US needs to worry less about playing defense against China, politician says

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Delivering a keynote address at a Brookings Institution forum on “The End of US Engagement with China?” on March 7, US Congressman Rick Larsen said in jest: “I think you got your title wrong … a more appropriate title would be: ‘(Is This the) End of US Engagement with China, the EU, Canada, Mexico?’ and so on.”  
On a serious note, he said: “The short answer to that I think is, no.”  
Larsen, Democratic representative of Washington’s 2nd District since 2001, is a politician with a sense of humor who sees “a lot of room for cooperation” with Beijing. And as the co-chair of the bipartisan US-China Working Group, he has a “realistic” playbook guiding his attitude and approach toward China.  
Larsen said he could understand the anxiety of some over China’s recent efforts in the South China Sea, its moves for market access and other commitments. But while some of his colleagues in Congress have called for a more hawkish approach toward China, Larsen highlighted “a more nuanced approach”.  
He cited the latest issue of Foreign Affairs, in which Kurt Campbell, chairman of the Asia Group, and Ely Ratner, senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, note that the US has always set too high a bar in its expectations of shaping China’s trajectory. “Reality warrants clear-eyed thinking of the US approach to China,” they said. “Building a stronger and more sustainable approach to, and relationship with Beijing requires honesty about how many fundamental assumptions have turned out wrong.”  
To explain a more realistic “side of things”, Larsen used an American football analogy: “Does the US need to act like a defensive coordinator? Or, do we need to think like a head coach and develop new offensive and defensive strategies, a new playbook, or even dust off the old playbook, that are better tailored to the outcome that we want to see? I certainly … fall on the latter side.”  
As an example of “thinking about what offensive tools that we already have and what tools we can develop to play offense”, Larsen said that rather than responding to China’s Belt and Road Initiative with alarmism, the US should reinvest in existing programs that promote trade, investment and economic diplomacy.  
The growth model the US used to talk about — open markets, engagement and trade — is “pretty good” but “we are not doing that in this administration. … We are not taking every opportunity we can to remind folks about the growth model for the last 70 years that created the wealth in the world, that created the opportunity in the world that many countries benefited from, including China,” he said.  
China has said the current international system is like a well-designed building with multilateralism being its cornerstone. The need is not to build another structure but to renovate the existing one to better reflect the new reality and meet countries’ needs.  
Larsen said: “And I think, again, we don’t need to sometimes create new plays in our playbook, but we have a pretty good playbook already, and we need to enhance what we are doing.” On Capitol Hill, people tend to think of competing with China all the time, when in fact there is a lot of room for cooperation, such as on climate change, counterterrorism and on the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Larsen said.  
“We need to think long term about that, and not … stay focused just on the current president’s policies and proposals regarding climate change,” he said. The US’ relationship with China is a little like the stock market, going up and down, and “it can only grow … through continued engagement, through continued dedication and maybe a shot or two of baijiu,” he said. Baijiu means liquor or spirit in Chinese.  
Indeed, Larsen’s speech sparked spirited discussion that day. Let us hope it will also prompt US politicians to wake up to the reality of the realistic side of things.

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