



Passing the Torch to China?

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Unfolding events in Washington and Beijing raise the disturbing specter of a global passing of the torch from the United States to China, one with frightening implications for freedom and democracy.

First, President Donald Trump seemed to applaud from afar as China's leader consolidates his power over a more authoritarian government at home, while the regime promotes its model of governance in increasingly aggressive terms abroad. Second, Trump announced that he will slap steep tariffs on steel and aluminum and welcome a trade war that most of the world, and most of his own Republican Party, dreads.

These events may seem unrelated, but they're really sides of the same coin, for they both signal a U.S. retreat from defending the Western liberal order of free-market capitalism and democratic government that it did so much to nourish in the decades since World War II.

In Beijing, the Communist Party is amending China's constitution to end presidential term limits, enabling Xi Jinping to remain as party chief and Chinese president for as long as he likes and, thus, become China's most powerful leader since Mao.

The Communist Party, in turn, is exerting greater control over the basic sectors of Chinese society, including the government, military and the private sector. With the West roiled by division, Chinese officials are also promoting their nation's governing model – the "China solution" – as an alternative for the wider world.

That alternative offers fewer opportunities for free expression. Beijing, which has long imposed a Great Firewall to restrict what the Chinese can see online, is expanding its efforts. At home, it's monitoring social media tools like WhatsApp and retaliating against those who use them to criticize the government.

Abroad, it's pressuring such companies as Google and Facebook – both of which are blocked in China – to delete content accessible to the Chinese diaspora and others outside its borders that Beijing considers insulting. It's similarly pressuring foreign companies that sell their products in China; German carmaker Daimler apologized last month after its Mercedes-Benz brand used Instagram to quote the Dalai Lama, whom Beijing considers a threat for promoting Tibet's independence.

At a closed-door fundraiser in Florida over the weekend, Trump mused about developments in China, praising Xi's power grab. "He's now president for life," he said. "President for life. No, he's great. And look, he was able to do that. I think it's great. Maybe we'll have to give that a shot some day."

All joking aside, Trump also announced steel and aluminum tariffs of 25 and 10 percent, respectively, late last week while Xi's top economic advisor, Liu He, was meeting with Trump's economic team at the White House to ease U.S.-China trade tensions. Trump's tariffs will clearly undercut those efforts.

But while China is the world's largest steel producer, it provides just 2 percent of America's steel imports, and Beijing criticized Trump's move in only muted tones. Far more striking was the outrage expressed by America's allies in Canada (America's largest foreign supplier of steel and aluminum) and Europe, who promised retaliation. Administration officials have since made clear that the tariffs would apply to all countries, though they raised the possibility that companies could seek exemptions for certain products.

In response, European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker promised that Europe would slap tariffs "on Harley-Davidson, on bourbon and on blue jeans – Levi's," while a leading Canadian trade expert suggested that his country target wine. More frightening than the tit-for-tat details, however, are the broader implications.

"With this," said Bernd Lange, a German Social Democrat who runs the European Parliament's trade committee, "the declaration of war has arrived. They [the United States] have a mercantile trade model that dates back 200 years."

That Trump's move rattled stocks reflects investor concerns over where U.S. policy is headed. After all, the steel and aluminum tariffs came after Trump signaled in late January that he will begin implementing his "America First" trade policy by slapping tariffs on solar panels and washing machines, which affect not just Chinese and South Korean manufacturers but also those in Canada, Mexico and Europe.

Together, all these developments force the uncomfortable question of whether the tectonic plates of global power are shifting, with Beijing poised to exert more influence across its region and far beyond at the expense of a Washington that, unlike Beijing, doesn't seem to understand what's at stake.

