

ASIAN VIEWPOINT

The man of the moment

BY DERWIN PEREIRA



American President Donald Trump is the undisputed man of the moment. His success in bringing about a ceasefire between Israel and Iran and his earlier intervention in the war between nuclear-armed India and Pakistan make him a wartime president in a pretend time of peace. His transactional view of the world diverges from the deeply ideological streak in American foreign policy that has produced policy paralysis and held back many of his predecessors from acting forcefully, exactly when the American presence was required most keenly abroad.

Trump's domestic policy agenda is more complicated, but that, too, is in keeping with the nature of the leadership that he exemplifies.

All this brings us to what is perhaps the most important question of contemporary geopolitics: What, if anything, is wrong with Trump? "Everything," some would say. "Nothing," others would reply. I think there is a space between those two extreme positions that explains the Trump phenomenon. Occupying that space, my bottom line is that much is right about Trump but there is also something that is wrong. On balance, more is right than wrong.

The two extreme positions about the president are understandable because Trump is a divisive leader. However, this does not mean he is wrong. The best leaders in the worst times are often divisive, because to be decisive is to be divisive. In 2020, Trump's first presidency was ranked as the most divisive in American history in a survey published by the Brookings Institution. The list of divisive leaders included the two Bush presidents, Ronald Reagan, Richard Nixon, Lyndon B. Johnson, Harry Truman, and Abraham Lincoln, although some of them were judged to have been more divisive than others. Surprisingly, some presidents were considered so benign that they did not feature at all in the survey of the 30 most divisive leaders.

Even a cursory reading of history reveals why certain leaders proved so divisive. Lincoln's leadership was indispensable during the defining American Civil War and the struggle to abolish slavery. Truman and Johnson oversaw America's transition from the end of the Second World War to the beginning of the Cold War with the Soviet Union. Nixon presided over America's difficult years in Vietnam during the Cold War. Reagan drove the Soviet Union to collapse and brought the Cold War to an end. Bush, the father, fought the Gulf War and Bush the son launched the War on Terror. Each of these leaders responded to a defining global confrontation of their time. In that same mould, President Trump is now positioning the United States for long-term strategic competition with China. The connecting motif, broadly understood, is war — whether military, ideological, or economic in nature. To be decisive, Trump must be divisive, as some of his most important predecessors were in their different but related times: times connected by one kind of war or another.



Trump is reasserting a mainstream narrative of American history against its radical revisionists

Divisive and revisionist

Trump is divisive and a revisionist president in an America where status quo leaders such as Barack Obama and Jimmy Carter performed their expected roles on the world stage before retreating into ideological oblivion. So might Trump, but let history be the judge.

Meanwhile, my point is that to be divisive is not necessarily to be wrong. Trump has divided America between what I would call "sleeping Americans" and "hungry Americans." Sleeping Americans are the comfortable, well-fed elites who have sleepwalked the country through uneasy times. Their weapon is the liberalism enshrined in some of the country's oldest universities, which plays out along the Beltway, Washington's corridor of power, where access depends heavily on family, educational, and professional privilege. Hungry Americans are down-to-earth, conservative, working-class women and men from across the geographical and racial divide whose greatest joy in life is to place a bowl of wholesome food in front of their children for dinner, no matter how sparse the wooden table or how frayed the tablecloth may be. Trump is a successful businessman and politician, but he has turned into their unlikely saviour because those Americans have no one else to turn to. Their grievances do not stop at the domestic level. They fuel a broader political agenda that reaches beyond America's borders.

That is why Trump has returned to power. His desire is to reclaim globalisation on American terms, not to reject it outright. His tariff war on friends and foes alike is an opening salvo against what he perceives as countries that build up their economic and strategic strength by penetrating the American economy and borrowing its security umbrella through extractive means. He is not entirely correct here, because many of those countries, including several in Southeast Asia, actually contribute to lower costs in the American economy, thereby benefiting American consumers, and support America's forward military presence in Asia to deter expansionism by America's rivals.

Beyond a certain point, punitive tariffs will undermine the productive strengths of the American economy, to the extent that globalisation, which will continue with or without the United States, may encircle it as an economic threat. Strategic myopia will cost America dearly because an Asian predator will not stop at the eastern edge of the continent but

will push through the Pacific Ocean to constrain the United States within a narrow strategic space in the Western Hemisphere. Much concern is expressed over the fate of Taiwan in the Sino-American conflict. But is any attention being paid to the fate of Hawaii? These are not alarmist questions. The Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, prompting America's decisive intervention in the Pacific theatre of the Second World War. Surely, America is not looking for a replay of military history — and this time with a nuclear-armed adversary? Such dangers are not lost on America's strategic community and policy intellectuals. President Trump listens to advisers and will surely be guided by those who have America's long-term interests at heart.

Hence, my sense of an evolving world order is that the American tariffs will eventually be negotiated bilaterally with exporting countries, and the administration will differentiate between strategic partners and competitors. Indeed, a new American *modus vivendi* will likely be struck even with China, a strategic rival, which may agree to a new economic relationship because the loss of the American market would be too much to bear — at least in the near term.

On balance, globalisation will continue, but with a greater American imprint than before. An American president can hardly be faulted for putting America first. Does not Chinese President Xi Jinping put his country first, and rightly so? How can Trump be wrong for doing what Xi is doing right? To rearrange the rules of globalisation is not to automatically indulge in protectionism. The United States and China are likely to converge on new regulations sooner rather than later — unless the two great powers are determined to go to war. In that case, all bets would be off.

Domestic politics

Trump's domestic politics and policies are almost insurrectionary, but that is because they are viscerally revisionist. Consider immigration, one of the foundational truths of American history. In the conservative mainstream view, the United States began as a nation of European outcasts who established a new civilisation in the Americas, eventually surpassing Europe in the trajectory of Western expansion. This progress was made possible by the marriage of values and power. The values of personal liberty, social free-

dom and political democracy were, and are, protected by America's military supremacy. This is the quintessential conservative view.

The opposing, more liberal or radical view acknowledges the violent marginalisation of Native Americans, the importation and exploitation of enslaved Africans, and other discordant episodes such as the internecine white violence of the Civil War. It also points to America's imperial imprint on a world that extends from Latin America to the Philippines and Afghanistan, and on to the Middle East. Proponents of this view argue that remaining open to new immigrants, the global legates of those early Americans who fled tyranny in absolutist Europe is a debt the United States owes to the world. This view reflects a deeper reckoning with American history, one that sees the nation's founding ideals as noble in theory, but often betrayed in practice.

Trump disagrees. He is reasserting a mainstream narrative of American history against its radical revisionists. He insists that America has the right to protect its borders from illegal immigration from Mexico and elsewhere. He believes that everyone in America, whether an immigrant or a native-born citizen, must abide by American laws and adopt American values. He argues that English must not become a language of last resort, particularly among Hispanic communities. America may be a secular country, but that does not mean its Christian origins, historically tied to Judaism, can be erased by newcomers who use their faiths to challenge the country's foundational religious identity.

Deeply unpalatable

All this is deeply unpalatable to the left-liberal consensus in the United States, particularly its imported global variant. Yet many, if not most, homegrown Americans, those who pay taxes and sustain America's global momentum, feel that their country has become a free-for-all, a place where anyone who secures a piece of the American Dream believes theirs is the only valid version. The pro-immigration riots in Los Angeles and elsewhere show how deep these sentiments run. Some protesters waved the Mexican flag, which is perfectly legal in the United States, but in doing so they exposed a well-known reality: that too many things are legal in America. Waving the American flag in Mexico during an anti-government protest would likely result in a very different outcome.

So, what, if anything, is wrong with Trump? Some things. His combative style has widened existing national rifts. Critics argue that his approach to trade undervalues mutual benefit and risks isolating the United States. At home, his challenges to institutional norms and his narrower vision of American identity have raised concerns about the erosion of long-standing democratic safeguards. Trump's presidency will be judged not only by the battles he chooses to fight but by the country he leaves behind — and that verdict, with all its consequences, is still unwritten. **E**

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