

America and the World - 2017 and Beyond

"The Significance of the Trump Presidency"

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Those that did not foresee the likelihood or even the possibility of Donald Trump's victory are going to find it hard to discipline themselves to a balanced projection of his forthcoming first term. To ardent liberals in the United States - not least most of those at the leading American universities - at worst it represents a conspiracy hatched by Russian President Vladimir Putin and at best a 'Black Swan' event that could not have been foreseen.

In which case the critics will not accept that it will have anything much to sustain it other than all the executive power the White House can muster. Need one look any deeper?

But what if the victory represents something much more significant? As someone who thought Trump's election likely, being a stranger receptive alike to burgeoning blue collar resentment and dissentient opinion among longstanding Democrats, I believe it represents a sea change in American opinion. It signals an abrupt turning inward, entailing a narrower definition of the national interest than hitherto witnessed. No less a harbinger of major change than that other shock to the centre-left, Brexit from Europe.

Indeed, the longer view suggests it may well emanate from the same Zeitgeist responsible for the crumbling of the established postwar order: beginning with the upheaval in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989; continuing with the irresistible rise of Islamic fundamentalism; spurring the re-emergence of traditional Russian chauvinism; and re-energising the spirit of nationalism in Europe which threatens to undermine the top-heavy EU in its entirety; with arguably far greater consequences for the world.

Its impact long remained hidden from view because the Islamic revival seemed, mistakenly as it turned out, containable, even after 9/11 and before the execution of al-Qaeda founder Osama Bin Laden. Moreover, the profitable accession of the Second World and China to the global marketplace eclipsed the longer term

impact of associated political realities and the subversive mindset at the very core of the change. In short, too much hope was placed on the triumph of liberal globalisation.

Liberal globalisation rested on assumptions derived from a very specific and by no means universal political culture: that of the English-speaking people. And, bear in mind, it was not its only political culture. As any educated American knows: Presidents Thomas Jefferson, James Monroe and John Quincy Adams may have been reluctant protectionists but their illiberal practices established a tradition of protectionism in the United States which only U.S. industrial supremacy could overcome after 1945, and, even then, reluctantly. The ultimate determinant of the swing of that pendulum was domestic, not international; and that pendulum has been slowly but surely swinging back to the mean.

As a counterpoint, perhaps we should also recognise that the power of ideas has long exerted a more fundamental effect than hitherto allowed. The predominantly materialist interpretation of the twentieth century is arguably misleading, focusing on the idea of power rather than the power of ideas. As such it provides us with few reliable sign posts to future developments. When stock market observers glimpse 'animal spirits' at work on the exchanges that have driven them to vertiginous levels, we should not ignore their political counterpart. Not everything is consciously conceived.

And before focusing in on Donald Trump, reflect for a moment on the impact of the Obama presidency. This was certainly not an unalloyed success across the globe.

Let us not forget that Trump was a unique candidate who met with hysterical resistance to nomination within his own adoptive party, the establishment Republicans, as well as from the opposing Democrat Party, both hopelessly distracted from the emerging reality by an undeserved and complacent sense of entitlement.

The fact was that Trump's entire campaign was unsavoury and seriously underfunded. He ignored minority interests and focused on states crucial to winning the Electoral College rather than the popular vote. So to say he lost that vote is beside the point since his choice of where to target his campaign showed that it was irrelevant. Trump, adroitly guided by his campaign manager Kellyanne Conway, clearly knew what he was doing. Others, including Hillary Clinton, clearly did not; as Vice President Joe Biden,¹ former President Bill Clinton² and Barack Obama³ have more or less separately admitted without prompting. Hillary Clinton and her team ignored the forgotten, who had unfortunately for her been ignored one too many times before. Instead she paraded celebrities.

Such an unanticipated change in government in the United States for all its undoubted strength cannot, of course, alter overnight the entire course of international relations. The overwhelming fact is that the substance of change must answer the core needs of the neglected: cutting corporate and personal tax rates to re-energise the economy and attain genuine full employment. It has been in anticipation of this that the stock market has

¹ As reported in the *Los Angeles Times*, 22 December 2016.

² Speech, Lansing, Michigan: *Detroit Free Press*, 6 November 2016.

³ As reported in the *Washington Post*, 15 November 2016.

risen so fast and so high. But it will only sustain such levels if policy produces results. And those results will depend to some degree on a foreign policy that promotes stability, not disruption, in the international arena.

Certain fixed points of restraint do, of course, exist for U.S. foreign policy, even if an administration rides roughshod over prior treaty commitments: overwhelming American firepower is severely constrained by a strong public reluctance to use it in any way that puts foot soldiers in the line of fire; the massive, longstanding but often unspoken influence exerted by big business and finance on 'the Hill' can set its own limits on an administration's freedom of action; and an unprecedented level of indebtedness on the public account (\$20 trillion and growing) acts as a drag on government, including defence, expenditure.

These limiting factors make a reckless foreign policy based on cavalier adventurism and brusque confrontation vis-à-vis Iran, for instance, or directed against President Xi Jinping's increasingly authoritarian China a costly and tricky enterprise. Though they certainly do not rule out a high degree of tension prior to renegotiating these testy relationships.

Tension is already rising in the case of China and will grow as a result of heavy pressure from Washington exerted to remove the three main irritants: blatant protectionism, the scandalously widespread theft of intellectual property, and the arbitrary use of cyber warfare. This fractious process will inevitably take time and damage commercial relations to some degree. The regime in Beijing is already nervous at such an unappealing prospect, given its own massive indebtedness, public and private - even larger than that of the United States at over \$22 trillion - and the dire need to staunch capital flight. And Chinese leverage in the form of ownership of U.S. Treasury debt is no longer what it was, having ceded primacy of place to Japan.

Trump certainly barks a lot, mostly via Twitter. The old saw that barking dogs do not bite, at least not seriously, was in many respects borne out during the Reagan Presidency which, though almost obtusely hawkish, expanded upon the military build-up begun under his predecessor. Recall Britain's Foreign Secretary Lord Carrington attacking the administration for 'megaphone diplomacy.'⁴

Yet notoriously the Reagan administration restricted itself in open military engagements to those it was certain to win (Grenada) and pulled out speedily from hopeless situations that threatened incalculable future losses (Lebanon). It was only in covert military action that Reagan felt unconstrained (against Nicaragua), at one desperate point even using sales of arms to hated, fundamentalist Iran for payment. Reagan ratcheted up tension in relations with Moscow (notably, though not only, with the Strategic Defense Initiative) but, consciously or not, as a prelude to resettling relations on terms more favourable to U.S. power and influence. And few remembered the early promises to favour Taiwan over the People's Republic of China.

Even if Trump follows Reagan's example, problems do remain, however. A great deal in foreign policy can be attributed to blowback: the unanticipated consequences for relations with others of policies directed at chosen adversaries. It is this that should caution the President strongly against foreign policies made without sustained reflection and discussion and well before any extravagant public promises have been made.

To take one example. A forward policy against China that captures the President's foreign agenda will inevitably result in Washington easing up on pressure against Russia, just as a more assertive policy in concert

⁴ As reported in the *New York Times*, 23 April 1983.

with Moscow directed against militant Islam will press the United States in the same direction. If a policy of appeasing Russia because fundamentalist Islam is the greatest threat has already been decided upon as a matter of prudence or if the Treasury is going into battle against Beijing, then no matter; if it has not, however, then the result will be disarray.

And even if appeasing Russia has been decided upon – and early signs are that it has - the European Powers are unlikely to accept entirely passively a weakening of resistance to revanchism by Russia against Ukraine without some hope of reciprocity from Moscow in the form of a lasting settlement. And the sight of the United States making the Pacific the first order of decision will itself have a further unsettling effect, as it always had in the past (not least the policy of non-recognition of China and the disastrous and domestically divisive war in Vietnam).

In current conditions the failure of the European Union collectively to resist and the failure of NATO to act cohesively against Russia will only encourage centripetal effects that may ultimately damage U.S. security interests in the hemisphere. The immediate fall-out, a chaotic collapse of the European Union, would undoubtedly allow Washington the advantage of a free hand and a level of bargaining power unseen for decades, but the resulting bickering and disarray will weaken the West and NATO as a whole and that will provide unforeseen future temptation to those seeking to reconstitute the borders of the former Soviet Union (Putin's only election promise in 1999).

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