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Opinion

With a trade war truce, China must make good on its promise to the US to review its economic policies

- Tom Plate says Beijing needs the help of its think tanks to amend the policies and practices that are unfair to its trading partners, including the US, and this means allowing its scholars the freedom to explore ideas and solutions



Tom Plate

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Illustration: Craig Stephens

Fragile ceasefires are not the sharpest knife in diplomacy's kitchen drawer, but they are better than abandoning a fire and allowing it to roar on. The tariff war that US President Donald Trump ignited on the hefty kindling of China's self-styled "socialism with Chinese characteristics" has been put on slow burn for the time being. Further tariffs are on hold while teams of American and Chinese negotiators slog through a nightmare list of trade issues.

Will this lowering of the temperature on trade tariffs ease the tension in US-China relations in other respects? Tariffs by themselves are not an end point but rather an intermediate "ways and means" of projecting strategic sovereign intent and interest. Trying to inflict pain on China economically will not ease the economic problems in America, but could viciously intensify political fissures between the two countries, as mutual trust is eroded.

The Western news media won't say it, but in fact President Xi Jinping's government is to be applauded for implicitly agreeing to take a long look at how its structures of trade and economic policy cause needless misunderstanding, irritation and even paranoia, including and especially with the US.

If a good-faith review by the Chinese government and its many think tanks yields the thoroughness and incisiveness of which China is capable, Beijing will not impair its "Chinese dream" in the least: "containing" its own brand of economic nationalism will only add to its appeal as a world power.

To this end, China's impressive army of think tanks, which in Xi's official rhetoric at least are accorded importance and respect, must be free to explore ideas. Without a central-government green light to play with

ideas, rather than simply recycle or repackage already approved ones, the country's policy intellectuals will sink into mediocrity and irrelevance, especially if the Communist Party is going to peck away at every little thing like some old hen.

Let a thousand ideas bloom by encouraging (not crowding and defenestrating) the bloomers. Let them tend their gardens without the government always proposing to do the weeding. Let them take chances and mix it up with their Western interlocutors. Both sides have things to learn.

Xi's China is truly at an identity crossroads. The great potential uptick in China's global profile will not come from flexing military muscle, despite its naval and air build-up, but from belief in a steady, authentic press of soft power. Cultural diplomacy is needed: too much Sparta and not enough Athens will lock China into future wars, not enduring peace.

Maybe I put too much on brains over brawn but China's trump card, as it were, will be its core of universities and think tanks, not its corps of ZTZ-99 tanks and all that. China may field as many think tanks as the US and some of them may be as good as our best (Rand, Centre for Strategic and International Studies, Brookings, and so on).

Is Trump getting the best advice? Would he recognise it if it were in front of him? He would have been wiser not to have tariff-baited in the first place; but perhaps the president is beginning to sense that down that bumpy tariff road lurks the nightmare prospect of economic warfare that might never end. Combative by nature though he is, he could hardly be a fan of that. Not all tunnels end in light.

This past weekend offered the welcome reminder that America breeds statesmen as well as cowboys. Sad though the news of the death, at 94, of the 41st US president was, it wafted over the country like a layer of perfume: George H.W. Bush was overall a very good president, particularly on the issue of China relations. To be sure, few tears will be shed by Iraqis, who will never forgive him for fathering George W. Bush, the 43rd president who ordered the dreadful Iraq invasion that killed countless people.

In the US, the news all but drowned out the Trump tariff drama in Argentina.

Bush Senior's public image was not that of the Texas cowboy (as with "W") but of the New England (Kennebunkport) gentleman. Bush Senior did not become a statesman only after receiving the White House "Leader of the Free World" makeover upon election in 1989, but was born that way.

Exemplary was his sensitive service in China between 1974 and 1975 as chief US liaison officer in Beijing. There, his respect for the Chinese grew by the day. Later on, China was to reap benefits: as president, Bush Senior fought hard inside the Washington Beltway against a simplistic, holier-than-thou reaction to the 1989 Tiananmen tragedy, and in its wake secretly dispatched plenipotentiaries to Beijing to underscore the American commitment to relationship stability.

His support for proper trade terms with China (then dubbed "Most Favoured Nation") prompted him to deftly deflect the thoughtless anti-China bellowing in his own party; and he'd invariably shoot off personally inscribed notes (I have one) to journalists who supported his administration's not-then-trendy position on China. The professionalism of his efforts helped pave the way for China's Rubicon-crossing to the World Trade Organisation.

Still, in fairness to the Trump team in Buenos Aires, it's not easy negotiating with Beijing in the middle of the current Chinese churn. But surely meetings of high quality never hurt. America's president, for all his mounting troubles back home in the US, deserves credit for this one – as does China's Xi, whatever his troubles back in China. Tariff de-escalation is the only move that makes sense.

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