

Trump needs to deploy truth trap

Written by Joseph Bosco
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US President Donald Trump campaigned on a promise to end the China trade relationship that severely disadvantaged US businesses, workers and taxpayers. Once elected, he set about fulfilling that pledge with a combination of punishing economic sanctions, coupled with unstinting personal praise for Chinese President Xi Jinping (习近平).

After two years of arduous negotiations, he succeeded in securing a landmark agreement that committed China to purchase a record amount of goods from US farmers and producers. However, the deal fell far short of achieving a structural reform of the Chinese economy.

Those further reforms were on the Trump administration's agenda for "phase two" of the trade talks, which would have carried into a presumed second Trump term. If accomplished, communist China would be much further along the road to becoming a normal nation. That was then-US president Richard Nixon's vision in 1972, when he "opened China to the world and opened the world to China," and said: "China must change."

However, as that effort faltered, Nixon worried that "we may have created a monster." The West tried again 30 years later, by admitting China into the WTO and dropping human rights progress as a precondition. Those concessions and further opening again failed to bring meaningful change or ameliorate the communist regime's hostility toward the West.

Now, after yet another 20 years, a much more powerful and aggressive China threatens the world on many different levels. Trump was determined, against all odds, to disrupt that dynamic. With the consummation of the first part of the trade deal, he believed that China was finally starting down the path of structural economic reform and that more than US\$200 billion of revenue from China would soon be coming to US farmers and manufacturers.

Then, almost miraculously for Beijing, the COVID-19 pandemic suddenly intervened. With a global health emergency and severe economic downturn, all bets were off — not only for China's promised purchases, but also for the prospect of economic reform. A Trump re-election no longer seems assured, and an administration led by former US vice president Joe Biden would likely be more conventional, predictable and, from Beijing's perspective, manageable.

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This shocking turn of events sparked speculation that China intentionally spread the novel coronavirus to the West, even if the original infection was a natural animal-to-human transmission or a Wuhan laboratory accident.

Chinese Ambassador to the US Cui Tiankai (崔天凯) dismissed both the lab theory and China's charge that US soldiers brought it to China as "crazy talk," but he should be asked the question: cui bono (who benefits)?

For the past several months, Trump and his administration had been touting the great victory over China in the trade war. Xi and his allies were treated to almost daily presidential tweets and press briefings boasting of the surging US economy and soaring stock market, and almost taunting China over its economic problems.

Even US Vice President Mike Pence got into the act.

"Because of the president's policies, America has added trillions of dollars of wealth to our economy while China's economy continues to fall behind," Pence said at the Wilson Center in October last year.

The pandemic spread quite efficiently from China to Europe and the US, dramatically changing the narrative. It has caused nearly 100,000 American deaths, and devastated the US economy and jobs market to a degree not seen since the Great Depression.

Chinese media have made no secret of their satisfaction at the reversal of US fortunes — suffering, death and humiliation in place of triumphalism. The virus has weakened even the US military to the point that Chinese hardliners are advocating an attack on Taiwan.

With some taunting of its own, China has been exercising its first operational aircraft carrier increasingly close to Taiwan. Unofficial Chinese blogs claim, without foundation, that in addition to the USS Theodore Roosevelt, three other US carriers are out of commission because of the virus.

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Amid calls for an imminent move on Taiwan while the US is distracted, and economically and militarily weakened, government sources have invoked the Qing Dynasty's 17th-century conquests as a model for the patient, but inevitable absorption of Taiwan. They offer it as a historical rebuttal to the May 4 speech by US Deputy National Security Adviser Matt Pottinger, which, delivered in fluent Mandarin, cited the 1912 student uprisings and was well-received by many young Chinese.

Washington should remind Beijing of a more recent piece of history: the strategic miscalculation North Korea and China made when they invaded South Korea under the assumption that the US would not intervene. That misimpression was encouraged by official US statements suggesting that South Korea and Taiwan were outside the US security perimeter.

US declaratory policy on Taiwan is more ambiguous. Beyond the commitment under the Taiwan Relations Act to provide it with defensive weapons, US statements merely leave open the possibility that Washington would directly intervene in Taiwan's defense. Many Chinese officials believe that it would not, and there are Americans who say it should not. After having misled the world on the virus, it would be wise if Beijing were left with no doubt of US intentions to defend Taiwan.

At the same time, having seen Trump's trade leverage over China dissipated by the pandemic, his administration should step up its information campaign against the world's most dangerous regime. As Pottinger's speech showed, the messaging would find a welcoming audience among the Chinese public and give the Beijing government more to think about than undertaking military adventures.

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