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Opinion

Tom Plate

Donald Trump's embattled presidency will take its toll – and not just on America

- The need to fend off a gathering movement at home to impeach him will no doubt distract the already easily sidetracked Trump from global matters, whether it is North Korean denuclearisation or a trade deal with China



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Illustration: Craig Stephens

When US President Donald Trump abruptly folded his diplomatic tent in Hanoi and flew back to Washington without a denuclearisation/sanctions-relief deal with North Korea, the temperature in the Vietnamese capital had been pleasantly warm. But, on landing, the American capital seemed much, much colder – in more ways than one.

Depressing testimony in Congress from a former inner-circle intimate was painting a sordid picture of Trump's choppy character, and the lower house, now under the control of bitter, get-even opposition Democrats, was lathered up for a total takedown. Perhaps Trump should have hunkered down in Hanoi, taking as long as he needed to seal a deal, artfully or not; for, at least outside, the crowds on the streets were not waving "Impeachment" signs but welcome ones.

The powers of concentration of America's 45th president, never in the matter of details rated without peer, must have unravelled further when his attention was diverted by the roaring fire back home. The management of US foreign policy these days is not easy under any circumstance; just ask Trump's predecessor, Barack Obama. But it is going to be quite the challenge for the rest of the world to have to deal with an American president constantly off-balance, on his heels, leaning over the precipice of impeachment – and who was not so even-keeled in the first place.

It was Trump who recast the Sino-US relationship into a tit-for-tat tariff rumble. Now the need to negate that negative energy is urgent, especially with the world economy showing worrisome frailty.

Until relatively recently, the word out of Washington was that a draft accord might be close to completion, with the two powers signing an agreement formally later this month.

But having seen the American leader blithely take a walk on the North Korean leader – whether as a textbook negotiating tactic, a flash of immature machismo or out of sheer psychological exhaustion – Beijing is surely wary of putting its leader in a position of leaving a Trump summit with nothing more to show for it than the echo of empty toasts at Mar-a-Lago.

Failure can precede success but too much of it erodes confidence. Trump does deserve genuine credit for trying to wrap up a colossal positive with North Korea, but by allowing himself to be diverted by the widening shadow of congressional hearings and the presumed damaging findings of Special Counsel Robert Mueller's investigation, he increasingly suggests a presidency that looks all but -depleted.

Many opponents calculate that impeachment is the "killer app". Perhaps – but the possibility of a boomerang backlash is barely considered.

"And so the world awaits as America tries to regain some balance"

The lower house of Congress can vote to send to the upper house its recommendation; but the current Senate, under Republican control, will be about as easy to get through as the Himalayas. The very process is full of peril; few really understand all that it entails.

Look back to 1868 – the impeachment target was president Andrew Johnson, and the writer of the following was the young Mark Twain: "The multitude of strangers were waiting for impeachment. They did not know what impeachment was, exactly, but they had a general idea that it would come in the form of an avalanche, or a thunder clap, or that maybe the roof would fall in."

History records that the Senate vote for conviction failed by one vote even as the House had approved the referral 126 to 47.

And so the world awaits as America tries to regain some balance. It's hard to see how prolonged self-negation will prove healthy.

My foreign-policy seminar teachers in graduate school included Theodore Sorensen, president John F. Kennedy's right-hand aide, who would emphasise the importance of intimate intellectual engagement by the president in all major foreign-policy questions, which, he would insist, wind up in the Oval Office and nowhere else.

An incumbent president who cannot focus on facing an opposition that will not relent in hatred is a formula for a comatose foreign policy.

Should such be our fate, Americans will have to readjust in dramatic ways. Its responsible media will need to broaden its foreign-policy visage beyond the usual government beats and be more inclusive

of other points of energy, expertise and concern. Foreign leaders who offer peace rather than war need more time in the spotlight.

While we can all pray for more trust between Pyongyang and Washington in order to conclude at least an interim agreement, in the meantime, South Korea itself must be encouraged to press forward and knit up new relationships with the North.

The need for humanitarian aid – food, medicine and massive paediatric assistance – is pressing. Fortunately, while official Washington fiddles in the swamp of impeachment, a non-official America hovers.

Outfits such as America's National Committee on North Korea, the Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainability in Berkeley and other NGOs must keep their energy and efforts on high. Now is not the time to let despair get to the best of us.

Should the Chinese government simply try to wait this all out? Were such passivity feasible, it might be advisable. But history never goes to sleep. It's fair to complain that the vituperative Trump tariff thrust sprayed too many economic bullets in too many places.

But this temporary American insanity offers Beijing reason to reflect on the internal changes needed to be made for its economy to move forward with diversity enough to buoy up 1.4 billion human beings.

Large institutions – whether a massive country or a venerable religious institution – can benefit from reform and renewal. So long as the current insanity ends soon, the global economy overall might just benefit from the self-examination. China is that consequential, to be sure.

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