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South China Morning Post 南華早報

What do North Korea and an octopus have in common? More than you might think

PUBLISHED : Monday, 11 September, 2017, 2:44pm

UPDATED : Monday, 11 September, 2017, 7:59pm

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Tom Plate

Tom Plate says the highly intelligent but often misunderstood cephalopod may offer a clue to understanding North Korea, given the parallels in a defence system that include dramatic expulsions and ostentatious threat displays

Is there any way I might persuade you that the behaviour of North Korea might seem less animalistic if only we understood where the hard-to-figure octopus was coming from?

I propose this because I despair of learning anything new from conventional political science, which has been on this for decades and yet we still don't know really why North Korea is the way it is or even what it is.

So why don't we try something different? Let's dip into the deep of neuroscience, which studies the nervous system and the brain, and which in recent years has been stirring the imagination of our naturalists and philosophers to wondrous effect.

Start with the famed research at Addenbrooke's Hospital in Cambridge, England, that about 10 years ago advanced our sense of human consciousness.

They were able to show (via MRI technology) that consciousness, at some level, could exist even in a human being in a brutally degenerative state, as long as the brain was still functioning. Through advanced neuro-imaging, they could track the brain of the patient "listening" to them, even though she could not respond or even signal with eye movement.

Consciousness, then, is no less conscious in the absence of communicability. It gets better: human consciousness clearly arises from the neural processes of the central brain, but research on animals high up on the evolutionary ladder suggests that consciousness (or "subjective experience") may be the product of the total organism, not just of one organ in that animal, as with the "human being" animal. And this turns out to be the case with the octopus, weird-looking and sometimes bizarre-acting, but almost always misunderstood, as it is not human.

New science reveals it to be conscious throughout many parts of its brain-decentralised body. Armed eight times over, it can do many things we humans do, and some better; it adapts to novel challenges, demonstrates curiosity and looks to expand options.

The catch is, from our perspective, that it cannot speak to us, at least in a language we understand. So we imagine it might be plain stupid, like a vegetative human with brain trauma that cannot physically communicate.

But that's our problem as much as theirs, is it not? Philosopher Amia Srinivasan, in a recent essay on two fabulous books on the most advanced of all cephalopods (by the Australian-American philosopher Peter Godfrey-Smith and the American naturalist Sy Montgomery), offers this: "Octopuses are the closest we can come, on earth, to what it might be like to encounter intelligent aliens. The potential worry is that the evolutionary chasm between us and the octopus is too great to make mutual intelligibility possible." And then the lecturer from University College London tartly adds: "In that case the octopus will have something to teach us about the limits of our own understanding."

Here let us move from neurological science to a new kind of political science by analogy: the suggestion is that North Korea is in many ways octopus-like. It is far from as stupid as it looks, it does not communicate in any human way, and of its nature we have limited understanding.

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To borrow Srinivasan again, “Ethical questions remain, raised by creatures, like the octopus, which so clearly yearn for freedom. Perhaps from our perspective the life of a wild octopus is already a tragic thing ... speaking without being heard ... an alien. If only the octopus were more like us, we might be better at leaving it alone.”

Let us imagine that North Korea’s rude missile flights and [unnerving underground bomb tests](#) [1] are akin to the black ink of the octopus spewed out in existential fear (rather than aggressive intent); and that the totality of its consciousness is not wholly contained within the parameters of Pyongyang, the entity’s central brain, but extend somehow throughout its entire political-neural system. The North Korean octopus, after all, does not speak to the West in any intelligible language, and is still threatening; and this makes us feel we somehow have to respond – but [we just don’t know how](#) [2].



Donald J. Trump

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Military solutions are now fully in place,locked and loaded,should North Korea act unwisely. Hopefully Kim Jong Un will find another path!

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Bombing North Korea’s capital back to the stone age will not extinguish its consciousness, though it may mash it into some sort of vegetative state. (And, even then, North Korea will continue to live in our consciousness the way historic Hiroshima and Nagasaki still haunt.)

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If this somewhat empathetic take on the Korean octopus makes sense as an analogy, then the smart – and safest –course for the world is to back off, not pre-emptively crowd it by setting off alarm bells with threats that will accomplish little. From this analysis, the inclination of Beijing to take a long-term, more careful, view of North Korea [5] deserves further respect, as it has a better chance of avoiding calamity than the hard view.

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And the US needs to face up to the reality of its own limitations. The first is to avoid the frustration of expecting that we might be able to offer a solution in the absence of understanding of the octopus, as we are incapable of hearing what they are saying. The second is to realise that the US government is headed by someone whose own instincts are primarily primitive – believing the solution is simply to cut off the head of the octopus.

Military action on North Korea is not an option, China tells visiting US general

But the octopus, a solitary creature, is actually highly intelligent, though having learned nothing from its parent. It is anything but brainless, but its brains, as it were, are threaded throughout its body and its intelligence is not jammed into its “head”. Its defence system against enemies includes the dramatic expulsions and ostentatious threat displays. Am I getting anywhere with this?

University professor and columnist Tom Plate’s new book is titled *Yo-Yo Diplomacy*, the third in the Tom Plate on Asia series. It’s about China and the US and their ups and downs

