

This opinion piece by PCI Vice President, Professor Tom Plate, appeared in the South Morning China Post, Monday, December 19, 2016.

Underwater drone spat shows why China-US relations are tense – and can only get worse under Trump

Tom Plate says the latest Sino-US tensions show both sides need to make a lot more adjustments to get along. For China, it means accepting a US leader who will certainly offend its sensibilities



And so the question is sure to arise: Who will be blamed for “losing” the South China Sea to China? That utterly passive/non-aggressive Obama crew? Or, instead, will the sea change be viewed in a more sophisticated way – perhaps as a simple matter of a newly energetic China in full neighborhood swagger?

The question resurfaces when the crew of a [Chinese warship scooped up a US oceanographic sea survey drone](#) and absconded, apparently without a care in the world – and with a fishy finger in the US Navy’s face. Washington lodged a protest, of course – blah, blah, blah; and then the Chinese responded by saying the act was “professional and responsible” – blah, blah, blah.

In fact, [according to a Hague tribunal](#) recently, by the tepid authority of international law, central seas are everyone’s waters; but China has dropped enough hard infrastructure onto various islands and sandy shoals that we might as well face facts and accept the notion of *uti possidetis juris* (as you possess under law; or, in other words, possession is nine-tenths of the law). As an honest analyst at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in Washington put it: “China has radically changed the balance in the South China Sea and no one can do anything about it.”



The US Pacific Command, mustering pushback, has been rhetorically flapping its sails, more for the calming of allies than anything else: “[You can count on America now and](#)

into the future,” declaimed Admiral Harry B. Harris Jnr in Australia. “Reports of America’s abandonment of the Indo-Asia Pacific have been greatly exaggerated,” he added. In reality, the rarely speechless US Pacific Command boss is caught between a rocky shoal and a sandy soft place. In his remarks at the Lowy Institute in Sydney, the ranking admiral depicted the People’s Republic of China as being “increasingly assertive”. He is surely right about that, but nations fighting to regain their balance after being knocked off stride for ages do tend to come off as pushy in rebound.

Rather than throw curses at historical probability – whether via bombast or bombs – a responsible and visionary US foreign policy would focus more on the reality of the 21st century and China’s rising role in it.

One trick is to comprehend this giant on its own terms, rather than on ours, while still honouring worthy treaties with Japan and Korea (Beijing must try to swallow this). That won’t be an easy balance to maintain, but it will be easier and more prudent than if the US Pacific Command tries to regard the South China Sea with the same proprietary air as the US Fourth Fleet over the Caribbean.

Similarly, Taiwan is no run-of-the-mill issue but core to China’s sense of self, as President Barack Obama [aptly acknowledged last week](#): “The idea of One China is at the heart of their conception of a nation.” This, after all, is the “Mainland Consensus”, and sometimes even the “Washington Consensus”: In remarkable respects, US diplomacy has handled the Taiwan issue with more delicacy than the South China Sea. Nuanced policy has helped foster functional autonomy for Taiwan, substantial economic growth on both sides of the Taiwan Strait, and peace in East Asia. That kind of result surely rates more than a passing grade in any professor’s class.

It would certainly help to keep the bilateral blood pressure on an even keel were President-elect Donald Trump to control his tweets and be more careful about accepting phone calls from relative strangers bearing ego-stroking gifts. Again, Mr Obama: “And so if you are going to upend this understanding [about Taiwan], you have to have thought through what the consequences are.” The Chinese, he said, would not treat any departure in US policy on Taiwan the way they would treat other issues – not even the South China Sea, “where we’ve had a lot of tensions”.

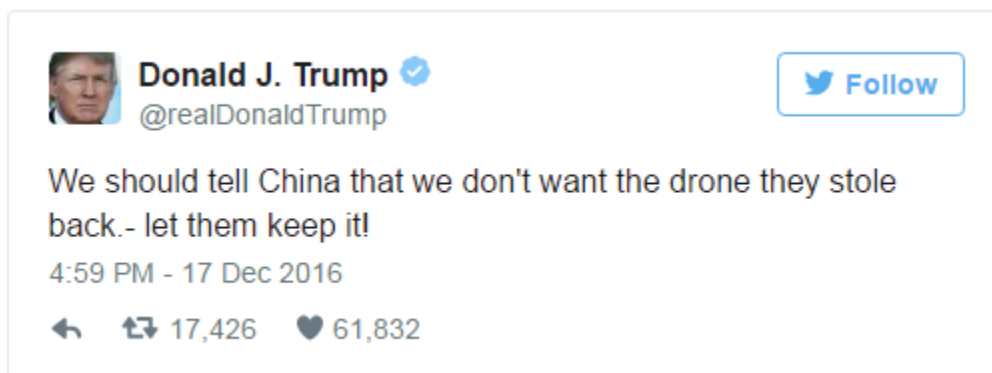


The brittle personality and questionable global views of Trump are well suited to further roil the waters of the China-US relationship. As far as anyone can tell, his beliefs are that the world needs to remain America's oyster; a treaty has no higher reverence than, say, a rental-lease arrangement; and alliances are solely for convenience – always shifting, never foundational, spare any emotion or foolish loyalty. International diplomacy is, at bottom, the art of the deal.

Based on any sympathetic understanding of Chinese diplomacy since 1949, this won't do. Pick up a copy of *Ten Episodes in China's Diplomacy* by Qian Qichen (錢其琛), who from 1988 to 1998 was China's foreign minister, and you will see the problem. The Chinese find "deal diplomacy" extremely tacky. In Qian's 2005 memoir, the figure of James A. Baker, the US secretary of state under president George H. W. Bush, emerges not as a skilled statesman but as a vulgar discount-car dealer: "Baker handled foreign affairs as if he were doing business. At the negotiating table, he liked to say, 'Let's make a deal'." The irritation of Qian, who was respected among world diplomats, notwithstanding his hawkishness on Taiwan, is palpable throughout the book. America's incoming "Dealer in Chief" will grate against Chinese sensibilities; Trump is Baker without the finesse.

China's leaders need to regroup and review. For, whatever his faults (indecisiveness, fumbled Asian pivot, whatever) with Beijing, Obama was always properly cautious. Let

the record show that, on his watch, no war between China and America came close to surfacing.



Trump is no Obama; he tweeted: “We should tell China that we don’t want the drone they stole back – let them keep it!”

Yes, this is the social-media voice of the incoming 45th US president. If the Chinese are going to twitch over every one of his tortured tweety thrusts, they may be setting themselves up for an enervating and stormy four years. After all, Trump is, [to use his very own word](#), “unprecedented”. Of course, one means unprecedented. But perhaps we could begin to use the word “unprecedented” to describe someone who doesn’t act like a president.

Columnist Tom Plate’s latest book – Peace Columnist: China and American Journalist Tom Plate – is to be published next year

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