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America's China hawks, anti-mainland Hongkongers, and the Putin calendar: why 2019 would be a better year without them



Tom Plate

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- Tom Plate says for the sake of better China-US relations in 2019 (and his blood pressure), some of the irritants in the relationship, such as those who engage in warmongering and grandstanding, should be called out for their behaviour



Illustration: Timothy Mcevenue. See: www.timothymcevenue.net

Every year about this time, a late, great American columnist would knock out his “People I’m Not Talking to This Year”. It was a get-even roll call of big-time baddies and political popinjays – a crabby crusade whose charm pleased readers and deterred nervous, gimlet-eyed newspaper editors from spiking what eventually came to flourish as a tradition. In that spirit, here is my own hit list of “People I Wish Would Disappear This Year to Keep My Blood Pressure Down”, customised for my China-US-Asia remit.

That Chinese Navy rear admiral (name intentionally withheld) who recently urged an attack on a US aircraft carrier, openly drooling over the projected death toll of 10,000 US sailors: this morally misguided man is potentially more harmful to China’s peace and security than any Uygur terrorist or anti-China conspiracy. Might Beijing have available somewhere a “re-education” camp for military men out of their minds?

American military officers (no names here either) who drool like a crazed Chinese admiral, whether in reciprocal enmity or personal initiative. These Dr Strangeloves of the China-US relationship need to be watched. Warmongering can lead to war.

Any American academic or author who appears to sanction, welcome or flatly predict war with China. Anything to sell a book? Never underestimate your responsibility as an author when writing about a potential conflict that would endanger millions of lives on both sides of the Pacific.

Florida Senator Marco Rubio. This guy strikes me as cheaper than a Madras shirt in a Mumbai airport gift shop. It's like he's always "on sale".

In high senatorial dudgeon, he takes on Google for working with China. As if America's National Security Agency doesn't keep under surveillance seemingly everyone, anywhere (just ask German Chancellor Angela Merkel for details).

Stop grandstanding, senator: America's not a whole lot better than China or anyone else in violating privacy or intrusive surveillance.



US Senator Marco Rubio speaks outside the Senate chambers at the US Capitol on December 21. Rubio was among several senators who have criticised a reported plan by Google to introduce a censored search engine in China. Photo: EPA-EFE

Anyone who knocks America's invaluable foreign service. The high-end sector of our own professional foreign policy mandarinate is shrinking almost as fast as President Donald Trump's global credibility.

Budget cuts and still unfilled diplomatic posts are a shameful trashing of a proud and well-grounded public-service institution. The wilful neglect unintentionally makes China's rising diplomatic effort look more formidable than ever.

Anyone who knocks China's diplomatic corps. What used to be the case in America, where graduates from our better universities made a career of the foreign service to serve their country, is now increasingly the case with the China's corps.

This is especially true in Asia, and at the United Nations, where perhaps only the spirited British effort matches Beijing's. Diplomacy costs much less than war. Peacemaking and peacekeeping need robust professionals to work it, not blowhard politicians.

Hongkongers who do not respect mainland Chinese. Please: you like "one country, two systems"? Then don't ask for homogeneity. Don't act like a nose-in-the-air Frenchman towards Algerians. Make allowances for peculiar mainland manners and mores.

Mainland Chinese who do not respect Hongkongers. OK, maybe they do act with a superior attitude. Mainlanders, just live with it, you are part of the same country, just as Texas is part of the US. Doesn't everyone like Texans? They're always so cuddly, no?

The anti-China Twitter gang that can't tweet straight. There is a posse of American pundits who have no positive word for Beijing and seem to be gunning for war. One is laughable for predicting the exact year of China's dramatic collapse – a wrong prediction, of course, he's made many times.

When they're not feeling nostalgic for the Peloponnesian War, they're pounding the conga drums for a new cold war. There's no stopping them, but I wish they would agree to not initiate their tweet outbursts until much later in the day – at least not before noon - by which time those of us with a delicate and nervous disposition can be properly prepared.

"Experts" who bang on and on about the "Thucydides trap". Everyone knows the meaning of this currently academically fashionable term for when an established power loses its cool in the face of an up-and-coming power. The idea being conveyed is: war.

Please get that Thucydides thing out of your head or you'll be trapped in cliché thinking, because the Thucydides trap is pure pap. Historical analogies are invariably double-edged swords: yes, they can open your eyes to the present; they can also blind you to something really new.

In the Peloponnesian war (a very long time ago), two city states went at it to determine which one was to emerge as top Greek. So, in this hyper-technological, over-nuclearised age, people should think of Beijing as Sparta and Washington as Athens? I say: 'Those who rely too much on recycling the past may only be insuring its repetition in the future.'

If we obsess about the so-called Thucydides trap, we'll have less time to worry about the poverty gap, which is growing in Hong Kong, mainland China and the US. This dynamic is the real cause of wars and revolutions. Let the eminent Thucydides rest in peace, as he has since 395BC.

Anyone buying the [new Putin wall calendar](#). News reports claim they're selling like mooncakes, especially in Japan and even France, heretofore ranked as among the most cultured and discerning of countries. If the sales figures are not all hype, the decline of civilisation may be dated as accelerating from this point forward.

And finally, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte. Crazy like a fox? Or dumb like a donkey? Do ignore this man, unless stuck in the Philippines with no way out. Then again, America is currently stuck with a kind of Duterte doppelganger of its own, no?

Columnist Tom Plate teaches courses at Loyola Marymount University and writes books, including the "Giants of Asia" series and the "Tom Plate on Asia" series. He has worked at newspapers in London, New York and Los Angeles