

A case for peace in the Pacific

China, US need to recognise each other as being politically different but not strategically incompatible

In the Middle of China's Future: Tom Plate on Asia

Marshall Cavendish Editions, Singapore, 2014, 452 pages.

By **ASAD LATIF**
FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

THE veteran American journalist Tom Plate's writings on Asia have contributed significantly to raising the region's profile in his home country.

His books on Asian leaders such as Mr Lee Kuan Yew and Dr Mahathir Mohamad sought to explain the reasons for their prominence in political and cultural terms that are not always familiar to an American audience.

But Plate has also gone beyond political elites to amplify the voices of ordinary Asians, to show how they are coming to terms with the dislocation and change that affect Americans as well in a globalised world.

This book contains his thoughts on China in a collection of articles penned over two decades.

Looking at the present, it argues that both America and China must do much more to avoid war. The fact that this is the purpose of the book shows how far Sino-American relations have deteriorated from the time when the relationship was the bedrock of international peace and stability.

What is it that the United States and China should do? The crux of the book's argument is that each country must recognise the other as being politically different but not strategically incompatible.

As a liberal, Plate recognises that China is not exactly run by liberals - any more than the United States always is. But he is also a realist. He is prepared to judge a system on its own historical terms so long as it does not deny its citizens fundamental rights, or undermine the global order built out of ruinous world wars and regional conflicts.

Despite Washington's devotion to the propagation of ideas of democracy drawn from its own culture and history, Plate avers that China is not fated to be an adversary of the United States.

Instead, China will change from within as it adjusts to the need to function in a global commons. What would be disastrous, he suggests, would be foreign attempts to change China's domestic behaviour.

Having made this point, however, Plate appeals on page after page to Beijing to treat its political opponents with respect, not because the West demands this but because the Chinese deserve it.

These are not novel arguments, but the strength of the book lies in the way the case is made consistently over 20 years, during which China's relations with the West witnessed several downturns. These

will that Plate rightly asks America to display towards it. China's assertiveness in the South China Sea dispute creates doubts about its intentions even as its status as a primary stakeholder of the global economy is increasingly recognised.

Like other states, China has both the right and the responsibility to protect its people from chaos and destabilisation - two ancient curses with which the Chinese are more acquainted than many other peoples. Thus, Beijing is justified in dealing with terrorism in Xinjiang.

But when China behaves imperiously towards smaller states on its maritime rim, it dilutes the case made by thinkers like Plate who want China to take its rightful place in the scheme of things.

Plate asks his readers to take the long view of history. As Professor Kishore Mahbubani, Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, writes in his foreword to the book, "Tom Plate is one of the few Western journalists who have gotten the world's biggest story right," - that story being the rise of China.

I hope that China will pay Plate the compliment of allowing him to continue to be right.

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The writer is a former Straits Times journalist.

The book is available at Kinokuniya at \$32.60 before GST.



A deck chief of the PLA ship Peace Ark speaking on his radio as a US Navy UH60 Seahawk prepares to take off from the Chinese vessel during last month's multi-national military exercise - Rimpac - in Hawaii. PHOTO: REUTERS

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of the book lies in the way the case is made consistently over 20 years, during which China's relations with the West witnessed several downturns. These included the confrontation of the mid-1990s, when the US Seventh Fleet intervened to keep the peace in the face of a Chinese military threat to Taiwan. Never, even during the height of such crises, did Plate waver in his commitment to the need for trust between two of the world's greatest powers.

For example, during a time of heightened tensions between Washington and Beijing in 1999, he warned: "It's not clear whether a whole new Cold War is in the wind. But politicians who would use the China issue for domestic advantage may burden future generations with a wholly unnecessary trans-Pacific cold war... Are we so sure that a new cold war with China is necessary? Is the current Chinese menace that threatening?"

A postscript added to the article written for the book adds: "The ending (of China being seen as a menace) raised a key question back in 1999. It is still a key question today."

In making a principled case for peace in the Pacific, Plate acts as a true friend of Asia. He is credible because he writes with the moral energy of a learned journalist intent on presenting a complex truth.

However, the question at the end of the book is whether a rising China will reciprocate the good-

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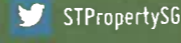
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