

This opinion piece by PCI Vice President, Professor Tom Plate, appeared in the South Morning China Post, Monday, January 16, 2017.

China should beware the trap set by ‘dumb Trump’

Tom Plate says the US president-elect isn't known for his intellectual prowess, but he is wily: Beijing should not be riled into doing something reckless by his purposely provocative views on ‘one China’



With the World Economic Forum plenary meeting up and running this week in Davos, as usual in January, you may find this story poignantly relevant, even though it occurred back in 2000.

And so US president Bill Clinton, ever restless, orders Air Force One to fuel up for Zurich, where a Swiss military helicopter then lifts him, his then-teenage daughter Chelsea, and what seems like half his cabinet to the Swiss Alps village of Davos, where upwards of 1,500 world CEOs, government leaders, political and literary figures, and a handful of mere journalists assemble annually to mull over global issues and hobnob like excited kids at a preschool.

The first US president to appear at Davos while in office, Clinton makes thoughtful comments on not just the bright but also the dark side of globalisation.

But it is his other appearance that day I remember best: a closed briefing for journalists, mainly from Europe; and though late, as usual, Clinton, with Chelsea in charming daughterly tow, hits it around with the media for a 90-minute back and forth. Halfway through the performance, I whisper to ask the journalist from Agence France-Press next to me of her impression of the US president. In a tone tinged with a touch of surprise, she says: “He’s very smart, isn’t he?” But of course he was; after all, as president of the United States, world leader, he had better be smart, right?

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Perhaps you can see where I am heading with this. Later this week in Washington, as the big shots and prima donnas helicopter out of Davos, the US will [inaugurate its 45th president, Donald Trump](#). Let me ask: Can you imagine Trump, in Davos in some future year, facing a barrage of European journalists and triggering the same impressed reaction: that he is “very smart”?

The question arises poignantly in the context of US-China relations as President Xi Jinping (习近平) arrives in Davos this week – the [first Chinese top leader to attend](#) the World Economic Forum. Will the international press judge the Chinese leader to be “very smart”, whether or not he lowers himself to a surprise press chat?



[Chinese President Xi Jinping travels to Davos with a tough sell on his hands](#)

For starters, Xi’s views generally seem more Clintonian than Trumpian. Although hardly unaware of the dark downsides of globalisation (roiling employment dislocation, structural equity, endless trade disputes, and so on), Xi accepts the inescapability of global interaction in this epoch of nano-second internet

communication. This line contrasts with that of president-imminent Trump, who campaigned crudely against international trade regimes.

[As Trump kills the TPP, Can China-backed RCEP fill the gap?](#)

By contrast, the Chinese government offers a vision of trade harmony and ways to harmonise. Such public diplomacy enlarges China's global stature and makes Trump's America, the world's richest nation, seem petty and nationalistically selfish.

In addition, the Xi government also seems, on the whole, open minded on the nuclear arms limitations; at least, it seems to regard the option of further nuclear innovation with a lot less relish than the US. And, as everyone knows, China has long trumpeted a no-first-use nuclear policy.

Another Xi-Trump comparison concerns the Iranian pact. Why propose to ditch this admittedly flawed agreement (and almost all complicated multinational deals markedly fail a perfection test) when you have zip in your pocket to replace it with? It's an insane diplomacy.



Why China hesitates to take on global climate 'leadership' role

In addition to looking comparatively sane on the nuclear issue, Xi's Beijing bodes to look more cosmopolitan than a Trump Washington on growing climate concerns. The latter appears to hold that no compelling global challenge needs to be unduly fretted over; by contrast, the former stoutly supports the [2015 Paris](#) climate agreement. Especially if Trump proposes to undermine it, the accord having been signed by no fewer than 194 nations, China could come to resemble the world's only climate-sensitive superpower. Similarly at the United Nations, which in Trumpian rhetoric has already fallen to the status of some kind of multilingual bridge club, a higher, proactive profile from China, especially at the Security Council, could add to its leadership aura.

Xi is not only younger than Trump, but also patently smarter. The incoming American government is a jumble of ethical uncertainty and policy pugnacity, whereas the Chinese government's positions on some of the globe's most important transnational issues are supported by many nations – not to mention by well-respected scholarly and policy communities.

Watch: What cards can US President Trump play against China?

Yet, at the same time, China may risk underestimating Trump, as did countless allegedly smart American journalists during the campaign. For Trump is only dumb in the manner of the fox that was Ronald Reagan, the 40th US president. What's more, the shameless brutality of his political incorrectness and his savvy sense of smell for the rot of liberal complacency seems always keenly targeted for political kill.

Beijing hits back at Trump: one-China principle is non-negotiable

Thus for China, the current public quarrel with little Singapore over [armoured vehicles en route from Taiwan](#) and the rising to the bait of the Trump-teasing on the "one China" issue could play right into his hands. Great powers should not be easily flustered. The smart advice for Beijing would be to avoid doing something dumb in frustration or anger. This we shall term falling into the "Trump Trap".

Columnist Tom Plate is the Distinguished Scholar of Asian and Pacific Studies at Loyola Marymount University and the vice-president of the Pacific Century Institute, both in Los Angeles