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Opinion

From US-China trade war to ‘foreign interference’, the nation-state system is ailing and needs a reset



- Donald Trump’s call for China’s assistance to investigate a political rival, at a point when bilateral relations are at a critically low ebb, raises alarm bells, and more questions about the sustainability of the Westphalian nation-state order

Tom Plate

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A US flag on an embassy car is seen outside a hotel in Shanghai in July this year. The trade war has put Beijing in the spotlight in America, and attitudes towards China, both in and outside Washington, have turned largely negative. Photo: Reuters

There are a few, though not yet many, Republicans openly furious with beleaguered US President Donald Trump for seemingly asking Beijing to join his re-election campaign, in effect, by actively degrading a leading Democratic opponent.

The target – former vice-president Joe Biden son’s alleged business activities in China – follows the president’s call for buy-in from Ukrainian authorities for help in nailing Hunter Biden for allegedly suspect dealings there.

This latter move appears to have been the tipping point for leading Democrats assessing the plausibility of an impeachment effort. But forget Ukraine for a moment: it was the naked appeal to China last week that blew some Republican minds.

US Senator (and former Republican presidential nominee) Mitt Romney led the Republican criticism: “When the only American citizen President Trump singles out is his political opponent in the midst of the Democratic nomination process, it strains credulity to suggest that it is anything other than politically motivated.”



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Romney, though beaten by president Barack Obama in 2008, remains a significant figure. A respected Mormon, his late father was George Romney, whose own campaign for the Republican nomination against Richard Nixon imploded in 1967 when, upon returning from a “fact-finding” trip to Vietnam, he disowned his prior war support with the oddly phrased admission that he’d been “brainwashed” by US propaganda.

More than just a footnote to history, the brainwash assertion wound up destroying a good man (who I believe would have made a good president) and to this day the sad memory cautions his son against excessive public candour. Even so, this time, this Romney let fly: “brazen and unprecedented”, he said of the president’s pathetic plea for foreign assistance.

In response, Beijing could trot out the tried-and-sometimes-true trope of “non-interference in the internal affairs of other states”. Whether sincere or not, it’s a good place to hide. Rather than lose footing on the slope of another Trump ethical slip, the government ran to nominally high and dry ground, where it should stay as long as possible.

Trying to influence the coming Taiwan election is one thing (Beijing doesn’t recognise Taiwan as an independent state; neither does the UN); but mucking around with the coming US presidential election runs a huge risk with Americans, who might otherwise have a more open mind about “socialism with Chinese characteristics” than their East Coast political establishment.

In Washington, itself hardly a paragon of inspirational governance these days, China is being outfitted for the “Evil Empire” retro wardrobe – a Soviet Union with Chinese characteristics.

As so much political bull is loose in the China shop, far more Americans think they know China than can spell Ukraine, much less find it on a map. Launching the idiotic trade war has put Beijing in the spotlight and, at the same time, some of President Xi Jinping's government policies are starting to scare people half to death.

Then there is Hong Kong, almost every day shooting out hot international headlines with each new street fury, wiping out the management cred Beijing rightfully earned during the relatively tranquil years immediately after 1997.

Understandably, the Xi government blames outside, Western interference in Hong Kong's internal affairs. But who picked Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor to run the show?

Who knows what history will make of what's happening now. But let me conjecture that the epidemic of imagined and actual foreign interference, nowadays and over past decades, will be interpreted less as pure evil than evidence of a massive malfunctioning of the creaky nation-state system that, after all, hails back to 1648 and the Treaty of Westphalia.

How well has this silo-style system worked to maintain high-quality peace and security, when one or at most two silos shadow all?

The world is more bunched up and more susceptible to immediate mass extinction (nuclear war and winter) or slow-burning extinction (global warming) than ever. So perhaps the desire to intervene in an American presidential election, whatever the immediate overt motive and circumstance, may be more a psychological symptom of a kind of rejection of current unrepresentative reality than pedestrian political criminality.

Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, along with his brilliant father, was by no means the first to articulate it but has perhaps proven the most properly persistent on this point: whoever Americans elect as their president, the rest of the watching world has to live with, like him or her or not.

Xi Jinping, with obvious pride, declaims often about "Chinese civilisation" and the "Chinese dream". Not everyone loves this. Remember the famous 1997 back-and-forth from Washington, when president Bill Clinton declaimed that China's authoritarianism was "on the wrong side of history", and Chinese president Jiang Zemin politely begged to differ.

But perhaps China and America are both wrong-sided, bent towards narrow nationalism, each in their own way: political creatures stuck in the past – in the original mindset of 1648, as it were. Surely that epoch is long past; surely time is running out for the world community. And so, surely, it is past time for the kind of global system change that almost everyone says can never happen, but which many of us now have come to understand simply must. Somehow.

Clinical Professor Tom Plate, author of the Giants of Asia books, is Loyola Marymount University's Distinguished Scholar of Asian and Pacific Affairs and the Pacific Century Institute's vice-president