

ISAS Brief

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Trump and the Upending of the Global Order: An Insight

This article is the first of a series of papers written to develop a better understanding of how Donald Trump, elected to the United States presidency on 8 November 2016 and sworn in as America's 45th president on 20 January 2017, is likely to influence the world. The impact of his policies will be profound on the Asian continent. They will set back its rate of economic growth by slowing down the expansion in international trade. They will inhibit the movement of Asians to the world's more developed countries. They will pose serious problems over the long run because of the way the Trump administration is reacting to climate change. The main purpose for this work is to alert Asia's policymakers to the challenges they must confront because of the emergence of Trump and Trumpism in global politics.

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Introduction

What made it possible for an individual with no political experience to win the White House? How did Donald Trump function and behave once he was the president-elect and after he

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assumed office? Of the many unexpected things he did and said, how many can be attributed to the lack of a political background and how many were the result of serious personality flaws? Once Trump achieves some of his declared ambitions, how will his presidency impact the United States (US) and the world? These and other related questions will be addressed in a series of papers prepared for the Institute of South Asian Studies. However, at this moment in the Trump presidency, any analysis of the Trump phenomenon is at best a work in progress.

Much of the rhetoric used by Trump in his long campaign to win the US presidency was not only meant to create a loyal base of support for himself, but also to change the existing global order. He told his increasingly excited followers that the political establishment in Washington belonging to the two main political parties, the Republicans and the Democrats, had rigged the political and economic systems against them. Many people had suffered as a consequence. He presented himself as the only person in the crowded field of Republican candidates who felt the pain of those who had been dealt a raw deal by the established structure. He also claimed that he was the only aspirant to the job who could “fix the system”. The system that needed fixing was not only the one operating within the US. He also suggested that the world system had not been fair to America. It had taken more from his country than given back to it. These two assertions proved to be politically potent. They convulsed politics in America and unexpectedly won Trump the White House.

Having won the Republican nomination and in facing Hillary Clinton, the Democratic Party’s nominee, he turned the argument of inexperience of government affairs on its head. It was her rich experience in government that was the problem with Mrs Clinton, he declared. She was a part of the swamp that existed in Washington which he was going to drain if he went to the White House. He won the argument and was elected the president but not by a majority. The majority voted for Mrs Clinton but the Electoral College elected Trump the president.

The First Hundred Days

From most of the actions he took soon after assuming the reins of power, it appears that Trump had meant most of what he had said during the campaign for the presidency. However, he reversed himself in a number of areas, not fulfilling the promises he had made. That said, there is no doubt that some of the decisions he took in his first hundred days in office will upend the

established global order. This will happen in several different ways. He praised Russia's Vladimir Putin in spite of his annexation of the Crimean Peninsula that was part of Ukraine. He seemed not to be bothered by Moscow's expansionist ambitions and, thus, helped Russia become a player of considerable importance in the international arena. He applauded Brexit – Britain's decision to leave the European Union – since he did not have much use for multi-national associations that took away some sovereignty from those who participated in them.

In trade as in other matters, Trump was strongly in favour of bilateralism rather than multilateralism. He threatened to take punitive actions against China and Mexico since the two countries had built up large trade surpluses with the US. These, he maintained had resulted from unfair practices. He signed a number of executive orders that reversed the actions his predecessor Barack Obama had taken to comply with the Paris climate control agreement most nations had signed in December 2015. The Paris accord was made possible by the agreement Obama had reached with China during a brief visit to Beijing in the summer before the Paris meeting. Once the accord was reached, India ratified it which led to its formal adoption a year after it was concluded in Paris. China, India and the US are the top three emitters of carbon into the atmosphere.

Trump issued an executive order banning the entry into the US of people from seven Muslim majority countries. The ban was to last for three months to give the US administration the time the new president said was needed to establish "extreme vetting" of new entrants into the country. When the order was declared unconstitutional by a federal judge based in Seattle, Washington, he followed it up with another toned-down executive order. This met the same fate as the first order, this time by a federal judge in the state of Maryland and another in Hawaii. The entry of refugees from Syria was banned for 120 days. These actions would have enormous consequences for the world, in particular, for the Asian continent and alienate one billion Muslims who live in the area. The Asian nations will no doubt become engaged in constructing a new regional order, with China taking a position at front.

How was Trump viewed by the public on the eve of his first hundred days in office? The answer is "not well". According to a new Washington Post-ABC polling, "The president's balance sheet, overall, tilts towards the negative. The majority of Americans say Trump has not accomplished much during his first few months as president. Meanwhile, he shows little improvement on his temperament and honesty, and, while he has gained ground on empathy,

“more than 6 in 10 still say he does not understand the problems of people like them.”² Trump is the only modern president whose disapproval rating at 53 per cent outweighs approval in his first 100 days. Obama had an approval rating of 69 per cent after his first 100 days, George W Bush, 63 per cent; Bill Clinton, 59 per cent; George H W Bush, 72 per cent; Ronald Reagan, 73 per cent; Jimmy Carter, 63 per cent; Gerald Ford, 47 per cent; Richard Nixon, 61 per cent; Lyndon Johnson, 79 per cent; John Kennedy, 78 per cent; and Dwight Eisenhower, 73 per cent.

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² Dan Balz and Scott Clement, “Trump polls at record lows,” *The Washington Post*, 23 April 2017, pp. A1 and A14.