

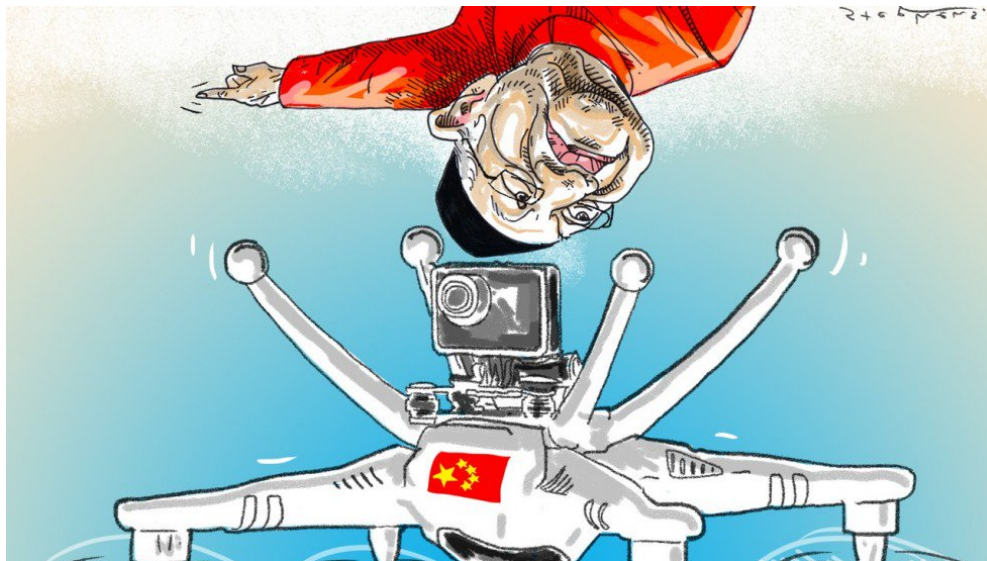
This opinion piece by PCI Vice President, Tom Plate, appeared in the South China Morning Post on Tuesday, August 14, 2018.

Criticism of China by Malaysia's Mahathir resonates around East Asia, and with Beijing

Tom Plate says while Beijing may have once appreciated the long-lived Malaysian prime minister's straight talking, China's leaders may have less taste for it now that they – and not the US or IMF – are the targets of his criticism

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[Tom Plate](#)

Over the decades, [China](#)'s leaders have been known to greatly respect the tell-it-like-it-is political instincts of Malaysian maestro Dr [Mahathir Mohamad](#). But now you have to wonder how much love may have been lost of late.

No one in Beijing or anywhere else doubts even today that the young country doctor who was to rise to prominence as the modernising leader of [Malaysia](#) is still one crazy smart [Asian](#). Of the most remarkable figures I've met in a long journalistic career, Dr M – as I call him – is anything but the buttoned-up prime ministerial stereotype. Compare

him, for instance, to Sir John Major, leader of the United Kingdom between 1990 and 1997 – so very much the English gentleman, dapper in tendering fair-minded and politely expressed opinion, charming even in disagreement. Dr M was – and is – nothing like that. Now 93 and prime minister of Malaysia for a second time, it is not even clear that he has mellowed much with age. Compare him to a sport and you'd have him more like [Australian](#) football than cricket.

The former boss of all bosses of the massive, money-infested monster that was Malaysia's oft-dominant party has since become the "young insurgent" [toppling that party](#), and Dr M's views have new sting since becoming leader anew. His first go as prime minister ran for 22 years, the Malaysian record, ending in 2003. But way back when, at least before the September 11 terror attacks, one of Islam's craftiest, secular political minds was all but ignored by Western journalists. Asia then was an "Oriental" story, with the Asians in the spotlight usually crazy, poor and clueless ... or communist. And this Malaysian Asian was, to some, either an authoritarian crank, [an anti-Semite](#) or a bizarre Muslim Machiavelli.

That began to change in 1997, when Dr M lashed out at the [International Monetary Fund](#), triggering regional applause. When the brutal Asian financial crisis hit, when currencies and economies from [Thailand](#) to [South Korea](#) were leaning over cliffs, and the cash-rich but cruel IMF only proffered loans with conditions reminiscent of a mafia loan shark, Dr M told the Washington-based organisation to bug off with its venomous bailout money. Instead, his government outmanoeuvred Western currency speculators, their short fangs drooling, and sent Wall Street wolves packing. ([Hong Kong](#) also outfoxed predators by working behind the scenes with premier Zhu Rongji.)

The Mahathir play got Beijing's respect. Largely buffered from the crisis (which lasted from 1997-1999) by having pointedly ignored Washington's ideologically pious (but Wall Street-serving) advice to lift the [currency](#) curtain and let the good times roll, the Beijing expertariat never forgot this Malay man who could say no – judging him as craftily un beholden to the West as anyone.

Beijing, it was sometimes said, secretly favoured his Malaysia more than [Singapore](#), in part because of the latter's intimacy with Washington, of which Dr M could never be accused. But that was then and now we have something new: in his re-emergence as prime minister, the good doctor is now offering measured criticism of China. Like others in the region, Malaysia has [maritime issues with Beijing](#), and concerns about previously negotiated bilateral development deals.

Dr M has raised questions about its pushiness in the (increasingly appropriately named) [South China Sea](#) and perceived neo-colonial style, particularly in rolling out the ambitious (if potentially helpful) [Belt and Road Initiative](#) with peculiar financing and contracts. Dr M's advice, as I decode it, is to slow down, stop bragging, be considerate of others' interests and show flexibility.

Zhongnanhai does not appreciate this sort of chatter – imagine the nerve of this tiny Asian deer of a country instructing the big elephant on what to do! China is legendary for not lusting for savage sovereignty over others, but seeking to conjure a less vulgar form of continuing influence – which the elegant [French](#) have a word for: suzerainty.

One does not brazenly run over other countries with tanks or dictate their actual form of government (for example, the [US](#) invasion of [Iraq](#) or the US post-war imposition of an American-style government on [Japan](#)). The preferred way is to hover over semi-unobtrusively and earn near-worshipful respect as the de facto hoverer-in-chief with whom one does not ever mess.

A widespread question around Asia these days is how low the hovering will go, for at too low a height, hovering can become smothering, rendering China more neo-colonial than neo-wonderful. And that is where the regional image of China seems to have settled in some minds, at least for the moment. Beijing should thus consider respecting this re-risen sage, but these days it is not seeing things as clearly and unemotionally as it might.

The result is not that Mahathir has a problem; at 93, this proven politician is clearly having the time of what is left of his lengthy life by putting his chips on the table. It is Beijing that has a problem, not only because the Mahathir critique is not idiosyncratic and increasingly resonates in [East Asia](#), but also because, in East Asia, is there a

political figure (with the exception of Lee Hsien Loong, Singapore's prime minister since 2004 and the late Lee Kuan Yew's son) who has more earned the right to be listened to?

Over the decades Mahathir has given us all much to think about, even when not enough of us thought so much of him. And now he is trying to cheer China on, to continue to become rich and Asian, but without becoming crazy – and driving everyone else crazy while doing it. There must be a way.

University professor and career journalist Tom Plate is the author of the Giants of Asia book series, which includes Conversations with Mohamad Mahathir



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