



President Trump and the world

If Donald Trump delivers on his promises, the world will become even more unpredictable and dangerous than it already is

For many in the US and around the world, the unthinkable has happened. Donald Trump has been elected President of the United States. A commentator in the *New York Times*, Kevin Baker, observed, "We are in uncharted territory now, a place where there are no directions or guidelines." Well, there are directions, ominous as they may seem to a lot of people, pointing to a vision of an America which is very different from what the world has become accustomed to since the end of the Second World War. Mr Trump's election rhetoric has been clear, consistent and even insistent. It harks back to an America which no longer exists and, more importantly, can no longer be conjured back into existence. A diverse and plural society cannot be reshaped to conform to the yearnings of the white, largely suburban, middle class. The US economy is globalised and attempts to reverse or even stall the ongoing process of globalisation will not only disrupt a still weak economic recovery but may even lead to trade wars with key trading partners, including China. If the North American Free Trade Agreement, the most important of US-led free trade arrangements, unravels, this would not only impact on the US economy but also Canada and Mexico, which, over the years have become deeply integrated with the US economy. The US is also at the centre of alliance systems in Europe and in Asia. A US retreat from these alliances or attempts to change the terms of engagement – for example, insisting upon allies bearing a larger proportion of costs as Mr Trump has threatened – will have unpredictable and probably acutely adverse consequences. Therefore, if Mr Trump begins to deliver on some of his promises, which those

who voted for him fully expect, then the world will become even more volatile, even more unpredictable and probably even more dangerous than it already is.

The hope is that having won the presidency Mr Trump will, in fact, act responsibly and cautiously. His post-election speech was, for the first time, mostly devoid of divisive and abusive rhetoric. He tried to sound inclusive and reassuring to those sceptical of his leadership qualities and his intentions. But Mr Trump won the presidency on the strength of his polarising agenda and rhetoric, appealing to a constituency which has felt socially and culturally threatened by the transformation of the US economy as it has become more globalised. How much leeway he will have in deviating, and deviating substantially, from the brand that he has assiduously cultivated over the past year and a half, remains to be seen. He cannot risk a blow back from his core constituency.

On the domestic side, we will probably see the scrapping of the Obamacare, the former president's signature initiative. There may be a walking away from an ambitious climate change agenda and renewable energy plans. With the Senate and the House of Representatives likely to fall under the control of the Republican Party, Mr Trump will have the political authority to deliver on a revisionist agenda. In addition, the appointment of a conservative judge to the Supreme Court will mean that the institutional checks and balances enshrined in the Constitution will probably become much weaker. Mr Trump is on track to becoming one of the most powerful presidents in US history, and therefore there is, for that reason, apprehension that he will pursue much if not all of his



SHYAM SARAN

electoral agenda.

The most important external relationship to watch is Sino-US relations. While there are tensions between the two major powers on the security side, they are joined at the hip on the economic and trade side. Their bilateral trade alone exceeds half a trillion US dollars and the US is China's most important market. Any disruption in this economic relationship as a result of Mr Trump imposing high tariffs on Chinese goods or even sanctions will mean that security-related tensions may be exacerbated by a clash of economic interests. On the other hand, if Mr Trump pursues a policy of relative disengagement from alliance relationships in Asia, this may not be unwelcome to China. There will be more space and opportunity to assert its dominant position in the region. This will obviously not be good news for countries such as India, Japan, Australia or most of the South East Asian nations. Where the balance of consequences finally settles remains to be seen.

America's European allies are also apprehensive that under Mr Trump, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization alliance may become weaker and this could accelerate the fragmentation we are already witnessing in Europe. The negative consequences of Brexit are likely to be exacerbated as a result. There are countries such as Germany and France which have been seeking to promote independent European defence, and this may well become a reality eventually. It will also be interesting to see what Mr Trump's policy towards Vladimir Putin's Russia may be. If he removes economic sanctions against Russia, which other European countries will likely follow, there could be a major geopolitical change not only in Europe but also in West Asia. The US and Russia working together against the Islamic State could change the regional security picture in a positive direction. However, this could be undermined if Mr Trump follows through on abandoning the nuclear deal with Iran. We are heading into a complex and perhaps contradictory phase in the already tangled politics of West Asia.

What would a Trump presidency mean for India? One should expect that the longstanding bi-partisan consensus in favour of a stronger Indo-US partnership will endure and one should take heart from the fact that India was not targeted in Mr Trump's campaign rhetoric. His few references to India have been positive. On the Indian side, the government has refrained from commenting on the US elections and the two candidates themselves. This has been a good move. This opens the way for the Indian prime minister to establish a good personal equation with Mr Trump and that will be helpful.

The downside may be in respect of the overall anti-immigrant posture that Mr Trump may adopt which will further and adversely impact on our information technology business. But Mr Trump's presidency also means that the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a mega-regional trade arrangement promoted by Barack Obama, is now off the table. India has gained some breathing space as a result and can now focus more on the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership agreement currently under negotiation. The danger of being pushed to the sidelines of the regional and global economy by the TPP has now dissipated.

We should be grateful for these small mercies.

The writer is a former foreign secretary. He is currently chairman, RIS, and senior fellow, CPR