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## Can China's ideology tsar, Wang Huning, be the steadying hand in Sino-US relations?

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**Tom Plate**

*Tom Plate says the newly promoted chief party theoretician is known to be a middle-of-the-road critic of US policy and society, and could exert a positive influence to keep bilateral relations on an even keel*

Of the three political parties today that pack serious global pop – the [Communist Party](#) [1] in China, and the Democratic and Republican parties in America – China's comes across right now as the least disorganised and ineffective.

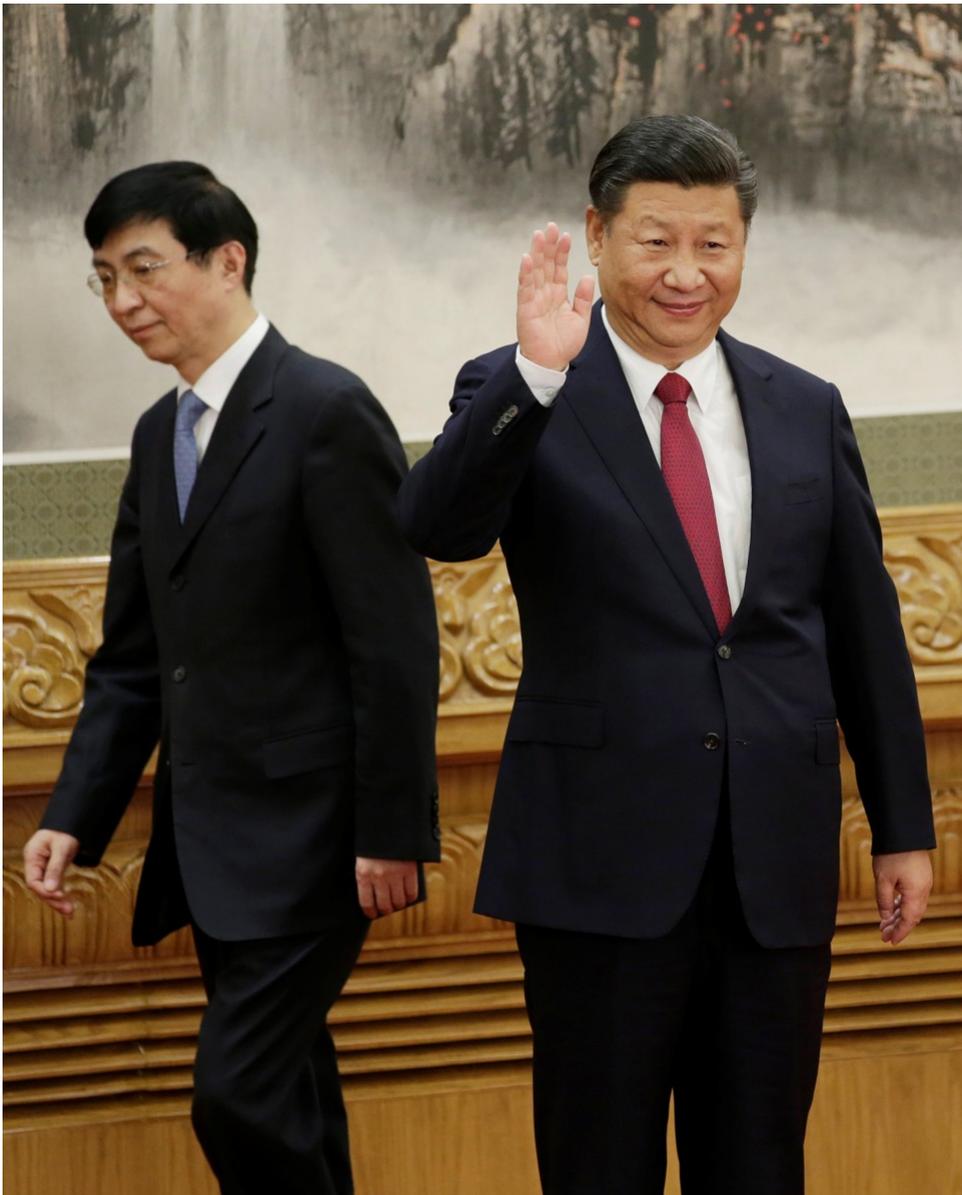
Even so, is it possible President [Xi Jinping](#) [2] is now less like an all-powerful Mao Zedong and more like a coalition-canny Abraham Lincoln, whose cabinet famously included quarrelling voices? Some 19th party congress evaluators size up the [new Politburo Standing Committee](#) [3] as just that – more like a Lincoln cabinet mash-up than a slate of pure “Xi-sters”. They also note that Xi's corruption-busting ally [Wang Qishan](#) [4] retired. The hypothesis is that the Communist Party is one big happy family when the whole world is watching, but a big squabbling one when out of view, behind closed doors.

So how does surging, ambitious China and surging, ambitious Xi keep the chorus of communist comity singing the same happy tune? One key is [Wang Huning](#) [5], the top-gun librettist on the new Standing Committee. Now something like the chief party theoretician, as well as the go-to speech-writer, Wang has the talent to weave together different policy textures into one fine fabric of collective thought. The youngest law professor to be granted tenure at Fudan University in Shanghai, polishing his French in college (and his English at visiting-fellow stops, including the University of California, Berkeley), Wang is not only a books-and-publication workaholic but also a gifted and usefully flexible theorist.

[6]

Is Wang anti-American? Yes and no. The titles of his books range from *America against America* and *Analysis of Modern Western Politics*, to *Debate Contest in Lion City* (Singapore he likes). He rates the American system less warmly now than in the past. A review of his utterances yields a Communist Confucian of both conviction and flexibility: “The political system must fit into and be accepted by a country's history, culture and society ... It cannot be too above the ground.” On political reform in China, he notes that it should “stay within the capability of the acceptance in society”. “At this time, centralised decision-making power and modernisation is more ‘politically efficient’ ... This model has achieved stunning economic results,” he writes.

The party elite's view of the US has never been simplistic, nor has it been effusively complimentary. On this scale, compared to other party intellectuals – especially Liu Mingfu – Wang is a middle-of-the-



road critic of US foreign policy and society, perhaps midway between the hawkish Liu and the cosmopolitan Zheng Bijian, whose take on America was comparatively empathetic. For all this, the overall judgment is that the American political system is little more than a fascist structure.

***How Donald Trump's example has emboldened Asia's strongmen leaders – and delivered a setback to democracy [7]***

Consider this from Nathan Gardels, editor-in-chief of *The WorldPost*, who has met Wang: “He is suspicious of democracy because, as he puts it, it is like shareholders in a company; in theory, every shareholder has a voice; in reality only those of the largest minority share do. Still, the main thing about him is that he has been pushing the ‘neo-authoritarian Confucian tradition of Chinese politics’ view and found a good receptacle in Xi.”

Wang has had his hand in the formulation of all three of China's most recent ideological tropes – from Jiang Zemin [8]’s “Three Represents” and Hu Jintao [9]’s “scientific development” to Xi’s “Chinese dream”. One well-known Chinese-American observer of Chinese politics who has taught in a mainland university sums it up thus: “He survived three presidents and still remains as the ideology tsar! This is a person with very good people skills, able to pitch socialistic ideology to please three consecutive leaderships. This is someone to watch.”

The Seoul newspaper *Hankyoreh* can lay claim to dubbing him “China’s Kissinger”. Perhaps – but for my 10 cents, Wang, shy and loyal, reminds me more of Theodore Sorensen, John F. Kennedy’s fabled policy adviser and wonder wordsmith.

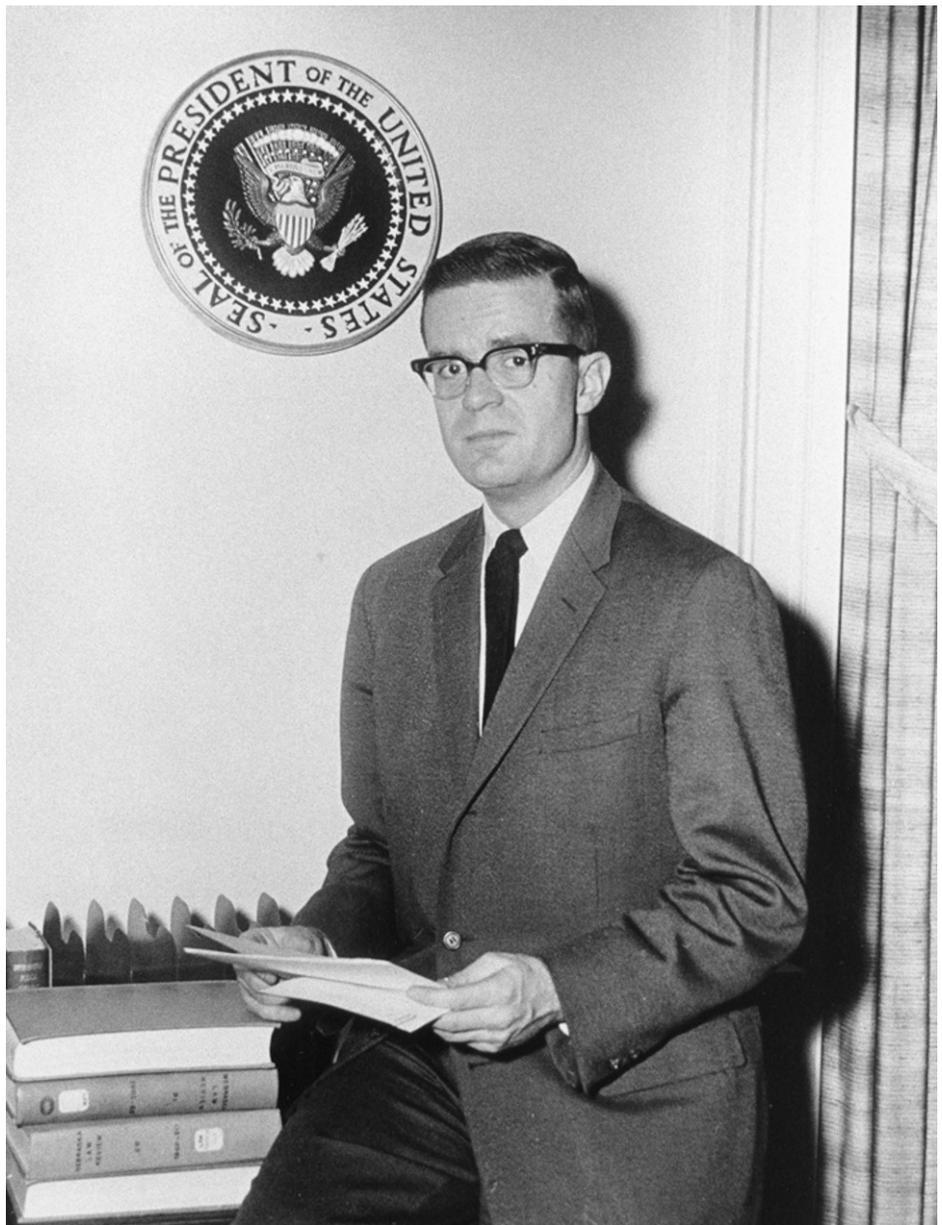
Rarely in front of a camera, invariably hunched over yet another speech draft, the late Sorensen, a self-effacing brainiac from the sticks of Nebraska, once explained to me the power of the top speech-writer. At the end of a difficult policy meeting, with the military fighting the diplomats fighting the media advisers fighting the White House staff, president Kennedy turned to the young Sorensen and said: “OK Ted, put that all altogether. For that speech in Brussels.” And out the next day it would come, fully baked in the cognitive oven of the speech-writer’s brain, all differences melted down into one nice cake.

Still, upgrading the rationale for Mao's Marxism to Xi's Chinese dream while not making a hash of communist doctrine – that's hard work. Wang loves the challenge, as did Sorensen, because to the serious speech-writer, the challenge is inherently patriotic: "Unity of leadership is the prerequisite for the existence of any country," Wang once argued. "Where there is no central authority, or where the central authority is in decline, the nation will be in a divided and chaotic state."

Wang has probably never heard of Sorensen, who might have explained to his fellow wordsmith our messy democratic process better than anyone; but even Ted would have had a tough time making a case for the poisoned polity today.

Even so, keeping crude anti-Americanism down to a minimum would be in China's interest, and could be a significant contribution from the man who is the intellectual life of the party. As Sorensen might have said to him: ask not what your party can do for you,

but what you and your party can do for your country and the world. A mature China-US relationship is crucial to global stability. Speech-writers only need to find the words for it.



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