite to advise anyone to go “back to the future”.

The provincialism of Trump is a symptom of the current default to the past, including tariff tantrums and potential trade wars that will harm US consumers as well as foreign producers; but he is not the core cause. The new provincialism goes deep: after all, Trump's more thoughtful predecessor preferred “leading from behind”. But whether from the back or front, Asian nations from the Philippines to Vietnam – and perhaps also Singapore and Malaysia – need the US to act with intelligence and foresight. What is needed is a committed effort to formulate a cosmopolitan internationalism, fiendishly multisided; but rarely is anything truly important easy to achieve.



The problem with the win-lose paradigm is that someone always loses; the argument for win-win is, “why risk being a loser”? It should not be hard to decide which of these two approaches offers the best odds for geopolitical and economic stability. This outlook would prove less difficult to realise were it matched by an expansive dose of cosmopolitanism from China. Americans worry – and increasingly so – that Beijing is striking a more global posture than Washington but the new “nice” hegemon profile is but a pose. One Harvard professor even titled his latest book (superb, other than the awful title): *Destined for War*.

China will stumble if it needlessly brews its own cold war rumble. Big powers advance best with little steps. This sensitive point was conveyed at Davos. Singapore's tactful

minister, Chan Chun Sing, came across as more than happy to accept China's imaginative and ambitious New Silk Road programme as a credible potential trigger for our world economy's “next phase of growth”. But – seemed the minister's subtext – Beijing needs to stop scaring people in the Asian neighbourhood half out of their wits if it proposes to begin “leading from the front” with élan. Said Chan: “I can understand and I have heard theories where people are afraid, hesitant about China's growth. But this is an important historical opportunity for China to convince the rest of the world that actually its actions have a broader perspective ... The Chinese have a saying: yi de fu ren – use your benevolence to bring about a global community.”

This felicitous phrase was the one trumpeted by President Xi Jinping in his Davos speech last year. The optics of the current Chinese government plumping for an expansive internationalism contrasted brilliantly – and cleverly – with the self-centred darkness of the then newly inaugurated American president. And it still does. Back to the future – if America is prepared to go small conceptually, while blowing up militarily? Or boldly into the future goes China – yi de fu ren? That's the daunting, haunting mystery of our era.

Loyola Marymount University Professor Tom Plate's books on China include the recent *Yo-Yo Diplomacy* and *In the Middle of China's Future* (with an introduction by Kishore Mahbubani)