

East Asian concerns about Trump

**Urs Schoettli, Consultant on Asian Affairs and Member of the stars
International Board, Tokyo and Mumbai**

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Traditionally, major political events in the United States are followed with particular interest by the general public and by decision makers in East Asia. While trade with other parts of the world may be significant, what really counts for East Asians are the United States. Great attention is, therefore, given to presidential elections and national electoral campaigns in the US. While, through NATO, Washington has a huge stake in and a considerable commitment to the security of Europe, in the Asian century its major challenges will be in the Asia-Pacific region. Particularly the relations between China and the US will be crucial for world peace in the 21st century.

It would be an understatement to describe the policy utterances of Donald Trump as astounding and unconventional. As the American electorate will decide who will become the most powerful man or the most powerful woman in the world, nobody can be indifferent to statements and opinions of the two candidates who will fight it out on November 8th. East Asia is witnessing the powerful rise of China, the re-emergence of a world power and the emergence of a new super power. Such a process is difficult at the best of times. Experience in the last two centuries indicates that whenever a new power aspired for its “place in the sun”, major wars occurred. This was the case with Napoleon, with the German Empire, with the “Third Reich” and with the Japanese Empire.

Up till now the rise of the People’s Republic of China has been relatively peaceful. However, there are enough indications that the road ahead may be bumpy. US President Barack Obama, since some years, has declared “the Pivot to Asia” as a central element of US foreign policy. This comes at a time when for a number of reasons the Chinese leadership is letting the world know that it will pursue national interests with greater vigor than before. We are currently witnessing this change of tune in the island disputes in the South and East China Seas. Both, Beijing and Washington, have hyped the tone. The Chinese made it clear that neither the ruling of an international court in The Hague nor foreign declarations in favor of the freedom of navigation will have an impact on their policy, while the US has unambiguously declared itself as the champion of the defense of international waterways.

In such a climate diplomacy is of utmost importance in order to prevent the slide into violent conflict. One thing is sure, no peaceful solution is possible if one side has to lose face. This is particularly important in the case of China which still suffers from deep wounds when in the 19th and 20th century the country was humiliated and occupied by foreign powers. The situation is not made easier by the fact that in East Asia there is no multilateral security architecture in place and a profound and lasting reconciliation between China and Japan is still due. The US has bilateral security treaties, most notably with South Korea, Japan and the Philippines, but there is no hot line between Beijing and Tokyo.

In such a situation any statement that emerges from the two major candidates to the US presidency acquires high significance. Trump is known to make controversial utterances, even in such delicate areas as national security and international relations. His comments about the Far East were particularly worrying and since they have not been revoked up till now, we have to believe that they will become part of Washington's Asian policies if and when Trump enters the White House. Trump let it be known that in the future US allies will have to contribute more. Obviously, Japan is contributing to the US bases on its territory much more than most European NATO partners. Nevertheless, Trump let Tokyo be known that when it comes to defense it has to go its own way. For good measure he added that he is not against Japan and South Korea acquiring nuclear weapons in the case of an American withdrawal.

Knowing the delicate situation in the Far East, with a rogue regime in Pyongyang and deep distrust between Japan and China, Trump's statement is not only irresponsible but an open invitation to a nuclear arms race in one of the most dangerous regions in the world. At the best of times for East Asians who have an ancient tradition of diplomatic culture the rough and tumble of politics in the Western democracies is difficult to understand. But Trump's utterances must be totally alarming and unsettling. As the chances of the Republican candidate winning the poll are increasing, alarm about Trump's loose talk is rapidly increasing. Of course, Beijing can be very direct in voicing its criticism. However, Tokyo has to be much more careful. First of all one must take care not to strain a relationship that is vital for Japan's security. Secondly, the political forces backing Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Donald Trump come from very similar ideological camps and policy backgrounds.

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