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## Trump's mind and the reality show within: why China should worry

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**Tom Plate**



*Tom Plate says the self-regarding mind of Donald Trump, as revealed in a recent impromptu interview, proves again that he is no Obama. And that adds a new layer of uncertainty to the US relationship with China*

Recent US presidents, at least in public, would speak of China only after the vetting of practically every word, as if an errant one might prove seriously chancy. The bilateral relationship is too complex and freighted with too many tensions, and the stakes too high, to have it otherwise.

President Donald Trump is different and, in the back and forth between China and the United States, this lays on more uncertainty to the bilateral relationship. It's as if the entire world – as one hypothesis making the rounds has it – exists within the confines of his own mind, so that, when that mind is turned off, as it were, the world sort of ceases to exist.

Absurd as that may seem, there is ample precedent for this view in classical philosophy. Bishop George Berkeley (1685-1753) defined reality as nothing more than a product of, and dependent on, the human mind – for what can really be said to exist outside the mind? Here in the quaint words of this landmark Irish philosopher: “All the choir of heaven and furniture of earth – in a word, all those bodies which compose the frame of the world – have not any subsistence without a mind.”

The self-regarding mind of Mr Trump could be said to mirror this. Last week, a *New York Times* reporter caught him in a Berkeleyan mindset, as it were. The interview covered tout le monde, even though its duration was but a half-hour.

Zhongnanhai carefully noted that the “reality show” inside the president’s mind did not exclude China, nor its president, Xi Jinping.

Said Trump from the Grill Room of his Mar-a-Lago hotel: “Yeah, China ... I like very much President Xi. He treated me better than anybody’s ever been treated in the history of China ... One of the great two days of anybody’s life and memory having to do with China. He’s a friend of mine, he likes me, I like him, we have a great chemistry together. [But] China’s hurting us very badly on trade, but I have been soft on China because the only thing more important to me than trade is war. OK? ... I’m disappointed.

“You know that they found oil going into [North Korea] ... Oil is going into North Korea . That wasn’t my deal! ... My deal was that ... they’re a nuclear menace, so we have to be very tough ... If they’re helping me with North Korea, I can look at trade a little bit differently, at least for a period of time ... China has a tremendous power over North Korea. Far greater than anyone knows.”



**Donald J.  
Trump**

@realDonaldTrump

Caught RED HANDED - very disappointed that China is allowing oil to go into North Korea. There will never be a friendly solution to the North Korea problem if this continues to happen!

8:24 AM - Dec 28, 2017

24,176

32,106

125,820

That has been Mr Trump's persistent view; but, just as persistently, Beijing has warned the world that its leverage over its neighbour is easy to overestimate (Americans who dismiss this Chinese assertion out of hand might reflect on our own limited leverage over Mexico – maybe Beijing doesn't want to have to build a wall someday?).

For its part, the Hong Kong government, of the very special administrative region of China, said it is taking serious note of allegations of Hong Kong-based tankers being involved in midnight oil-to-Pyongyang subterfuge.

In matters of this gravity, the foreign ministry in Beijing responded by calling for "calm" – a boilerplate response of late that makes one wonder if the ministry in Beijing has anyone (or two) in mind. North Korea, after all, is a nuclear power, its leader a bombastic bully.

As for the China on Trump's mind: over the centuries, Western philosophy made a virtual profession

of tony quarrels about the so-called mind-body problem. But not all philosophers were reverent: Gilbert Ryle would scoff at the very idea of an independent mind "thing" – derided in his memorable phrase about "the myth of the ghost in the machine". Of course, this strong-minded English philosopher (1900-1976) had not encountered our current president; or the experience might have made him believe in ghosts.

An American novelist once asserted that the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.

Unexamined is the question of how to rate an intelligence that may lack the ability to hold just one unopposed coherent idea.

On the evidence available, the mind of our American president, who is to mark his first full year in office soon, tends towards the blunt-binary – "they" are either for us or against us; "they" are either cooperative (as we define it) or are rudely non-compliant. You may have noticed this kind of mind soaks in self-congratulation ("better than anybody's ever been treated in the history of China"), almost bathing in a buoyant mentality that talks only to itself, as if to minimise contradiction or interruption.

With that, intelligence agencies assigned to psychological profiling of leaders now have their hands full, if not their minds blown.

After all, Trump's predecessor proved much the easier psychology to scope out: always valuing the rational, rarely preferring melodramatic action, almost even predictable (perhaps to a fault) – a mind shaped more by the mechanisms of law-school analytics than the showmanship of the pitches of the American salesman.

Mr Donald J Trump is the opposite of former president Barack H Obama. In terms of the back and forth between China and the US, this is a difference that will add a new layer of uncertainty to the world's most pivotal bilateral relationship.

**Columnist Tom Plate, author of "Yo-Yo Diplomacy", is Loyola Marymount University's Distinguished Scholar of Asian and Pacific Affairs, and the vice-president of the Pacific Century Institute**

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