

This opinion piece by PCI Vice President, Tom Plate, appeared in the South China Morning Post on Tuesday, November 167 2020.



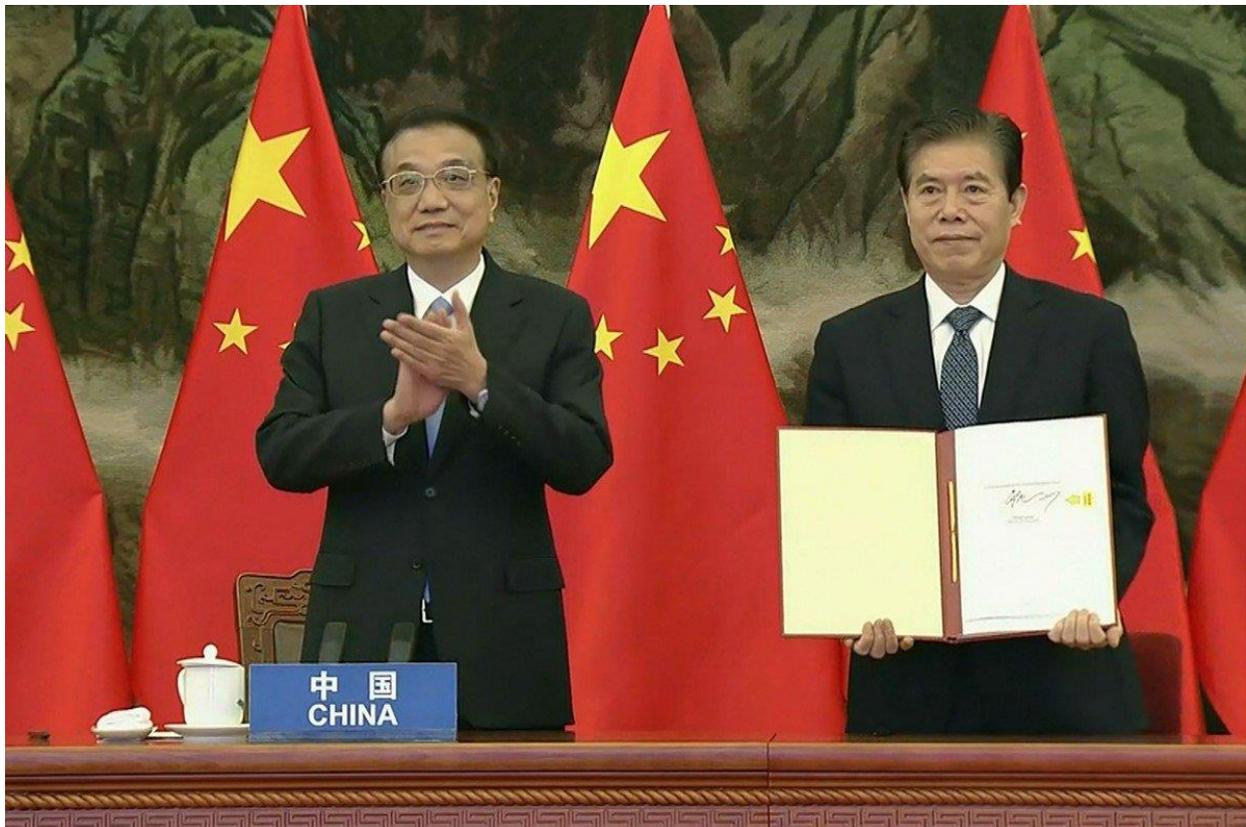
US needs to start seeing China not as an enemy but a contributor to peace and prosperity



Tom Plate

- After decades of neglect and bad choices, if the United States now concludes it has a China problem in Asia, it is in part of its own making
- Now is the time for Biden to rebuild the State Department, make the right appointments, re-engage and reassess foreign policy

Published: 3:30am, 17 Nov, 2020



Premier Li Keqiang applauds as Commerce Minister Zhong Shan holds up the agreement during the signing ceremony for the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership trade pact on Sunday. China's growing importance in and integration with the Asia-Pacific region requires the United States to reassess its foreign policy. Photo: AFP

The truth about China's growing importance in Asia is that, without America's help, the improvement of its position would not have happened as quickly. Perhaps it began in 1997 with the collapse of the Thai

baht, when Washington did not rescue an Asian nation that had been loyal to its Cold War campaign against communism.

It left the clean-up to cold-hearted institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, whose dogmatism exacerbated the region's suffering, while halting Tokyo's bid to charter a big, stabilising regional bank.

Then came 2008. While Beijing was orchestrating a largely gorgeous Olympics, Washington looked away while Wall Street's own "wolf warriors" went to town on the world and plunged it into financial darkness. An alert Asia was taking it all in.

My charge sheet is long enough, but I almost forgot one other big thing: the general insolence of the Trump administration and, specifically, the policy primitiveness of the trade war with China. For the foreseeable future, this idiocy will stand out as dumb and dumber.

If the United States now concludes it has a China problem in Asia, isn't it in part of its own making? Why blame Beijing for not wanting to ignore a vacuum?

As an American journalist reporting on Asia continuously since 1996, I cannot possibly be asked to view all this passively. The lost possibilities are too haunting. The America I love is seen as if sleeping through history.

Instead of being able to observe America at its best – and when at its best, America can be awesome and exemplary – I am pressed against the cold glass pane of a yawning black hole, a brain drain in the Asia-Pacific region of America's international policy. I am not sure a path of escape exists to permit a timely return to a properly balanced policy.

This is not to deny in any way China's achievements. They are impressive, from its Belt and Road Initiative to its wise ongoing investment in international institution diplomacy. True, the Chinese pivot to Asia and the world has not been entirely angelic. The line between visionary largesse and pure self-interest is not always easy to discern.

Like the US in Europe last century, China is largely a success but will suffer its share of stumbles as its moves out into the global jungle economically. Elephants can be clumsy and intelligent at the same time. The basic charted direction is anything but idiotic, though.

“Like the US in Europe last century, China is largely a success but will suffer its share of stumbles as its moves out into the global jungle economically”

As my friend and colleague Bill Overholt put it last week in the “Myths and Realities in Sino-American Relations” online conference at Harvard University's Fairbank Centre for Chinese Studies: “Engagement with China is the biggest single reason that the world has experienced half a century of big power peace and the most extraordinary increase in prosperity in global history.”

The most visible tragic dimension is Beijing's demonstrable military build-up. Why? Having observed the fall of the Soviet Union, laden with little else to show the world besides a monstrous military-industrial complex, does China propose to proceed on a similar course of down-the-drain resource commitment?

No doubt the American superpower game plan found resonance in a modern China tempered by such heartwarming notions as “Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun”. More than 75 years after its triumph in the Pacific, the arms of America’s military octopus still drape over Asia as if holding on desperately for relevance.

Having won, let us not return home but stay put as if another major war is just around the bend. Has the American effort to balance China had the unintended consequence of helping Beijing conjure up one big ping-pong table as the field of play on which all shots from the US side require an equally fierce return?

And so, along with the exit of US President Donald Trump and the entrance of Joe Biden , now is the time for America to get Asia right. The immediate steps are plain to see. Rebuild the State Department, which has been starved of funds and White House warmth these past few years. Make great appointments at key levels. Who becomes Biden’s secretary of state is crucial, but so is who becomes assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs.

Re-engage multilaterally but without apology for the disarray of the past four years; people understand a political pandemic. Even with all this, a grand re-conceptualisation is necessary. Is China a permanent enemy or a contributor – though not without tears from time to time – to global peace, prosperity and stability?

It is worth noting that over the weekend in Singapore, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership came closer to realisation. Fifteen governments across the Asia-Pacific agreed to take the pact back home for approval.

It includes Australia, China, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand and the 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. India took a pass. Take a wild guess as to which other big nation was not involved.

Clinical Professor Tom Plate is founder of Asia Media International at Loyola Marymount University, where he is tenured to the Asian and Asian American Studies Department