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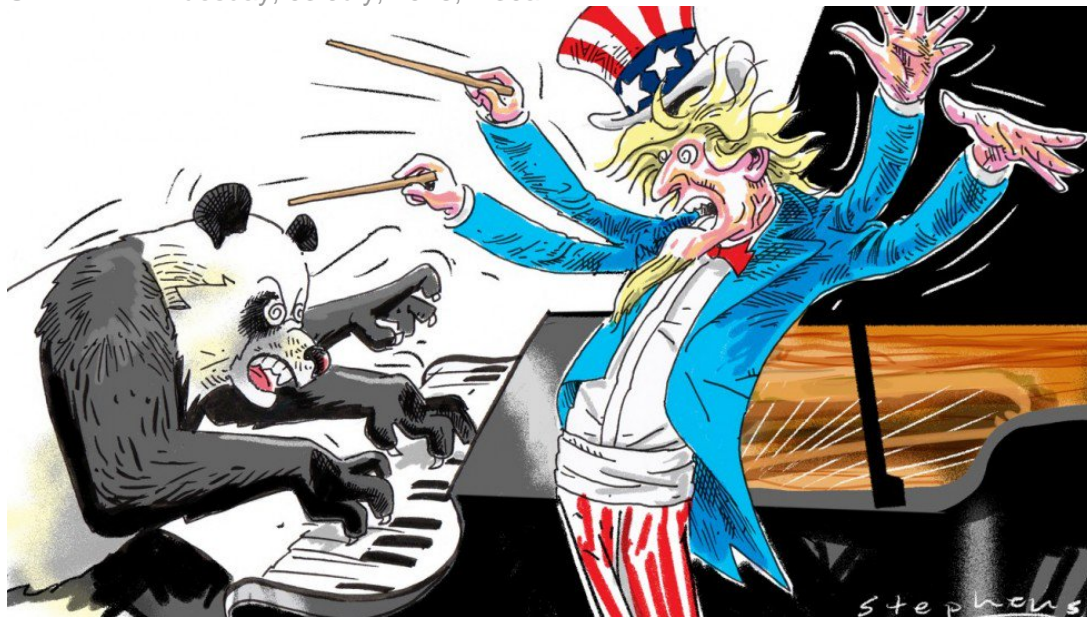
The danger of speed: why China and the US must learn to watch first, then respond

Tom Plate says major disagreements take time to work through, yet the two powers appear to be rushing into an unwanted confrontation with their moves and counter-moves on trade, the South China Sea, Taiwan and other issues.

The pace of change must slow down

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Tom Plate

How best to make beautiful music? Loud or soft? Fast or slow? How best to compose a new world order – loud or soft? Fast or slow?

In orchestral history, in 1962, superstar tensions surfaced at New York's Carnegie Hall. The egos of rising pianist-powerhouse Glenn Gould and the well-established superpower, New York Philharmonic conductor/composer Leonard Bernstein, clashed over how best to perform the scheduled *Brahms*

Piano Concerto No 1, a piece in the classical canon that is nearly an hour long.

Headstrong pianists tend to bang it out as if rushing to catch a flight. Bernstein, though no mindless speed freak, was more than hip to the presto, but, on stage, just minutes before the curtain went up, he dramatically informed the audience of their deep discord.

Gould, the keyboard virtuoso noted for his idiosyncratic interpretations (and stubbornness), wanted to slow the tempo of the piece to a crawl, Bernstein implied, while going on to admit that the performance would have to be done Gould's way, if the show were to go on at all.

Today – in tribute to both Bernstein's flexibility and Gould's virtuosity – a slow-motion rendition is valued as an inspiring way to play the piece. Speed isn't always everything. And, indeed, sometimes it isn't anything positive at all: especially these days with the re-orchestration of our world order, which has been reforming itself since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the economic revival of China, and the sudden self-casting of the [United States](#) as grumpy nation-in-chief.

What a Bernstein-Gould analogy proposes is that we try slowing down before speeding ahead as usual – that we catch our breath, think things over, try something entirely different, be a little cautious.

Speed, as the saying goes, can kill. China is moving forward at unaccustomed speed. It smooths sea outcrops into landing strips, adds new bases, plans to belt out transcontinental roads, and amends its constitution to permit its leader to stay presumably as long as he wants.

Almost the only thing China is not doing is calming nerves, and, outside the mainland, some of its policies seem harmonious to fewer ears. To be sure, that's nothing compared to the coarse cacophony of the new US nationalistic rampage.

Long-standing allies can hardly believe their ears; veteran US diplomats – embarrassed, dispirited – are running towards retirement villages. For its part, Beijing [tells visiting US Secretary of Defence James Mattis](#) that it covets no one else's territory but righteously refuses to retreat "one inch" from ancestral inheritances – as if definitions alone could erase sincere and genuine ambiguity about who owns what.

If the world order is to become bipolar in a functional manner – and a new bipolarity is what many political scientists see coming for us – it would help if the two major powers would not risk triggering "international bipolar disorder" with new policies so fast and furious that we won't know what hit us until it's too late to figure out what we got.

Our two bipolar leaders seem unable to mount a sustainable "charm offensive" that doesn't strike some nation or other as offensive. Consider this: from Australia – a notable American ally – comes an authoritative [Lowy Institute Poll](#) measuring the way Aussies look at the world.

A "whom do we trust" chart is offered and at the top are the United Kingdom (not surprisingly), then Japan and France (perhaps surprisingly). Further down the chart, it is revealed that Aussies trust the US to act responsibly in the world, but less than they trust India – and scarcely more than they trust China.

One might have expected China's confidence ranking to outrank America's because so many people have a higher regard for President [Xi Jinping](#)'s level of sophistication and competence than President [Donald Trump](#)'s. This might suggest to Beijing that something is not right with the way it portrays itself to the world.

And this brings us back to Brahms. China is moving terribly fast these days – on so many fronts – no doubt in part because of nightmares about the domestic risks of slowing down on any front at all. This worry cannot be dismissed as pure paranoia. Certain domestic issues have deeply negative international optics, the way the brilliant 2008 Olympics had positive ones.

[Taiwan](#) (viewed on the mainland as a purely domestic issue) is an example. Under what conditions would Beijing unleash force to panda-hug the island to a re-dock with the mainland? The very fact that this question is anything but an uncommon one in the high councils of the Chinese government suggests the perilous fragility of regional stability. A sudden thrust by either Beijing one way or by the US Indo-Pacific Command (formerly the US Pacific Command) the other could unravel everything.

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China should not be begrudged its success. The US is wrong to believe an economic downturn would make the government more pliable. Americans who root for “Communist China” to fail should instead pray not to live long enough to see such a dumb wish come to pass.

Washington and Beijing need to work together to slow the pace of change and consult, behind the diplomatic curtain, with mutual respect, growing trust and mature patience, almost everything of mutual interest. They can make beautiful geopolitical music together only if they accept that neither alone knows the full score.

[Trump’s trade war](#), for example, is idiotic; Xi’s persistence in the [South China Sea](#) adds to volatility, at least as long as Trump is president.

Last point about the Bernstein-Gould episode: because they respected each other, despite profound and sincere differences, the two musical superpowers wound up producing something special and unexpected. The key metaphorical lesson for our time is this: the current global tempo is too torrid. Slow it down.

Columnist and Loyola Marymount University professor Tom Plate is the author of *Yo-Yo Diplomacy*, a recent book on the US-China relationship