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China against the world: A tale of pride and prejudice

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Tom Plate says Beijing, which draws a red line on issues of sovereignty, is vulnerable to nationalism, and outsiders who refuse to give it the respect due a great civilisation are not helping relations



The cafe in Los Angeles was well shaded from the glaring sun outside and not even half full and no one was within overhearing distance. My appointment was with a diplomat – a smart Ministry of Foreign Affairs veteran from China. I needed to talk to him – no; I needed him to talk. This is what I do when I am not teaching or working on my next book; I try to listen carefully to people who know more than I do (a notably vast pool).

The diplomat arrived, and stirred the hot latte put before him without enthusiasm. His spirit was low. The Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Netherlands had ruled against his government on the Philippines brief in the South China Sea case. And his job was public diplomacy. For him and other Chinese “public” diplomats, it was not exactly the night before Christmas.

China is a riddled entity of profound vastness – one big Jupiter surrounded by many twirling Asian moons. Despite all the post-Mao openness, all the enforced globalised intimacy and all those Western think tanks, it has proven about as easy to unravel as string theory. I read academic journal articles and trudge through long books by China “experts”, but sometimes wonder if the notion of a “China expert” is often more hope than realisation.

“There is an occupational hazard for anyone who chooses to write about Chinese politics in the second decade of the 21st century,” admits Professor Kerry Brown of King’s College, London, in his dazzlingly detailed new book, *CEO, China: The Rise of Xi Jinping*. “We may live in an age of openness and information, but the inner workings of the Chinese political system ... remain one of the few bastions of opacity.” More presumptive “experts” should follow Brown’s lead and humbly offer their “expertise” with modesty. Few do.

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Nationalism reigns whatever the ideology [1]

With Beijing, Western arrogance grates. Representing a government atop a continuous civilisation that dates back thousands of years, my friend the diplomat parried my questions by seeking to elicit, sincerely, my thoughts on The Hague tribunal's anti-China decision on the South China Sea. This struck me as a trap, though not plotted: Anything this American might say short of saying that the tribunal was a CIA front might be viewed by him as anti-China.

In all fairness, Manila's decision to file its arbitration case, egged on by Washington, was never going to do much but add to the tension. President Xi Jinping's (习近平) neighbourhood is no happier a place thanks to The Hague.

"Our public diplomacy must be improved," said the Chinese diplomat when he started to open up. In his view, Beijing's problem is that it is misunderstood by the world. Perhaps – but sometimes it is either understood all too well or deliberately misunderstood. In the South China Sea, China has consistently put forth core sovereignty as the basis of its claims. What part of that stand did Manila, in pressing its legalistic case in The Hague, not get? Modern China draws the red line on sovereignty – including sovereignties, in China's mind, regained with its rise. No court in Europe could ever shake that sense of rectitude.

Even this polished professional diplomat cannot hide the deep well of emotion that comes from the sense that now is China's time – the era of catching up on old losses and evening-up causes once thought lost. "We're not afraid of Europe," is the diplomat's way of dismissing some full-of-itself tribunal in a far-off Dutch coastal city.

The sincerity (if not the wisdom) of that emotion is impossible to doubt but the time had come for a bit of bluntness. Trying to appear as casual as the young waiter seemingly avoiding our table, I asked why his government hadn't anticipated the inevitable "public diplomacy" problem from The Hague decision by working harder to defuse Manila's volatility. Why not throw a real concession or two its

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way?



The makings of a South China Sea agreement between Beijing and Manila [2]

The diplomat hesitated; I had hit a nerve, and took a stab at an answer myself: “Nationalism, right?”

He looked at me directly but responded with the slightest nod that I took to be yes.

I couldn’t help myself: “But nationalism’s also a force in the Philippines. They’re people too, right? And Vietnam doesn’t have nationalism?”

He said nothing but his eyes said a lot. China’s problem is less with neighbouring nations than its own people. Its foreign relations are fuelled more by domestic pressures than by logical interactions with neighbours.

A long time ago, a wise American offered this enduring perspective: “Today China stands isolated, mistrustful and hostile toward the outside world; her whole history has contributed to the view of herself as a superior civilization set upon by hostile barbarians ... China’s ancient pride may be an obstacle to communication, but it also provides the opportunity to breach the barrier of mistrust and hostility by treating China with the respect that is her due as a great and ancient civilisation.” This foreign-relations homily came from US Senator J. William Fulbright, the famous chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, in his classic book with the enduring title, *The Arrogance of Power*. This was written in the mid-1960s.

Now, it’s half a century later: Can the West honestly say that it finally gets it?

But at the same time: When will China be able to tell us that it’s finally over it?

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