

By Invitation

Treat China and Trump with respect in 2017

As a price-taker in the global world order, Singapore needs to work with all powers and leaders



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For The Straits Times

"The Chinese government is a despicable, parasitic, brutal, brass-knuckled, crass, callous, amoral, ruthless and totally totalitarian imperialist power that reigns over the world's leading cancer factory, its most prolific propaganda mill and the biggest police state and prison on the face of the earth."

This is the Guardian's distillation of Dr Peter Navarro's views on China from his writings and statements. Who is Dr Peter Navarro? United States President Donald Trump has appointed him as the head of the new National Trade Council. It doesn't take a political genius to surmise that with Mr Trump making such provocative appointments, US-China relations will go through a rough patch in 2017.

So what should Singapore do?

We should treat China with respect, perhaps even special respect, in 2017.

Why? 2017 will be a testing year for China. It is in our national interest to show some understanding for the difficulties China will experience this year.

CHINA BASHING

China will have a difficult time if President Trump carries out even half of the actions he has promised to take against China. He has threatened to label China as a "currency manipulator". He also said he might impose a punitive 45 per cent tariff.

Most dangerously, he earlier threatened to review the "one China" policy of all the previous US administrations, where the US acknowledges Beijing's position that there is only one China, and that

Taiwan is part of that. Last December, he showed a lack of respect for the "one China" policy by accepting a congratulatory phone call from President Tsai Ing-wen of Taiwan. This week, though, on Thursday night Washington time, Mr Trump agreed to honour the longstanding "one China" policy during his first phone call with Chinese President Xi Jinping.

This is welcome because many Americans privately believe that for the US to act against China, as President Trump earlier threatened, will be dangerous and even counterproductive. Yet, virtually no major American figure will defend China publicly. No American politician gets rewarded for praising China. Instead, all American politicians try to outdo themselves in their criticism of China. Last year, all the leading presidential candidates – including Mrs Hillary Clinton, Mr Ted Cruz and Mr Bernie Sanders – engaged in severe China bashing.

This American political tradition of China bashing is, of course, reinforced by the mainstream Anglo-Saxon media. Anybody in Singapore who believes that the Anglo-Saxon media is fair, balanced and objective in its reporting on China should have his head examined. It is biased against China on many counts.

Firstly, there is an ideological bias. The idea that a non-democratic society could be successful in improving the livelihoods of more than a billion people is too heretical a thought to be contemplated. The Anglo-Saxon media will readily publish articles claiming that the Chinese political system is fragile and about to break up. They will publish almost no articles stating that the system may indeed be strong and resilient.

Secondly, there is an economic bias. American tech giants Google, Facebook and Apple are respected. Chinese tech giants Baidu, Renren and Xiaomi don't get the same respect.

Thirdly, and most insidiously, there is a deep cultural bias against non-Western cultures. As I said in

my response in the magazine *Foreign Affairs* in September/October 1993 – more than 20 years ago – to the famous essay *The Clash Of Civilizations* by Samuel Huntington: "Few in the West are aware that the West is responsible for aggravating turbulence among the more than two billion people living in Islamic and Chinese civilisations. Instead, conjuring up images of the two Asian hordes that Western minds fear most – two forces that invaded Europe, the Muslims and the Mongols – Huntington posits a Confucian-Islamic connection against the West."

CHINA WORLD VIEW

Singaporeans are particularly vulnerable to be influenced by these negative Western biases against China since our newspapers reprint many articles on China by the Anglo-Saxon media, without noting or highlighting that these articles are inherently biased and unbalanced – though, to be fair, *The Straits Times* periodically publishes viewpoints that convey a more China-oriented world view.

In an effort to counter this biased and unbalanced coverage of China, I decided to speak on the subject of "What happens when China becomes No. 1?" when I was asked to deliver the Albert H. Gordon lecture in Harvard almost two years ago in March 2015. I know that many leading Western minds believe that the world will become a much darker place when China becomes No. 1. So, I decided to explain in my lecture why it would not become darker.

The key point is to understand the main objectives of the Chinese leaders. Are they trying to promote communism? Or are they trying to

revive Chinese civilisation? I believe that the latter is the real goal. Hence, the Chinese Communist Party should be seen as the "Chinese Civilisation Party". If this is the goal, China does not present a threat to the West.

Fortunately for me, this Harvard lecture has been viewed 172,000 times on YouTube. Since YouTube is not available in China, most of the viewers would have been those living outside China. I know that many of my fellow Singaporeans have viewed it and passed it on to their friends. Several have thanked me for providing an alternative to the traditional Western bias against China.

If China wants any consolation about the negative coverage it gets in the Anglo-Saxon media, it should compare itself with the coverage Mr Trump gets in the same media.

There is one thing that China and Mr Trump share in common. It is considered almost heretical to write positive articles about either China or Mr Trump. Indeed, many New York Times readers were truly puzzled by the election of President Donald Trump, as it had published only negative articles on him. And it never gave credence to the possibility of him winning.

So, let me conclude with another controversial point. We should also treat Mr Trump with respect.

Why? Because we live in a small state. We are price-takers, not price-makers. We have no choice on who becomes the US president. Only the Americans can choose their president. When they do so, we have to accept and respect their choice, even if the chosen candidate has criticised Singapore. Small states must develop a thick skin. Even a relatively large state like Canada has decided that it must be

pragmatic. A recent New York Times report noted that even though Mr Trump's "personal style and policies are widely disliked by Canadians", Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, despite his personal beliefs, "swiftly turned the machinery of Canada's government towards finding a way to get along with Mr Trump".

We should emulate Canada: Ignore rhetoric and focus on interests. There are many good reasons for working cooperatively with China. There are equally good reasons for working cooperatively with the US. We should maintain good relations with both.

Last month, in my commentary in these pages, I highlighted the fact that Singaporeans should prepare themselves psychologically for a rough ride in US-China relations. In the same issue of *The Straits Times*, I was impressed to see that on the same day that Chinese President Xi received a call by visiting Vietnamese President Tran Dai Quang, there was also a visit to Hanoi by outgoing American Secretary of State John Kerry.

Vietnam has lived beside China for 2,000 years. Indeed, it was occupied by China for 1,000 years. Yet, despite the fact that the Vietnamese face many more challenges in dealing with both China and the US, they are able to maintain good relations with both.

Vietnam may provide us a useful model to follow.

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