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With cowboy Trump leading trigger-happy America, should the world worry?

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Tom Plate

Tom Plate says gun culture is in the DNA of America, represented by Donald Trump in the best tradition of John Wayne Westerns. Until diplomatic balance is achieved, this is a fact that the world, including China, must live with

Individual gun ownership is a right proffered under the second amendment to the US Constitution. In killing 58 people and injuring about 500 last week, the perpetrator of the Las Vegas mass shooting had at the ready about two dozen guns in his hotel room, and dozens elsewhere. The average citizen's right to bear arms mirrors the way the US thinks about foreign relations – which will also lead to unnecessary tragedy.

These days, neither near-absolute gun rights at home nor the reliance on military power abroad is working well for America. The Las Vegas massacre prompted knowing shrugs and dismissive - gestures around the world. America is widely viewed as gun crazy and, after last week, the world might well view roll-the-dice Vegas as a symbol for our culture of risk.

Foreign policy is no easy subject even for university graduate students; so imagine my fear standing in front of a packed classroom of Chinese middle-school students, visiting my Loyola Marymount University not long ago, where I was to offer 90 minutes about US relations with the world. What does – what can – a professor say to 12- to 16-year-olds from Shenzhen? A John Wayne simulation seemed the best option – staging a virtual foreign-policy shootout. These great kids were asked to make believe they were in a Hollywood movie – like a John Wayne Western, with the Good Guys (white hats) aiming to take down the Bad Guys (black hats). After a few cowboy videos to illustrate, and utilising classroom rulers as guns, we randomly decided on a few Bad Guys to shoot and had the white-hats (more aggressive-looking kids) go after them, rulers blazing. Before long, we had got rid of all the Bad Guys (bad actors, rogue nations) who were of course responsible for all the “problems” (international tension, war threats).



Having created this virtual utopia, the students were gleeful and proud, until it was pointed out that two of the dead Bad Guys were really Good Guys. While they were shot by innocent mistake, they were still dead, and so now we had a different problem. How to tell the bad from the good guys – you can't just shoot everyone.

The kids got the point – that trying to “solve problems” by pulling a gun and looking for troublemakers creates dangers itself. Yet, from Vietnam to Iraq, the US seeks to improve the world with guns and militaristic poses, though we are hardly the only country with a big military. In fact, the session ended with the classroom-wide hope that China will not “go cowboy” when faced with foreign-policy “problems” but will find a smarter way.

Alas, in America, the historic Chinese naval build-up has raised fears, not eased them. But, in addition to that new worry is the related fear that

we Americans are starting to have about ourselves. Suddenly, there are visible holes in the “Great Wall of American exceptionalism”. To employ Jean Paul Sartre’s prescient phrase, it is as if the West understood it “was springing leaks everywhere”.

Las Vegas, where more people died than in any comparable incident in US history, offered unmistakable evidence of structural societal leakage.



Hundreds attend a vigil marking the one-week anniversary of the October 1 mass shooting in Las Vegas. Photo: Reuters

Irrationality can be a symptom of insecurity: if you add up everything spent on defence not just by giant China but also by Russia – and also add in the defence budgets of Britain, Japan, India, France and Saudi Arabia – it all still bulks up to less than the US continues to spend.

China did not cause this long-running American spending binge that sets history’s high bar for perpetual militarisation. Such was in our DNA – macho movie star John Wayne rolling in front of our eyes with all the self-confidence we imagine guns can buy. Given a cultural heritage like this, might not President Donald Trump, a former casino owner, conflate a blazing missile offensive with hitting the jackpot? We hope not – but would it really be totally out of character when you consider his characteristic John Wayne public posturing and tweeting over North Korea?

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“Sorry – but only one thing will work”, he bellowed over the weekend about Pyongyang.

Admittedly, there is no doubt that the rise of China, which started decades ago, of course, but only relatively recently caught the attention of the US public, has added weight to the droop in confidence – and need for ego reinforcement.

So, just as the gun-control movement in America will probably go nowhere, so too movement in - reversing national armament levels – including, sadly, nuclear weapons – will go nowhere. DNA is destiny: and this is what the world, not to mention China, must be prepared to live with.

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The so-named “Thucydides Trap”, so popular in certain circles, hypothesises that when the fast-rising power threatens the dominance of the established power, the conditions for war between them intensify. But it’s only one hypothesis.

Another hypothesis (mine) says that when the rising power brushes up against the established power, the rising power – if it is smart – will negotiate differences to keep a rational lid on its armaments spending , thus freeing up funds for the people’s true welfare.

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This is the “Alliance-for-Progress Escape from the Thucydides Trap”. I know, it’s no catchy phrase. But it does propose a path away from hell, which is what happened in Vegas, reminding us anew that the violence option is often the problem itself.

To believe otherwise – especially in this nuclear age – is, well, moronic. Getting the balance right is the best way to avoid becoming seriously unbalanced.

Columnist Tom Plate is a Loyola Marymount University professor and an author of many books about Asia, including the recent Yo-Yo Diplomacy