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OPINION | COMMENTARY

## *On Trade, Where Are My Fellow Democrats?*

They should oppose Trump’s destructive tariffs and support U.S. exporters.

By Don Bonker

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A tugboat guides a cargo ship into port in Long Beach, Calif., April 4, 2018. PHOTO: TIM RUE/BLOOMBERG NEWS

President Trump’s latest round of punishing tariffs on China, with threats of more to come, will have a devastating

effect on the world’s two largest economies. His actions are contrary to the Republican Party’s usual doctrine of free trade, and they have alarmed business leaders, farmers and the American sectors and regions that will most acutely feel the pain of the tariff increases and China’s targeted retaliation.

So where are the Democrats? Until Mr. Trump arrived on the scene, the Democratic Party had itself been sojourning down the path of protectionism, driven by organized labor. Since then, the president has ripped up the Trans-Pacific Partnership, overhauled the North American Free Trade Agreement, and hit even U.S. allies with harsh tariffs—all while Democrats have been strangely silent. It seems as if they either tacitly support Mr. Trump's reckless trade policies or simply lack an alternative.

Sidestepping the Constitution, which clearly assigns to Congress the power to “regulate commerce with foreign nations,” the Trump administration is using executive orders and national-security statutes to impose punishing tariffs. If a President Bernie Sanders were doing this, Senate Republicans would protest furiously. Yet Republicans and Democrats alike are letting the president do what he wants.

When I served in Congress, I chaired a subcommittee that presided over export policy, was an original co-sponsor of the Trade and Competitiveness Act of 1988, and served on President Reagan's Export Task Force. If I were advising Joe Biden or any of the 20-plus Democratic presidential candidates, I'd tell them there's a better way to deal with the trade deficit than the Trump administration's escalating threats, tariffs and pressure on our trading partners.

America should match what its competitors—Japan, China and Germany—have been doing for years. They have ambitious government programs that advantage their exporters in the global economy. America is so preoccupied with limiting imports that it devotes little or no attention to boosting exports. That's the real problem.

The U.S. has tens of thousands of domestic companies that would be highly competitive in foreign markets if they could collaborate in marketing and shipping their products abroad. In 1982 I worked with Secretary of Commerce Malcolm Baldrige to resolve this problem by passing the Export Trading Company Act, enacted with bipartisan support, that included a waiver to allow these companies to team up without being in violation of the antitrust laws. Unfortunately, the law has since been largely ignored by recent administrations, including Mr. Trump's.

The White House has tried plan after plan to restrict imports and punish trading partners. But focusing on the export side is a better way to ensure that American companies get a larger share of the world market. Over the years, Congress has established agencies and mandates to help U.S. companies go international, but they exist more like fiefdoms. There is no global strategy and no coherence.

I'd also advise a presidential candidate to reorganize all the trade agencies—the Export-Import Bank, Overseas Private Investment Corporation, Trade and Development Agency, U.S. Commercial Service and others—under one umbrella with a new mandate to make America more competitive.

In the 2020 election, the Trump administration will continue to offer protectionist policies and ongoing threats that may provoke a repeat of the 1930 Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act, which precipitated the collapse of the world trading system. Democrats need to give voters a clear alternative: Elect a president who will take America back from the brink, make exports a much higher priority, and adopt policies to make U.S. companies far more competitive in the global economy.

*Mr. Bonker, a Democrat, served as a U.S. representative from Washington, 1975-89. He is an executive director of APCO Worldwide.*

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