

## ARTICLES

# South Asia confronts Trump the unpredictable

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The election of Donald Trump as the 45th U.S. president has unsettled governments across Asia, possibly more so than in other regions of the world. Thanks to Trump's unconventional rhetoric and out-of-the-box propositions, Asia is struggling to come to grips with unforeseen scenarios in U.S. foreign policy.

Regional leaders had been reading an excessively scribbled and studied notebook of trade, security and diplomacy that has been suddenly wiped clean by a freakish presidential eraser. Fundamental alterations of national strategies rather than cosmetic recalibrations will be required to manage the challenge of "Trump the unpredictable."

The most contentious element of what can be gleaned so far about Trump's puzzling foreign policy stance is his implied intent to abandon U.S. allies and withdraw into an inward-looking posture. U.S. treaty allies in Asia had already been despairing about lack of support from the administration of President Barack Obama against a rampaging China.

Trump's "pivot" will be to the American homeland, not Asia. He wishes to "make America great again" by not adhering to old-fashioned great power games. By bemoaning the enormous economic costs the U.S. bears in propping up NATO in Europe and the Pacific alliance structure in Asia, he is revealing his populist businessman instincts rather than a capacity for statecraft.

If the coming Trump administration does carry out this sea change, the dramatic folding of the American banner in Asia, the Middle East and Eastern Europe will push smaller nations to reconsider ties among themselves and with larger neighbors, such as China, Iran and Russia. These regional hegemonies will grow in heft and further erode American supremacy.

Trump, who does not hew to any mainstream playbook, has no qualms about such a development. He is willing to shed ideological rigidity and negotiate on an equal footing with regional powers that have hitherto been alienated by Washington.

The world as a whole might thereafter look like an expanded version of the Concert of Europe of the early 19th century in the sense that the U.S. shares power with three or four other great powers. Washington ceases to interfere in the spheres of influence carved out by China, Russia and India and avoids military conflicts with any of them. A multipolar world devoid of great power tensions will emerge.

The former real estate mogul from Manhattan can then go about rebuilding American infrastructure at home without expending vast sums on defense and overseas military entanglements. His neo-Keynesian and left-leaning domestic economic reconstruction and reindustrialization projects could attract capital inflows from nations holding surpluses like China. The resultant economic interdependence may further dilute hostilities with emerging powers.

The specters of immigration and trade wars unleashed by Trump's anti-Mexico and anti-China tirades could be mitigated if he eases foreign investment inflows for public works. The famed dealmaker in him could work wonders by weaving an international web of economic interdependence.

### **Sticky Middle East and South Asia**

The hitch with this idealistic and peaceful sounding future is that Trump ardently wants to crush terrorism with an iron hand and has promised harsh countermeasures against this global menace. In Afghanistan and Pakistan, which have become the epicenters for Islamist fundamentalists in South Asia, it is questionable if Trump can smash Al Qaeda and the Islamic State by adopting a hands-off, non-militaristic policy.

The same applies to Syria and Iraq. Obama started his presidency promising to end foreign military entanglements but finds himself leaving office with nearly 5,000 U.S. troops still in Iraq and 10,000 stuck in Afghanistan. Avoiding wars is a noble instinct but hard to achieve, even for a completely original and whimsical leader like Trump.

Trump has raised tremendous hopes in India by announcing that he would be "best friends" with Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the common fight against "radical Islamic terrorism". In effect, this means an even closer strategic alignment between Washington and New Delhi at the cost of Pakistan and China, which have been warily watching a closer India-U.S. strategic partnership during the Obama years.

Trump's anti-Muslim bias and fervent desire to go down in history as the man who crushed Islamist extremism will ultimately drag him into formal or informal alliances in Asia and the Middle East that would stoke existing rivalries or create new ones.

As Obama has already discovered, a U.S. focus on counterterrorism missions is not viable amid complex regional proxy wars where national interests of local players clash. Just as Trump will find it impossible to roll back all the trade agreements and financial arrangements underpinning economic globalization, he is going to learn from experience that geopolitics is unavoidable. Whether or not he has a brand new grand strategy for the U.S., his acts of omission and commission will affect the balance of power in different regions, especially in the hotly contested Asian arena.

Yet, even if the entrenched structure of the global economy and world politics compels Trump to compromise on his far-fetched ideas, he is the most heterodox leader America has chosen since the post-World War II global order was built. Asian countries will gain or lose greatly from his maverick ways. Those who strategize and prepare in advance will be better able to minimize risks and maximize opportunities.

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