

The world in the era of Trump: What may we expect?

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Short-term prediction is the most treacherous of activities. I normally try never to do it. Rather, I analyze what is going on in terms of the *longue durée* of its history and the probable consequences in the middle-run. I have decided nonetheless to make short-term predictions this time for one simple reason. It seems to me that everyone everywhere is focused for the moment on what will now happen in the short run. There seems to be no other subject of interest. Anxiety is at its maximum, and we need to deal with it.

Let me start by saying that I think 95% of the policies Donald Trump will pursue in his first year or so in office will be absolutely terrible, worse than we anticipated. This can be seen already in the appointments to major office that he has announced. At the same time, he will probably run into major trouble.

This contradictory result is the consequence of his political style. If we look back at how he has won the presidency of the United States, he did it against all odds with a certain deliberate rhetorical technique. On the one hand he has constantly made statements that responded to major fears of U.S. citizens by using coded language that the recipients interpreted as support for policies that they thought would alleviate their multiple pains. He did this most often either by brief twitters or in tightly-controlled public rallies.

At the same time, he was always vague about the precise policies he would pursue. His statements were almost always followed by interpretations by major followers, and quite often these were differing, even opposing, interpretations. In effect, he took the credit for the strong statements and he left the discredit for the precise policies to others. It was a magnificently effective technique. It got him where he is and it seems clear that he intends to continue this technique once in office.

There has been a second element in his political style. He tolerated anyone's interpretation as long as it constituted an endorsement of his leadership. If he sensed any hesitation about endorsing him personally, he has been quick to wreak vengeance by attacking publicly the offender. He required absolute fealty, and insisted it be displayed. He accepted penitent remorse but not ambiguity about his person.

It seems that he believes the same technique will serve him well in the rest of the world: strong rhetoric, ambiguous interpretations by his varied panoply of major followers, and in the end rather unpredictable actual policies.

He seems to think that there are only two countries other than the United States that matter in the world today – Russia and China. As both Robert Gates and Henry Kissinger have pointed out, he is using the Nixon technique in reverse. Nixon made a deal with China in order to weaken Russia. Trump is making a deal with Russia in order to weaken China. This policy seemed to work for Nixon. Will it work for Trump? I don't think so, because the world of 2017 is quite different from the world of 1973.

So let us look at what the difficulties ahead are for Trump. At home, his greatest difficulty is undoubtedly with the Republicans in Congress, particularly those in the House of Representatives. Their agenda is not the same as that of Donald Trump. For example, they wish to destroy Medicare. Indeed they wish to repeal all social legislation of the last century. Trump knows that this could bring a revolt of his actual electoral base, who want social welfare at the same time that they want a deeply protectionist government and xenophobic rhetoric.

Trump is counting on intimidating Congress and making them toe his line. Maybe he can. But then the contradictions between his pro-wealthy agenda and his partial maintenance of the welfare state will become blatant. Or Congress will prevail over Trump. And he will find that intolerable. What he would do about it is anyone's guess. He doesn't know himself since he doesn't face up to this kind of difficult situation until he has to.

The same thing is true in the geopolitics of the world-system. Neither Russia nor China is ready to back down in the least from their present policies. Why should they? These policies have been working for them. Russia is once again a major power in the Middle East and in the whole of the ex-Soviet world. China is slowly but surely asserting a dominant position in Northeast and Southeast Asia, and increasing its role in the rest of the world.

No doubt both Russia and China run into difficulties from time to time and both of them are ready to make timely concessions to others but not more than that. So Trump is going to find that he is not the alpha dog internationally to whom everyone must give obeisance. And then what? What he might do once his threats are ignored is again anyone's guess. What everyone fears is that he will act precipitately with the military tools at his disposition. Will he? Or will he be restrained by his immediate inner group? No one can be sure. We can all just hope.

So there it is. In my view it is not a pretty picture but not a hopeless one. If somehow we reach in the coming year an interim stability within the United States and within the world-system as a whole, then the middle-run takes over analytically. And there the story, while still grim, has at least better prospects for those of us who want a better world than that which we presently have.

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