

## President Bernie Sanders: What would it take and what would it mean?



*By David James Olney*

*SIA'S Senior Analyst International Security &  
Co-Host of STRATEGIKON Podcast*

When Dr. John Bruni and I were encouraged to write our recent article, "[Trump or No Trump – What's better for the People's Republic of China post-2020?](#)", I was enthusiastic to analyse the question and to write about the topic. The analytical part of my mind enjoyed the process of considering what impact President Trump has had (and might continue to have) on the PRC, but, since we published the article, the more creative part of my mind has not stopped cogitating on the following question: what would it take, and what would it mean for the world, for Bernie Sanders to be elected President of the United States in November 2020? Consequently, rather than employing the sort of Forecasting used in the previous article, this article relies on a process known as [Backcasting](#). I have imagined a point two years into a Sanders' presidency, at which many of his major policies have been implemented, and worked backward toward today. For the sake of familiarity and simplicity, the article is written from now, so that we can maintain our normal experience of time.

In "Trump or No Trump" John and I argued that circumstances would have to change significantly for President Trump to not be re-elected in November 2020, so let's begin with some possible problems that could change circumstances between now and election day, which could alter the result in favour of Bernie Sanders. At the time of writing this article the death toll from the Wuhan coronavirus (now dubbed COVID-19) has already exceeded the death toll

from SARS. Even if this virus is effectively managed, confidence, travel, and trade across the world have already been disrupted, and levels of disruption may well increase. At a time when trade tension between Beijing and Washington has noticeably eased, global economic uncertainty is increasing. Wall Street appears to be happily speculating, while Main Street America is nervous and chain/traditional stores across the United States continue to close at a pace. Many Malls are empty, and more of them are being closed than opened.

In addition, long-term problems could all become more acute as a consequence of heightened economic, social, and political insecurity. Young Americans are incurring ever higher student debt for degrees that frequently do not meet the needs of an economy in transition, thus entering adulthood already financially indentured to an economy that does not know what to do with them. Gun violence shows no sign of diminishing, the war on drugs has been an unqualified failure, police shoot far too many people, wild-fires and storms have become frequent and highly destructive, and race relations do not seem to be improving in the United States. In short, there are so many problems that need to be resolved, and many of them have become chronic problems, but the litany of problems is not being effectively addressed.

None of these problems are unique to the United States, except for the level of gun violence, and most developed Western Democracies have become similarly ineffective at slowing and reversing social and environmental problems. Modern Western Democracies are currently in a strange state of mind, in which a myriad of difficult issues have been sidelined and replaced by over-simplified economic concerns: will GDP increase this year, and will we have a surplus? The modern world and its problems have stretched, and are now exceeding, many people's cognitive limits. From [Rebecca Costa's](#) perspective a majority of our current societies have already hit cognitive overload, which has happened to many societies before ours, because our old answers no longer work for our current problems. Humans have a fascination with ancient civilisations and how they decline, and from Costa's perspective we are now at risk of doing the same thing: repeating what we believe used to work, even though there is no evidence it will work one last time. The world has become too complicated for our inherited ideas, and our supposed explanations and solutions have become too simple and out of date to get the job done.

As a practical example, from a Neo-Liberal perspective, life in the United States is fine, because the market as understood by Wall Street is doing well, but there is so much more that needs to be understood about the well-being of a country than an over-simplified representation of the condition of its economy. If the impact of COVID-19 increases dramatically, and we end up with a global pandemic that significantly disrupts and disturbs life in the United States, then even the mainstream Neo-Liberal political and economic view of the economy being the barometer for national well-being might crack, making seeing all of the problems (rather than only the reductionist economic representation of how things are today) unavoidable.

If we hypothesise that the global economy will deteriorate in parallel with the spread and severity of COVID-19, then the veneer that everything is okay, because, superficially, the economy looks okay is very likely to fracture. China watchers are already talking about the fact that China's population is beginning to ask questions about how the CCP is handling the outbreak, and what this indicates about how they manage other issues. Forgoing freedom for economic growth has made sense for many Chinese since the late 1970s, but if the CCP can

now neither deliver enough economic growth nor safety, what long-term reasons do the Chinese population have to accept authoritarian CCP rule?

In the case of the United States, President Trump has hitched his wagon to the success of the economy, but there is no good reason to believe that Wall Street is doing well as a result of President Trump's political decisions. In the predominantly Neo-Liberal anglosphere of the post-1970s world causation and correlation have regularly been confused, and there is very little un-ideological evidence of Neo-Liberal political policies leading to good economic outcomes in developed countries. The very rich are getting richer, the middle class are scrambling to adapt, and the working class are scrambling to hold on to as many hours of work as have not yet been offshored or automated.

If Wall Street slumps significantly, and the state of Main Street becomes even worse, then President Trump's wagon will be going backwards rather than forwards. It is clear that a majority of the United States political establishment (and a sizable chunk of the general population) is willing to accept President Trump's inconsistency and questionable morality as long as the economy keeps on rolling forward, but what possible reason can the population of the United States have to re-elect a president if his chosen wagon stops, or starts going backwards?

It is not like the population of the United States is ignorant. Like people across the world, Americans understand that there are a lot of complicated issues that need to be resolved, and that someone should resolve them, but like most of the rest of us they do not know exactly what should be done and who should do it. Indecision is the oxygen for inaction, which provides the heat for growing ineffectiveness, which increases the fuel load of unresolved problems, that can together ignite the flames of failure, which can burn an epoch to ashes. Americans, like the rest of us, are living inside of, and contributing to, a [Fire Triangle](#), and we need to reduce the oxygen, heat, or fuel before the world bursts into flame.

In order for Bernie Sanders to be elected President of the United States in November 2020, Americans either have to recognise and respond to the Fire Triangle, or get new and improved firefighting equipment on to the scene as soon after ignition as possible. Bernie Sanders is telling Americans what is wrong and proposing new ways to deal with current problems, but this will only have an impact if Americans are willing to acknowledge that they have hit cognitive overload and need to take a chance on new ideas. Admitting that we are not up to solving current problems with our current understanding is not something that most people are willing to do, particularly while there is still a belief that we can pretend that things are alright. Instead, a metaphorical fire is going to have to ignite in the United States, and the house might lose its roof before desperation and a commitment to do something come together to propel Bernie Sanders into the presidency. Bernie Sanders has been as articulate and persuasive about what is happening, why something needs to be done, and what needs to be done as any politician since the 1940s. The critical issue that will determine what happens next is not what else Bernie Sanders can say, but whether Americans are ready to choose, or can be jolted into choosing, to fight the immanent fire with him.

The language Bernie Sanders uses in relation to the Green New Deal is more urgent and powerful than the language that was used during the 1930s in relation to the New Deal. The difference in outcome so far stems from the present American audience not yet being disrupted

or concerned enough to respond in sufficient numbers to the progressive and positive things he is saying. The catalyst for change could be COVID-19, economic decline, a new war, increased political instability across the world, or President Trump outdoing himself.

And now we will assume that it is early 2023, and that President Sanders has successfully begun to implement his policies. What will this mean for the world? At this point we could imagine what circumstances look like two years into the New Green Deal, but I am less interested in practically imagining this point in time than I am in outlining the means used and implications of getting to somewhere new. For the sake of familiarity and simplicity, in terms of how we experience time, I have written the next section as if 2023 is the present.

Two years into President Sanders administration and politics in the United States looks and feels different. New ideas are greeted with quiet enthusiasm and careful scrutiny, and politicians are beginning to be judged on the quality and veracity of what they say rather than the number of times they restate the same tired and irrelevant message.

It is clear that no one can have all of the answers necessary to ensure smooth sailing in turbulent times, but what has come to characterise the Sanders administration is a willingness to keep ends like social justice, full employment, and a sustainable economy clearly in mind, while demonstrating a genuine flexibility and adaptability on the way to these ends. Much like during World War II, when politicians had to work out how to apply the ideas in John Maynard Keynes' book "How to Pay for the War: A Radical Plan for the Chancellor of the Exchequer," the ideas were there, and what was needed was a willingness to apply them and adjust policy as circumstances changed. "[How to Pay for the Green New Deal](#)," as written by the Levy Economics Institute before President Sanders was elected, set the course, but did not define the path. Complementary ideas and policies, such as Bill Mitchell's plan for a [Just Transition](#).

The discipline of Economics is at the beginning of a renaissance, having remembered that economies are meant to serve societies, rather than the other way around. Neo-Liberal ideology is still strong in many countries, but is at least being questioned as more Liberal Democracies go through their election cycles. People are still concerned about the size of deficits, but Stephanie Kelton's [arguments](#) are gradually reducing fear and increasing economic literacy. Modern Monetary Theory is still seen as a progressive leftist policy by many people, but the political Right is beginning to recognise that it is an economic tool that any political party can put to use, as long as they understand it and adapt their policy application as time passes. Citizens are beginning to ask what is ideology and what is an economic tool when they discuss the economic implications of policy and politics.

In 2023 the United States still thinks it is exceptional, and still thinks it can tell the world how to do things, but under President Sanders it is starting to show an openness to address the world's problems with new ideas and evidence-based policy.

There are clear lessons to be learned from the first two years of the Sanders presidency: problems should not be put in the too hard basket and change is necessary. Achieving social justice, full employment, and a sustainable economy is going to take a long time, and the ideas that got us this far will have to be questioned, modified, and/or replaced as circumstances change. There is still an incredible risk that the world will go up in flame, but a lot more people believe they can do something about it, because the United States chose a President who is

willing to do something about it. Politicians are now regularly asked “what are you going to do?” like the question and answer both matter. Politics is only ever as good as the citizens who get involved in it, and a lot more citizens are treating politics like it really matters.

In conclusion, and back in 2020, I can still not see Bernie Sanders becoming President unless circumstances get worse, and/or more Americans overcome their cognitive overload and embrace change. If Bernie Sanders becomes the President of the United States, then the world will have proof that confronting problems is possible and change is necessary. We need leaders who both challenge us to believe and require the system to act. Such leaders do not have to be perfect, but we do need to be brave. The United States is meant to be the home of the brave, and, at the moment, the world could benefit greatly from them being exceptional and brave.

**Views expressed in this article are not necessarily those of  
SAGE International Australia**

\*\*\*

Image Credit: [Wikimedia Commons](#) – Author, Jackson Lanier