

What's in store for Asia under President Trump

Written by Nick Bisley, Executive Director of La Trobe Asia and Professor of International Relations, La Trobe University

No mainstream observer expected this. Donald Trump was not supposed to win the GOP primary, let alone the White House. Yet, [here we are](#) .

This was always an election that would favour a change candidate, but conventional wisdom said that the reality TV star was not plausible in a general election. But he turned his complete lack of political experience into a huge advantage.

The fact that Trump was light on policy detail while on the stump, and that he contradicted himself on an almost daily basis, means that we have very little to go on when trying to ascertain what a Trump presidency will mean for Asia.

Management style

Most obviously, the first question will be how he runs his administration. Will Trump be a chairman of the board or will he adopt a CEO style approach?

All indications seem to be that he is likely to be a chairman. My best guess is he will act more as a figurehead and general direction-setter, delegating the core decision-making to his cabinet secretaries or advisers.

If that is so, a great deal will turn on whether he appoints more conventional Republicans in these key roles or whether he follows an anti-establishment instinct and brings more radical figures into the cabinet. If it is the former, then some of the wilder claims made during the election are unlikely to come to fruition. If the latter, then things will be very different from the past.

Militarisation in Asia

In the interim, America's Asian allies will be assessing just how dependable a Trump-led United States will be. To what extent can Japan, South Korea and Taiwan expect the level of protection that they had come to expect from Washington? What steps will they now need to take to offset that uncertainty?

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For some years, the region has become more uncertain in general. Competition between China and the US has increased. In response, countries across Asia have been boosting their defence spending to mitigate the risks. This sentiment is going to be badly exacerbated by Trump's presidency. Expect more militarisation of Asia's international politics.

The first reaction in Beijing and Pyongyang has been to raise the champagne flutes. The US is humiliated, conventional wisdom in Washington overturned, and the region's dominant power badly undercut.

Clinton was expected to provide a much more robust response to a rising China and to dent the nuclear ambitions of North Korea. Each expects a far easier ride from Trump.

Yet, in the same way that allies do not know what to expect, neither does China and North Korea. The traditional US playbook in Asia has been thrown out the window. But it does not follow that Trump will be more accommodating toward China. He has made a great deal out of his capacity to negotiate and his willingness to cut deals. But he is also an impulsive nationalist who has promised huge defence expenditure increases and shows little concern about flexing military muscle. There is as much chance that he contests China's rise militarily as he does accommodate it.

Trade trouble ahead

On the economic front, clearly the TPP is dead in the water. What is much less clear on the trade front is whether Trump will make good on his threat to impose punitive unilateral action on China. If he were, the costs to both would be significant.

More importantly, it could prompt not just a trade war but could lead China to take retaliatory steps. That could include, at the extreme end, the nationalisation of US economic interests in China. Those interests are not insignificant.

End of an era

In the heat of the moment, there can be a temptation to overstate the importance of events. But Trump's election, in many respects, marks the end of an era.

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The region enjoyed a peaceful and stable geopolitical environment that was created once China and the US worked out how to live with one another in the late 1970s. The rise of Chinese leader Xi Jinping and his more assertive and confident foreign policy marked the beginning of the end of that period.

Trump's election brings it firmly to a close. Quite where he will go, we simply do not know. This in itself is a break with the past. When one adds that to Trump's disruptive instincts, get set for a much more contested and unstable region.

Asia's international politics have entered uncharted waters.

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