

## WHO'S AFRAID OF DONALD TRUMP? ASIA-PACIFIC, AMONG OTHERS

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**N**ovember's US presidential elections will not only decide the occupant of the Oval Office. They will also measure the extent to which a large number of Americans are daydreaming in an atmosphere like the pre-Brexit one, drunk on Trump's emphatic rhetoric that puts feelings above facts and punishment (to the establishment) above scandals and the use of unvarnished language.

Although both candidates belong to the political/business elite their profiles are extremely different: Clinton's has been a long political career (which leads to criticism of her membership of the establishment), while Trump wields the language of an outsider, as direct in its manner as it is insubstantial in its content, appealing to the irrational part of the average citizen, to their guts and their pocket. His other two attributes are his supposed success as a business magnate and, above all, a great sense of spectacle that captures public attention. Another difference between them is their relationship with truth and lies. *PolitiFact*, the best-known fact-checking website in the United States, calculated at the start of October 2016 that three out of every four statements made by Donald Trump are partially, fully or flagrantly false. At 27%, Clinton's ratio is almost the opposite, which is better, though not perfect.

It is possible that the election result will also settle the future of Washington's strategy towards East Asia – the “pivot to Asia” – as well as the United States' image in Asia and the next stage of the 21st century's most important bilateral relationship, between Washington and Beijing. Clinton supports the pivot – a policy enacted during her time as Secretary of State – and has a comprehensive view of the relationship with China. This vision does not shun a controlled rivalry between the two powers, but it also admits that a symbiotic economic relationship exists between them (which some authors have defined as “mutually assured economic destruction”). For this reason Hillary Clinton has said that the relationship does not fit “neatly into categories like friend or rival”.

For his part, Trump sees China as an unfair competitor that he accuses, among other things, of dumping and of manipulating the value of the yuan to keep it low (which, by the way, is not an up-to-date argument),

and promises a direct confrontation with his country's main trading partner. According to the Japanese finance group, Nomura, after Mexico, China would be the country second most affected by Trump's protectionism, which would also damage other Asian economies like those of South Korea and the Philippines.

In security terms, the Republican candidate intends to increase the US military presence in Asia and demand that allies like Japan and South Korea pay more of their security bill on the threat of troop withdrawal.

When it comes to North Korea, Clinton supports the multilateral negotiation and sanctions, with the necessary participation of China. Trump, for his part, has offered bilateral dialogue that sounds more like a challenge to a duel than a negotiation and has spoken of preventive attacks to stop the nuclear programme. He has also stated that as president he would force China to stop its puppet ally, a vision that errs on two counts: China would not bow to his pressure and it does have total control of North Korea, as Trump seems to believe.

### **What to expect the day after the election**

On the one hand, a Clinton victory should not significantly change Washington's strategic focus, which will continue to administer peace and security in East Asia and promote the containment of China. This would keep the incentives for allies like South Korea and Japan to seek military autonomy low. Possibly, she would continue to defend the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) – although she has distanced herself from the final text – and, in general terms, a political vision of international trade agreements subject to the United States' global leadership. For curricular consistency, human rights should be important in her political narrative, which could temporarily strain relations with China. Likewise, Clinton would probably demonstrate greater capacity for proportionality in her reactions due to her less volatile and combative nature, a positive element when facing potential future "accidents" in the South China Sea. She would, similarly, continue the fight against climate change, which would benefit the regions of Asia most threatened by environmental catastrophes.

By contrast, the scenario after a Trump victory looks more unclear and dependent on the credit earned to implement his electoral discourse, including within the Republican ranks. The literal translation of his ideas into foreign policy would have an impact on the military alliances with Japan and South Korea, which would be strongly incentivised to increase their defence autonomy, thereby transforming – for good or for bad – the regional security layout. In Japan, this would accelerate the reform of the constitution with a view to giving the country conventional armed forces, which would intensify the social and political tensions with the opposition. In Korea, anti-American voices would also grow louder, intensified by Washington's threats. A loss of US popularity in the region would be a breath of fresh air to China just as its image is in the doldrums due to its rough behaviour in the maritime conflicts.

The idea of bilateral dialogue between Washington and Pyongyang would have little chance of success beyond the symbolic. Excluding the neighbours from the negotiation table would mean losing the key to handling other conflicts in the Korean peninsula and the rest of the region in the medium term. It is also unclear that North Koreans would enter into direct negotiations with Washington before reaching a position of strength and much less with nothing in exchange.

Given his demonstrated scepticism about the threat of climate change (going as far as to state that it is a Chinese invention for its own benefit), Trump could withdraw from the Paris Agreement (COP21), thus fatally hobbling a possible joint stance by the international community. Unexpectedly, this would open up a space for China to lead the incipient climate governance structure in the near future despite – or perhaps thanks to – having made a late start in many areas.

What is certain is that the decision belongs to the voters and that, in this, the Asian community in the United States does have a voice. It is the fastest growing community in 2016 and according to surveys made by Asian Americans Advancing Justice its members define themselves as Democrats (47%) or do not identify themselves with either of the large parties. Their support for the Republicans is small (15%) and opinion of Trump is highly unfavourable (61%). This has undoubtedly been earned by his racist comments and his vision of immigration and Islam, as, it should be recalled, 62% of the world's Muslims live in Asia.

If Trump wins it is likely that a great contradiction would soon emerge: the vision of the "Great America" to which he aspires – that would become even more coercive than seductive – in a global, interdependent world like the present one, is neither easy nor much more economical.

