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The Rise of Trump and Its Global Implications

A Divided America: Good or Bad for the World?

By Han Fook Kwang

Synopsis

The US presidential election has shown how divided the country is. But a great power needs to be strong at home with the people and their leaders sharing a common vision of its place in the world. America needs to heal its internal divisions. For its friends abroad, a strong and stable US is good for the rest of the world.

Commentary

PRESIDENT DONALD J. Trump - not many outside the United States thought they would be uttering those words. Indeed, the shock from his stunning victory is probably greater in the rest of the world than it is in America. After all, almost half of Americans voted for him. They wanted him to be their president because they wanted America to change. According to election analyses, his support was strongest among non-college white men and women who had fallen behind economically and felt the country's political and business elites were not paying enough attention to their concerns and working in their interests – the forgotten people in President-elect Trump's words.

He succeeded in tapping this groundswell of resentment which played up in many issues - globalisation, America's free trade agreements and immigration. Some commentators have said this election signaled the end of the neoliberal idea that countries serve the interest of their citizens best when they are open to the world, trading freely and with open borders that encourage the movement of people, goods and services. A Trump America would be nationalist and protectionist first.

The America Rest of the World Would Have Voted For

But this is not the America the rest of the world wants. For most, the US is still the leading light of the free world, the emigration destination of choice, the land of opportunities, and the world's policeman maintaining peace and stability, including in East and Southeast Asia. The America they want - and would have voted for if they could - now appears to be different from the America its own people desire.

The gulf between the two needs to be bridged or there will be more problems and convulsions down the road. It would not have mattered if this difference had occurred in a smaller country with limited international influence. But when you are the sole superpower with international obligations around the world, it is hugely problematic. For example, Trump wants to renegotiate America's trade agreements, to review its defence arrangements with Japan and South Korea and with the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato). If he is reflecting the wishes of the American people who voted him in, the America they want and its place in the international order is at odds with how large parts of the world see the role of the US.

So, what gives?

Getting the American House in Order

Great powers have to be strong and resilient in their home country first and foremost, with the people and their leaders sharing a common purpose. There can, of course, be many differences in views over policies, as in any healthy democracy. But there has to be general agreement about its place in the world. A superpower which is a divided country with no shared vision about its global role among its people will find its domestic politics always at odds with its international obligations. It will be difficult for such a power to command the respect of the international community.

America has to put its house in order first.

Therefore, those who wish to see the US continue to be the pre-eminent power must wish President-elect Trump success in making America great again. Give him the benefit of the doubt. Perhaps he is right that there are serious flaws in US society, that the present situation is unsustainable and the deep divisions among its people need to be fixed.

If it is not put right, the US will continue to decline economically and socially, and its international dominance will fade anyway. If he is indeed the man to stop the rot, he should receive all the support he can get, and good luck to America.

Testing American Power

Indeed, the early signs have been encouraging. When he met President Obama the day after the election for transition talks, they made a public show of putting their differences aside. The outgoing president had this to say to his incoming counterpart: "We are now going to do everything we can to help you succeed because if you succeed, then the country succeeds."

It remains to be seen whether the reality of American partisan politics will match those cordial words. For the rest of the world, it might be too much of an ask for them to believe President Trump can solve America's ills. He has no experience running public office and his behaviour during the campaign would not have inspired confidence.

They fear an America that continues to be weakened by its internal divisions and unwilling or unable to play its international role effectively. But the world will not wait for the US to sort its domestic problems. The forces that have changed the international landscape the past decade - China's rise, Russia's moves to reassert itself, Europe's uncertain politics and the shifting balance of power in the Middle East - will continue to reshape the geopolitical future with or without America's involvement. In fact, the pace of change might quicken as countries and other forces take advantage of this period of American uncertainty.

It seems likely therefore that the US will find itself under pressure both internally and abroad. Those who believe a strong US is good for the rest of the world would do well to echo President Obama's word: If Trump succeeds, they too might. Will they do everything they can to help him? Stranger things have happened in politics.

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