

## An Interview with Gary Locke, Former U.S. Ambassador (<https://thepolitic.org/>) to China



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(<https://thepolitic.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/1024x1024.jpg>)

Gary Locke served as the 10th U.S. Ambassador to the People's Republic of China under the Obama Administration, from 2011 to 2014. Locke had previously been Obama's Secretary of Commerce and served two terms of Governor of Washington state. During his first days as U.S. ambassador, Locke became a viral Chinese sensation after a photo of him purchasing his own Starbucks coffee was uploaded to Chinese social media. The mundane act, one that clashed with the lavish lifestyles in which elected Chinese officials typically indulge, elevated Locke to celebrity status and established him as a humble figure in the Chinese public consciousness.

During his three year tenure, Locke defused a potentially explosive crisis when he and the State Department negotiated the departure of blind human rights activist Chen Guangcheng from China. He also raised awareness of air pollution, using social media to encourage Beijing citizens to check the PM2.5 Air Quality Index measurements on a daily basis, and facilitated Chinese visa interviews by reducing the average wait time from 100 days to three.

Since Locke stepped down from his position as U.S. ambassador, he's founded a consulting group called Locke Global Strategies that primarily advises U.S. and Chinese companies on cross-border trade investment issues. He also works part-time at a law firm, where he works with clients on trade and political regulatory issues on the state and federal levels. Additionally, he has taken time to relax with his wife, Mona Lee Locke, and his three children, Emily, Dylan, and Madeline, and even to learn some golf. *The Politic*, which last interviewed Locke in 2013 (<http://thepolitic.org/an-interview-with-gary-locke-u-s-ambassador-to-the-peoples-republic-of-china/>), sat down with him again to learn about his thoughts on more recent developments at home and overseas.

***The Politic: You were the first Chinese-American to hold the position of U.S. Ambassador to China, which seemed to win you both a lot of admiration and hostility. How did you navigate that while dealing with the Chinese government?***

**Gary Locke:** Well, I just made it very clear that I was a representative of the U.S. government. I always indicated my pride in my heritage and the contributions of Chinese civilization over thousands of years, and I would also highlight what I thought were some of the greatest attributes of America and its contributions to the world. And then I would indicate that I was the representative of the United States and its people. The [Chinese] government officials understood that. I think there were a lot of expectations from the people of China, that because I was of Chinese ancestry I would therefore take the Chinese side or side with the Chinese government [in disputes]. I think we were quickly able to dispel that notion.

***A lot has happened since 2014. What was your reaction to the results of the 2016 U.S. elections?***

I was very active in the Hillary campaign, so I was obviously disappointed and shocked by the results. But that is our American system. Donald Trump is our president. My only hope is that he would just act more presidential, and be a president for all the American people.

***Trump has proposed many policies that people have found controversial. What do you think of his abandonment of the Trans-Pacific Partnership?***

Withdrawing from the TPP is counter to everything that he's trying to do, or says he wants to do, to increase American jobs. The whole point of the TPP was to level the playing field for American companies by making foreign companies/countries abide by the same standards that American companies have to follow. [Under the TPP] foreign companies, as they make a product, have to adhere to the same environmental health and human safety standards that American companies do. Otherwise, those foreign companies making that product are able to make it at a much a cheaper price. And that puts the American companies at a disadvantage, it makes the American products more expensive. And that hurts the sale of American products whether here or abroad.

While [I was] commerce secretary, we had a motto that was, "The more American companies export, the more they sell abroad, the more they produce, the more workers they need, and that means jobs for the American people." Also, the TPP would have lowered the barriers faced by American goods overseas. In many countries, American products are automatically subjected to a tax of thirty, forty, fifty percent. That makes the American products so much more expensive compared to the products of other companies or local products. The TPP would have lowered those artificially high tariffs and taxes on American goods. Again, to provide a more level playing field.

Hilary thought the TPP was not tough enough. It's one thing to say we want tougher standards, it's another thing to say that we don't want it at all, and we're going to let all these Southeast Asian companies or Pacific Rim countries trade among themselves, and have American products excluded.

***Japan recently announced that it was moving ahead with the TPP even without the U.S., because China seems to be filling the vacuum left by the U.S. and negotiating trade deals with Canada and really investing heavily in South America. Do you think the U.S.'s withdrawal from the TPP has weakened U.S. influence in the region?***

Certainly it's going to weaken trade with U.S. companies. Many of these other industrial companies will benefit from reduced barriers to their products as they trade among themselves. That's ultimately going to hurt U.S. workers, American jobs, and U.S. companies. The reason many of these other countries are

moving forward with the TPP is that they also want a high standards agreement, they want more trade among themselves so that they can ward off the economic power and the economic desires of China to provide all these products to these countries.

China is not part of the TPP, [so] Chinese products will still face high barriers and tariffs as they export to these countries. China is trying to reach its own trade agreements with these countries [separate from the TPP]. Many of these companies are concerned about the economic juggernaut that China represents, so they want to move ahead with the TPP to increase opportunities for trade among themselves, without China dominating.

***President Trump has been very inconsistent and somewhat unpredictable in his relations with China. In the beginning, he was talking about imposing tariffs on Chinese imports, and he angered China by speaking with Taiwan's president, which contradicted the One-China policy. But more recently, after meeting with President Xi Jinping, he seems to have embraced him. What do you think this kind of unpredictability that is so characteristic of Trump bodes for the future of relations between China and the United States?***

China will be very wary and very cautious about Donald Trump. They really don't know where he might be from one day to the next. They will move forward on some of the initiatives that they have launched, but they will be mindful that he could change his mind and terminate the deal at any time.

At the time of the meeting [between Trump and Xi], there was the provocative behavior by North Korea. I think [Trump and Xi] spent a lot time talking then and since then about the need to corral North Korea's nuclear testing and nuclear development program. But I think Trump is unrealistically putting all the burden on China. Ultimately it's going to have to be a diplomatic solution involving the United States, South Korea, Japan, China, and North Korea.

***And what do you think is the game plan of North Korea?***

Well, they believe that as long as they have a nuclear capability, the United States and South Korea will not invade them. They look at what happened to Muammar Gaddafi [in Libya]. He gave up his nuclear weapons, and where did it get him? He's no longer in power. He was overthrown, with the West very much supporting the opposition. North Korea feels like the nuclear weapons represent their safety net. Ultimately, I think a diplomatic solution [will] include a level of U.S. troops in South Korea [and] protection of North Korea by China. North Korea is going to want some assurances of its safety [and] of its viability from invasion or overthrow by the United States and South Korea...Of course, China does not want a unified Korean peninsula, [it doesn't] want a democracy right on its borders.

***You were very vocal about human rights [while serving as ambassador]. What do you think the U.S. position will be on human rights moving forward under President Trump?***

President Trump has really shown no interest on human rights. His invitation to the president of the Philippines to come to the White House, his meeting with the Egyptian leader and outreach to many other leaders in the Middle East, [it demonstrates that] human rights is a very low priority to him.

***Do you see that changing in the foreseeable future?***

No.

***Back in December, Trump announced that he's choosing Iowa governor Terry Branstad to be his ambassador to China, even though the process has been somewhat delayed and Branstad is yet to be confirmed. Do you have any thoughts or comments on his pick?***

Governor Branstad very much understands the value of trading with China, understands that so many American jobs depend on selling American-made or American-grown goods to China, whether it's wheat, soybean, corn, machinery, [or] locomotives. He understands that.

The Chinese government has a good opinion of Governor Branstad, and he and President Xi have met a couple of times. President Xi visited Iowa many years ago when he was just a county official, went back to the place where he was once an exchange government official, and has seen Governor Branstad on many occasions. But the reality is that Ambassador Branstad will be controlled by the White House, and will be the messenger of U.S. government policy and statements. So it's really up to the White House [to decide] what direction U.S.-China relations will go. Terry Branstad may be "a friend of China," but [he's] like the coach who has to give the news to the player that he's being cut from the team. You may be a friend of China or a friend of the player, but you still have to deliver the harsh, blunt message that you're being cut.

***You handled some very tough and potentially explosive incidents during your time as ambassador, like the 2012 incident with the blind [humans right] activist. What did those incidents teach you, and how would you advise the next ambassador to handle these very tense situations?***

You have to remain calm. You can't make precipitous decisions. You just have to sit down and be very thoughtful and deliberative in everything you say and do. Pull the team together; we have a great team of people at the embassy, as well as incredibly smart and wise people in the State Department. Career individuals, career people in the State Department, experts in the region. Successful resolution of any kind of crisis requires a thoughtful and very collaborative approach. In essence, keep your cool.

## *Where do you see U.S.-China relations going in the future?*

U.S.-China relations through the decades, ever since President Nixon visited China, have been improving. There have been ups and downs, but the overall trajectory has been positive and improving. That will continue. Obviously there are some contentious trade issues, human rights issues, rule of law issues between our countries. And there are some issues involving expansionist territorial claims by China in the South China Sea and then in the Sea of Japan. But we need to focus on the things of common interest [between the U.S. and China] and try to minimize the disagreements in the other areas. Because of the overarching concern and focus and attention on North Korea recently, I think that bodes well for [a] stronger U.S.-China relationship, and will help us put aside many of those issues that separate us, and certainly some of the issues that Mr. Trump has highlighted as being of concern. Now many of those I really thought were not real issues. He's railed against the Chinese currency, but really China has not been devaluing its currency, in fact it's been propping it up for the last several years, and most economists say that China is not manipulating its currency.

So a lot of these concerns that Donald Trump raised were really red herrings and not really significant. I'm glad that he did not impose tariffs on day one, forty-five percent tariffs on all Chinese goods coming to the United States, because China would have retaliated. That would have raised the prices of U.S. goods going to China, and that would have really hurt U.S. exports of American-made and -grown goods and services and products, and that would have cost American jobs. [It] also would have raised prices of everyday things that Americans use and buy that come from China. In a trade war nobody wins; everyone loses. I'm glad he did not move forward on that. I think the desire to work with China to curtail North Korea means there will be less attention to some of these issues that Donald Trump has raised.

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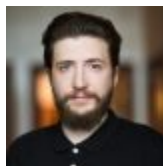
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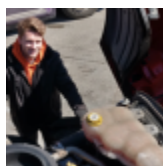
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