

Nov 04, 2016 by **Rob Asghar**

What's in a Word? ^[1]

HONG KONG-The media in this commerce-fueled city have been fascinated by the fallout from Treasury Secretary Tim Geithner's recent Senate testimony asserting that mainland China "manipulated" its currency. The South China Morning Post prominently ran a Reuters analysis today that argued that "manipulated" is too harsh a term, and that "managed" would be better; besides, the article argued, the U.S. itself could equally be accused of currency manipulation.

What's in a word?

It is at this point that politics, diplomacy and psychology intertwine. We always seek to use the charitable word for a person we like and a blunt word for a person we dislike. We see the difference between words and actions in our friend, and we call him "inconsistent." We see the same in a rival, and we call him "hypocritical."

Granted, there is slightly more at stake here than "mere words." If Geithner meant what he said, messy trade sanctions would have been on the table.

Early in the Obama presidency, we see some clumsiness as the administration, like a newborn fawn, struggles to find its legs while an anxious world stands watch. Even with its rich promise of an improved conversation with the governments and publics of the world, the administration has to figure out when to promise a meaningful global engagement and when to stand up for America.

The latter imperative draws fire, as it smacks of "protectionism" - which, as you can see here, is a curse word for many educated people today. Scores of news articles today detail fears of trade protectionism, and, increasingly, financial protectionism.

Take a minute to ponder that word. When precisely did "protection" become a bad thing? Isn't deriding protection akin to deriding, say, "homeland security"?

I'll attempt to make a connection: Protectionism is seen as a dirty word by free-trade advocates within the media, commerce and government communities around the planet, because of a strong sense that an attempt to cocoon yourself within a larger, dynamic system will cause damage both to you and to the larger system. Attempting to find protection via isolation cannot happen when you are inextricably a part of a larger system.

I suspect that the U.S.'s PD efforts faltered when citizens abroad began to see the U.S. operating in a "militarily protectionist" manner after 9/11, and saw Americans as attempting to achieve "homeland security" in a way that threatened the larger system that we are powerless to remove ourselves from.

Given that the Obama administration seems largely inclined toward engagement in terms of trade and international affairs, an early guess is that it will not antagonize those experts and

ordinary citizens overseas who treat protectionism as an old evil. But recent events have reminded us of some of the pressure points of the new global dialogue.
