

AdvaMed Plays Tariff Chess, Trump Plays Checkers | Commentary



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Imagine a world where life-saving medical devices are delayed or inaccessible due to unpredictable tariff policies. This is the reality the medical device industry faces today — a reality that demands strategic advocacy and decisive action.

Last October, in this weekly column, I argued that the medical device industry deserved the same fierce advocacy that defeated the medical device tax in the ongoing fight against tariffs. American patients deserve nothing less than AdvaMed's full fighting strength, not diplomatic optimism in the face of economic reality, I wrote.

And while I'm not changing my stance on that, more recent comments from the leaders of AdvaMed have helped me gain some clarity around what is happening in Washington between the advocacy organization and the Trump administration.

"We came out early in the year last year and talked about the importance of a zero-for-zero tariff model because of the uniqueness of this industry," Scott Whitaker said during a news conference last week. "...But I think the president's view of tariffs and how he's using them right now might not be consistent with the model we'd like to see."

It's almost as if AdvaMed has been playing chess — concentrating on the long-term — while Trump has been playing checkers.

In chess, every move is part of a larger strategy aimed at securing victory. AdvaMed's advocacy mirrors this approach, prioritizing stability and long-term growth over short-term wins. In contrast, the administration's checkers-like tactics — reactive and focused on immediate goals — risk undermining the industry's ability to innovate and thrive.

And while AdvaMed would still like to see a zero-for-zero tariff model for the medical device industry, the organization is realizing that what has hurt the industry most in the past year has been the moving target for global manufacturers in medtech.

So, when I asked Whitaker if we can expect a more aggressive advocacy approach in 2026 or just more of what we saw in 2025, he said he wouldn't characterize it as more or less aggressive.

"I would just say continued focus on stability," he said. "I think in the first nine months of this administration there was a lot of back-and-forth country by country, a lot of negotiations around tariff levels that had nothing to do with us. They were focused on a broader goal that the president had, and industry got caught up in that to some degree."

This year, he said, AdvaMed is trying to focus on the impact of tariffs on the medical device industry specifically "now that things have settled down [to] where we can jointly land so that they can achieve what they're trying to achieve, we can get the stability that we need to continue to grow these companies and manufacture more in the United States."

Whitaker said the most important thing for AdvaMed at this stage is if you can't get to a zero-for-zero tariff model, to get to a stable level in virtually every medtech market so the industry can manage to that, whatever the percentage may be.

In the complex game of tariff policy, AdvaMed's approach resembles a calculated chess strategy — focused on long-term stability and growth for the medical device industry. Meanwhile, the administration's checkers-like tactics, driven by broader goals, have created uncertainty that disrupts global supply chains and innovation. Yet, AdvaMed's persistence in advocating for stability, even if perfection isn't achievable, demonstrates its commitment to the industry and the patients it serves.

The stakes are too high for short-term moves. It's time for policymakers to recognize the value of a stable tariff environment, one that allows medtech manufacturers to innovate and thrive. AdvaMed's strategic advocacy is a reminder that in this game, the patient is the ultimate winner — and that's a victory worth fighting for.

