



ICAS BULLETIN

Special Issue: The Trump Victory and China

November 22, 2016

Subscribe

Past Issues

Commentary: Back to Basics in Asia by Hugh White

Donald Trump and the Future of American Foreign Policy

Interview: Donald Trump Expounds on His Foreign Policy Views

The New York Times, March 26, 2016

Maggie Haberman and David Sanger's extensive early interview reveals many of the president-elect's instincts on international issues, and provides a view of the unformed nature of his policies.

China Takes Over the Reins of Globalization from the West

Zheng Yongnian

IPP Review, November 21, 2016

Zheng, expecting Donald Trump to abandon the US' leadership in promoting international free trade and globalization more generally, identifies opportunities for China to take on greater international leadership responsibilities. He discusses some of the underlying social and economic factors that have contributed to this shift.

Trump marks the end of America as world's Indispensable Nation

Robert Kagan

The Financial Times, November 19, 2016

Kagan, a leading proponent of the US as a leader of the international liberal order, worries that Donald Trump's past rhetoric indicates that he will push the US to abdicate this role. He assesses some of the implications of such retrenchment.

Experts Weigh In: What this Election Means for U.S. Foreign Policy and Next Steps

Multiple experts

Brookings, November 9, 2016

Brookings experts assess the implications of Trump's stances for US foreign policy in a variety of regional and issue areas. Richard Bush and David Dollar discuss China policy, with Dollar emphasizing that the US and China are at a potential turning point in the relationship, for better or for worse.

The New Administration's Asia Policy: Speculation, Predictions, and Recommendations

Donald Trump's Peace Through Strength Vision for the Asia-Pacific

Alexander Gray, Peter Navarro
Foreign Policy, November 7, 2016

Written by two Trump advisors, this article is the most substantive recent discussion of China policy from authors with access to the president-elect. Whether Mr. Trump aligns with their views is unknown.

Under Donald Trump, the US will accept China's Rise – as Long as it Doesn't Challenge the Status Quo

James Woosley
South China Morning Post, November 10, 2016

Former CIA director Woolsey, an advisor to Donald Trump, articulates a policy that combines strategic resolve and ideological flexibility with China. He urges the US to accept China's regime so long as the status-quo in Asia is preserved, and recommends US cooperation with OBOR and the AIIB.

Sino-US Relations in the Trump Era

Doug Paal
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace,
November 16, 2016

If his campaign is any indication, Trump presents a stark shift in US foreign policy. Paal suggests how China should respond to this shift.

Does Trump Victory Spell End of US as Pacific Power?

Alexander Neill
BBC, November 13, 2016

Neill highlights the "clues" that indicate what Trump's Asia policy might look like. He looks at Trump's

meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Abe, the GOP views of TPP, and Trump's campaign promises.

Trump's Base Politics in Asia

J Berkshire Miller
Foreign Affairs, April 4, 2016

Miller considers Trump's views on issues in Asia after he became the leading Republican nominee, particularly his views towards Japan and South Korea as American security allies.

Trump Wins: Implications for US Allies and Partners in Asia

Yuki Tatsumi
The Diplomat, November 10, 2016

Tatsumi writes that, while in general China tends to prefer Republican presidents, Trump is a deviation from the traditional GOP platform that emphasizes pro-business and trade policies.

How Should Trump Deal with China, and How Should China Deal with Trump?

ChinaFile Conversation, November 9, 2016

ChinaFile asks several Washington think tank chairs, academics, and policy-makers what Trump can do to delicately balance the US-China relationship.

China Trade Realities for the Trump Administration

Yukon Huang
The Wall Street Journal, November 16, 2016

Huang debunks some of the myths about American trade deficits and China's trade surpluses.

The Presidential Transition

Trump's Transition Team needs to Find Nearly 4000 Appointees

Bonnie Berkowitz and Kevin Uhrmacher
Washington Post, November 12, 2016

This article provides a general explanation of the process for filling out the Executive Branch of the US government during a presidential transition, highlighting the great scale of the project and comparing the distribution of presidential appointees from one bureaucracy to the next.

Trump Takes Office: The National Security Agenda He Must Address by the End of the Coming Spring

Anthony Cordesman
CSIS, November 14, 2016

Cordesman believes the two national security priorities for Trump should be picking the right people and securing enough funds. He also suggests that the President must determine whether to continue the rebalance policy.

Team Trump's Message: The Clash of Civilizations Is Back

Michael Hirsh
POLITICO Magazine, November 20, 2016

This article examines the anti-Islam stances of Trump administration officials Michael Flynn, Steve Bannon and Mike Pompeo. With these hardliners in the cabinet, the US will be more likely to engage in conflict with the Islamic world during the Trump presidency.

Commentary

Back to Basics in Asia

Hugh White

It is a date we will long remember. The 8th of November 2016 quite plainly marks a big shift in the way we see America, and about its place in the world – including of course, its relationship with China. Now everyone interested in that relationship has to ask afresh: where do we go from here?

Much of course depends on the kind of President Mr. Trump turns out to be and the kind of policies he will adopt. Both these issues remain profoundly unclear. Faced with such uncertainties the best path is often to go back to basics. Hence it seems sensible at this time to re-examine the fundamentals of US-China relations - the things that haven't changed with Donald Trump's election. That helps us think about how, in these new circumstances, a foundation can be built for a stable and mutually-beneficial US-China relationship.

The election does not, in itself, change everything. Whoever became President this year would have confronted the same reality: that for all the immense interests and objectives that the two countries share, America and China today have divergent and mutually incompatible intentions and expectations about one fundamental question. They have quite different ideas about their respective roles in Asia and the essential nature of the relations with one another.

The gulf between the two country's aims is simple and stark. On the one hand, America seeks to remain the primary power in Asia, as it has been for so long. On the other, China seeks to change that, to create a 'new model of great power relations' in which America no longer exercises the leadership of past decades, and in which China perhaps takes its place.

Moreover, both sides appear to believe that they can achieve their aims without seriously disrupting the

many areas of cooperation between them, and especially without risking a military conflict - because each seems to assume that the other will concede the contested ground between them.

American policymakers on both sides of the aisle most believe that, faced with a clear demonstration of US resolve, China's leaders can easily be persuaded to abandon their vision of a new regional order, and go back to accepting US leadership into the future, as they did for so long in the past. This belief was the key foundation of President Obama's Pivot, and it explains why Washington thought that the Pivot's very modest practical initiatives would suffice to achieve its ambitious goals.

Chinese policymakers seem to believe the converse: that America can be quite easily persuaded to step back from its leadership role in Asia, and even accept that China will step up to take its place. They believe that the regional order in Asia matters much more the China than to America, and that America will thus be more willing than China to step back to avoid a confrontation. This explains why Beijing has been so boldly testing US resolve over intrinsically quite insignificant issues in the East and South China Seas: they have been confident that America would rather see its regional leadership erode rather than risk a rupture with China.

Herein lies the danger, of course. Each side believes that it can impose its view of the future relationship on the other without seriously endangering the many areas of cooperation which are so vital to both. They cannot both be right. The future of the US-China relationship, and of so much else besides, depends on which one of them is wrong, or if both are.

So, the key question facing the Trump Administration as it takes office is the same one that would have faced a Clinton Administration had the vote gone the other way. Should America strive to preserve the US-led order in Asia which has served the region so well for so long in the face of China's ambition to change that order?

Many Washington insiders are now trying to convince the President-Elect that he can and should commit to perpetuating US regional leadership. They argue that he can make Beijing back off and abandon its challenge to US primacy in Asia at low cost and with little risk. They talk of revitalizing the Pivot, expanding the navy, asserting freedom of navigation and re-energizing key Asian alliances.

That means doubling down on the President Obama's - and Secretary Clinton's - policy, in the hope that more of the same kind of pressure will make the Chinese back off. If they are right, US leadership in Asia will be reconfirmed, and the old status quo in US-China relations re-established.

If they are wrong, Beijing will respond to more pressure from Mr. Trump just as they have from President Obama - by becoming even more assertive, upping the counter-pressure and hoping it will be America that backs off. Mr. Trump would then face a much tougher choice - whether to counter-escalate in turn, risking an ascending cycle of confrontation with a real and growing risk of war.

But the voices urging a tougher line on China may not be the only voices in his ear. He campaigned on an 'America First' platform that prioritized America's immediate interests over broader visions of global leadership, minimized the importance of America's role in distant regions, and disparaged key US alliances in these regions. It is quite possible that, confronted with the reality of China's power and resolve, Mr. Trump as President does indeed decide that putting America's own interests first means stepping back from Asia rather than risking a confrontation that could cost America dear, or even a war that America could not win.

Alas, there are big risks either way for those - including Australians like me - living on the Western side of the Pacific. Few in Asia believe that China will back down as Washington hawks expect, so there is real fear that a tough line on China from the new administration would intensify rivalry and carry a real danger of war. That would be a disaster for us.

But few if any outside China want to see America simply step back from Asia, because we fear that we would then simply fall under China's shadow. The only good outcome for us is one in which America stays engaged as a key strategic player in Asia, but avoids escalating rivalry with China by acknowledging China's increased power and according it a greater share of regional leadership.

Negotiating that kind of new order in Asia would take very deft diplomacy indeed, combining flexibility and tact on the one hand, and icy resolve on the other. Alas Mr. Trump does not seem likely to command those virtues.

Hugh White is a Professor of Strategic Studies at Australia National University.



Follow ICAS on Twitter at @icasDC. Past issues of the ICAS Bulletin as well as subscription information can be found at www.chinaus-icas.org/bulletin.

We welcome commentary submissions to the ICAS Bulletin. Submissions should be approximately 1000 words and discuss a bilateral or regional policy issue affecting the US-China relationship. Please mail submissions to icas@chinaus-icas.org with "commentary submission" in the subject line. ICAS offers a small honorarium for published commentary articles.