

This opinion piece by PCI Vice President, Tom Plate, appeared in the South China Morning Post on Monday, May 7, 2018

## Playing with fire: why are Donald Trump and Xi Jinping whipping up nationalist fervour?

Tom Plate says repeated calls by the two leaders to rally their fan base at home towards restoring national greatness and rejuvenation – even if needed for political purposes – risk endangering the China-US relationship

PUBLISHED : Monday, 07 May, 2018, 5:30pm

UPDATED : Monday, 07 May, 2018, 9:11pm

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*It is difficult to understand the pressing need of the world's two greatest powers to restore greatness and rejuvenation when they have plenty of that already. What they don't have enough of is working together.*  
Illustration: Timothy Mcevenue

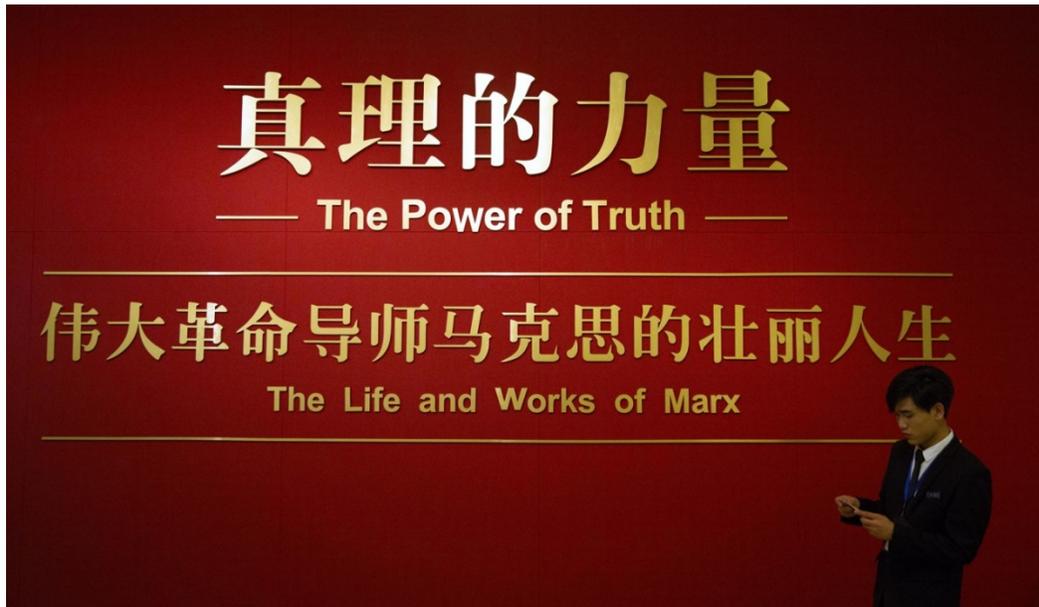


[Tom Plate](#)

President [Donald Trump](#) strives to “make America great again”, but for what purpose and to whose detriment? And, if in an inarguable sense America, for all its flaws, is still “great”, how much more greatness is needed? After all, America is not going to topple like the Soviet Union: anti-Americans of the world, please curb your enthusiasm. (And, dear Chinese master planners: drawing as you do on the best minds at your universities and think tanks, why ground your planning on the presumption that America is some pitiless, helpless giant going down history's loser lane? In fact, I bet the sharpest among you don't.)

Similarly, President [Xi Jinping strives to renew respect](#) in Asia for the relevance of Marxism on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of the birth of Karl Marx, that famous European thinker. What? This from the Chinese leader who in Davos last year [delivered a state-of-the-art speech](#) on modern globalisation and China's commitment to it? How can this be?

The Xi case is more engrossing and important than Trump's. Repeatedly, China's president urges his [Communist Party](#) to remain faithful to Marxian political-intellectual heritage. Party members should steep themselves in the reading of Marxist works as more than mere economic guidance, but as a "way of life" and a "spiritual pursuit". Indeed, as a secular religion, Marxism requires of its worshippers much belief.



*An exhibition at China's National Museum in Beijing commemorates the 200th anniversary of the birth of Karl Marx. At an event last week to mark the anniversary, President Xi Jinping urged Communist Party members to remain faithful to Marxian political-intellectual heritage. Photo: AP*

The goal is to advance the "[great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation](#)". Correct me if you think I'm wrong, but except for aliens on other planets, hasn't almost everyone been knocked out by how rejuvenated China is already? Too much more of it, and we may all keel over from fatigue just watching its roar of rejuvenation. Anti-communists of the world: curb your dogmatism.

To be sure, China's success is less attributable to puritanical fealty to Marxist economics than to its revisionism. With the pragmatism and energies of the Chinese people a happy given, the nation was rejuvenated by sensibly ripping pages out of other

texts (by Adam Smith, and so on.) and clipping them onto their planning boards. Let no cat, whether black or white, be denied the opportunity to nail a mouse.

Xi himself added unmistakable nuances last week at the Great Hall of the People with the insistence that necessary variations from Marxist orthodoxy were not ideological apostasy but natural progression. "Unceasingly promoting the Sinification and modernisation of Marxism is totally correct," he said.

In his waning years, Marx himself restlessly worried whether his own orthodoxies would stand the test of future facts.



*(People pose in front of a bronze statue of Karl Marx in his hometown Trier, Germany. The statue was created by Chinese artist Wu Weishan and donated by China to mark the 200th birth anniversary of the German philosopher. China's success is less attributable to puritanical fealty to Marxist economics than to its revisionism. Photo: Reuters )*

Xi is the governor of a real and rapidly rejuvenating place, not some ideologist floating atop cumulus clouds of Platonic ideals. If the legendary Deng Xiaoping had never fled power corridors to get out and see the real world for himself, he might never have understood that the problem with the Chinese economy was not that it was too Chinese but that it was too statist and – in the entrepreneurial sense – anti-Chinese. That led to a programmatic flexibility that made history.

Similarly, America abandoned severe ideological conservatism when the nation almost collapsed from the Great Depression – then rejuvenated itself with a raft of social programmes. While no Sweden, America tends to avoid dogmatism about adhering to

Darwinian economics (that is, every cat for himself) by accepting a touch of tactical socialism here and there. In more ways than one, Trump, though no tactical genius, as was Deng, may begin to see the enduring value of productive pragmatism.

Alas, the current leaders of both great nations feel the need to fire up the troops – Xi with a vision different from a purely Western one; Trump with a pitch different from a purely liberal ([Barack Obama](#)) one. But too much fire from either, though it warms up the fan base, could trigger a trans-Pacific fuse that rocks the bilateral relationship. Leaders set a tone that trickles down and is felt at great distances – in ways not always predictable.



*(Supporters of the National Rifle Association stand and applaud President Donald Trump during his speech at the association's annual convention in Dallas, on May 4. Trump's support for the organisation has won him fans. Photo: Dallas Morning News / TNS)*

Take the case of Djibouti, a developing East African country that, with fewer than a million inhabitants, today hosts two notable foreign bases. One is Chinese, and the other American – just a few miles apart. And so, in the past few weeks, if we are to believe the Pentagon (sometimes you can), the Chinese military has been aiming their on-board lasers at American cockpits with annoying accuracy. In one laser incident, a pair of American pilots allegedly sustained light injuries; in high dudgeon, the US government [fired off to Beijing an official iteration of irritation](#).

The Sino-US relationship is not a job for showboats on either side

But surely – I say to a source who knows her Djibouti from her Beijing – hot-headed Americans pilots occasionally put on their own laser show, no? “I’m sure we do too but the Chinese pull out their cameras all the time!”

Last week, the American trade delegation visiting Beijing was striking the [tough-guy pose](#) with [ineffectiveness](#). To impress voters at home, it threw on the table a rude [roster of demands](#) that almost got them a rocket-rickshaw to the airport. Like Chinese pilots rubbing it in, American negotiators make themselves look foolish when they act childish. The [Sino-US relationship](#) is not a job for showboats on either side.

It is difficult to understand the pressing need of the world’s two greatest powers to restore greatness and rejuvenation when they have plenty of that already. What they don’t have enough of is working together.

Now more than ever, macho displays of firmness and/or surety of ideology is not what is needed to manage our future. Even a wiser Marx would show flexibility – not to mention Adam Smith.

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*This article appeared in the South China Morning Post print edition as: Perilous pursuits*