

This opinion piece by PCI Vice President, Professor Tom Plate, appeared in the South Morning China Post, Tuesday, January 31, 2017.

With hawkish Navarro as US trade tsar, it is up to China to show diplomatic restraint

Tom Plate calls on China to focus on a peaceful rise and avoid overreacting to provocations from the Trump White House, especially its National Trade Council head

Not far down the freeway from my own university is the University of California – Irvine, for years the faculty home of one of the West Coast’s better-known China-watchers/worriers. He is the controversy-prone professor Peter Navarro, of the Paul Merage School of Business.

For the foreseeable future, though, you won’t find him in classrooms lecturing or clinking cappuccinos at the faculty club, joking about yield curves. Instead, you’ll find him in Washington – as head of the White House National Trade Council. And this is a concern.

Although technically his title is a nerdy “assistant to the President of the United States for trade and industrial policy”, currently he has been given to shoulder the monster moniker “US trade tsar”.

Pity this solitary man! American trade policy is the messy product of multiple economic and political forces, not to mention craven self-interests. But even if, in the end, Navarro proves far from a tsar, right now he is the hottest professor in the Donald Trump administration.

His academic work is neither solidly mainstream nor especially celebrated, but often bruted about by critics as that of an ideologue rather than empiricist. By his own descriptions, in fact, he would appear to almost welcome the buzz of negativity.

According to Navarro : “The role of government is to help a nation’s businesses compete by providing technological assistance, subsidies and protectionist measures such as tariffs and quotas.” For many Americans – not just academics – protectionism has an unpleasant historical association with the Great Depression of 1929-1939.

So stay alert: “trade tsar” Navarro might well become for Trump what Donald Rumsfeld was to George W. Bush, as the former president’s warmongering defence secretary.

Navarro is a “panda hugger” in the exact opposite worst-case sense of the trope, sometimes wrongly applied to those trying with near-pacifist passion to steer clear of war with China. Rather, it’s as if he’d like to hug the utter life out of Beijing.

His 2011 book (with Greg Autry), *Death by China: Confronting the Dragon – a Call to Action*, was a catalogue of horrors. I found it unbalanced, in every sense of the word.

His recent book – *Crouching Tiger: What China's Militarism Means for the World* – seemed far less the comic book, but offered the perspective of the prosecutor trying to assure the jury that his insistence on the death penalty for the defendant is solely in the interests of justice.

Navarro is far more to be feared by China than loved. While *Crouching Tiger* is well informed, it is also wrong-headed. Yet, it is also extremely easy to understand – and this is where his Trump-type talent comes in.

Most economists write with the delicate touch of crane operators and communicate with the verve of the comatose: by the time sentences come to their tortuous end, you want to bury the author, period.

Not so with Navarro, who is also a popular public speaker. He is exactly the sort who could grab control of the new American president's ear – and perhaps even the American peoples' – and not let go.

For China, this could present a tough dilemma. It could either try to utterly ignore the “trade tsar”, or blast him with propaganda at its worst, while point by point trying to refute all his nattering negativity. Neither tactic holds promise.

Navarro is capable of making a grand run through the Washington TV talk show line like a practised chorus-line hooper, aiming to dazzle the unknowing with verbal footwork; or even, to be fair, raising a point or two whose validity even China's behind-the-scenes policy wonks might privately acknowledge. The answer to the arguments of this new Trumpeter of Limited Trade, it seems to me, is simple but not likely.

Build fewer “hard-kill” missiles, “Mighty Dragon” fighters, warships, nuclear ballistic-missile and diesel subs, poorly disguised surveillance vessels and the rest of the expensive hard stuff. Accept that you've reached the upper limit of your island-hopping and sandy-shoal upgrading. Make friends and influence neighbours.

For China, the Trump epoch will prove an ordeal, especially if this first week of the new administration is anything to go by. React to every taunt and non-truth and bite at every baited hook, and before long your head will be spinning and your policy unhinged. Accept that this man is, pardon the very unoriginal phrase, a bull in the China shop. Stay on high ground and negotiate skilfully. Above all, improve your international profile with a thoroughly upgraded public diplomacy. Sack all your top propagandists; start from scratch; build on your cultural depth; be elegant, not grating. Help keep the world from war.

Sure, Trump doesn't consciously want war with China. But he operates with a very limited skill set, and he is predictably unpredictable.

More and more, the burden will seem to land on China to calm the superpower seas. Show the world you are up to it.

“Across the broad swathe of world history,” notes Navarro in *Crouching Tiger*, “in fully 11 of the 15 times since 1500 that a rising power like China faced an established power like the United States, war resulted more than 70 per cent of the time.”

What can China do to save Sino-US ties with Donald Trump in charge?

Don't become history's next tragic statistic, Beijing. Return to "peaceful rising" and mean it. Over time, well-established US institutions, including the courts, media and even Congress, will gather themselves into a kind of multi-tasking containment policy to blunt the worst of Trump. Over time, things will get better. Don't overreact now.

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Keep the peace