

2020 and the Twilight of the Trump Experiment



By Dr. John Bruni

Founder & CEO

SAGE International Australia

Host of the STRATEGIKON Podcast

At the time of writing, we are currently in the final phases of the 2020 US presidential election. The odds are that a Biden victory appears imminent, but it won't be by a huge margin. For many of us outside observers, the central question is, after four years of Trump, how could he still be polling so well? Trump has tarnished America's international brand. He has sown seeds of doubt among America's

closest allies that the US could be counted on. He has supped with autocrats and given them succour. He has mishandled national responses to COVID-19 and he has stirred hatred and division within the US body politic, leaving the US a highly polarised national community.

To his supporters, however, Trump retains his ability to thrill with his disruptive style. He remains the anti-politician, politician. To America's now 'inter-generational' rustbelt, his promises of bringing jobs back home from low wage countries, especially China, appeals. To the religious right, the fact that he has fulfilled some of their Middle East aspirations makes Trump their champion in spite of his very anti-religious behaviour. To some Wall Street traders, the Sino-American trade war has given them opportunities to create new domestic markets and industries. And finally, to those who feel aggrieved by COVID lockdowns, Trump's devil may care attitude allows them to revel in their misplaced and dangerous lack of social discipline to combat the disease.

Of course, much more can be said about all of this, but the fact is that 4 years of Trump has disrupted more than it has created. Where Trump's policy credentials remain strong is on the Abraham Accords. The Middle East's perpetual Arab-Israeli hostility has neither helped Israel or Palestine. Shaking this up might allow for a new and better diplomacy that can finally get on top of the moribund state of Palestinian rights. By placing pressure on China by using the plight of the Uyghurs and Hong Kongers is a net positive for drawing international attention to the repressive hand of the People's Republic. US weapons sales to Taiwan further draws the line on Xi Jinping's bellicosity, however, his maximum pressure policy on Iran has pushed the Iranian theocracy into the arms of the PRC – a foreign policy dilemma which will haunt a Biden/Harris administration. And Trump's engagement with North Korea did take the temperature down on the Korean peninsula, something that previous administrations did not do. A second Trump term would have seen which of these foreign policy initiatives would have stuck, but the American president's mercurial and transactional nature might have seen any 'gains' evaporate or flip-flop into a series of serious international crises.

But the election of a new president is not just about the 'Commander-in-Chief', it's also about the dynamics in Congress. A House of Representatives dominated by the Democrats, led by ideological warrior Nancy Pelosi will do little to calm things down, especially if the GOP keeps hold of the Senate. Pelosi's animus might be better kept in check if the Democrats take hold of the Senate but the key word here is 'might'. Pelosi is arguably the Democrat's weakest link especially if Joe Biden wants to fulfil his promise to govern on behalf of all Americans, irrespective of their political predilections. Her open bellicosity against Trump could have been handled differently but wasn't and played into the hands of Republicans, allowing them to present the Democrats as a danger to their 'natural rights' under the US Constitution.

Biden's priority will be to attempt to heal America's internal wounds. His second priority is to reinstitute a modicum of civility and diplomacy in America's international relations, especially among allied states. These two priorities cannot be taken lightly, and one can only hope that Biden will be able to fulfil a redirection and rehabilitation of the United States in his first term. Questions over Biden's age and health continue to dog him, and Kamala Harris as his Vice President is too green to take on these arduous and complex 'repair-jobs' to America's internal and external affairs within Biden's first

term. The hope is that Biden can survive long enough to train Harris to ensure a smooth transfer of power if and when this becomes necessary. Biden will have enough political goodwill initially, the trick is to ensure that Harris inherits this goodwill for when she steps up to the plate as president

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