

A Stress Test for Democracy

by James Bindenagel

Donald Trump has tapped anger over eroding middle class income, loss of identity, and anti-establishment fervor in a campaign of anger that won the Electoral College vote and the presidency of the United States.

Trump stoked the fires of fear of immigrants and Muslims, insulting the military, the handicapped, women and others. He shamelessly tapped domestic partisan divisions reaching deep discontent in the public borne of two inconclusive and expensive wars, focusing on a Great Recession with sluggish growth and stoking fears of lost identity by White Americans through immigration. His campaign also sets a stress test for American democracy and its commitment to respect for human dignity. He won. Now he must govern.

The basis for governance is trust. Henry Kissinger has emphasized how important trust is in maintaining world order. He has stated that “how a people perceive the fairness of a particular world order is determined as much by its domestic institutions as by judgments on tactical foreign-policy issues. For that reason, compatibility between domestic institutions is reinforcement for peace [...] a shared concept of justice was a prerequisite for international order.”

After the election, speaking with Atlantic Magazine author Jeffrey Goldberg, Dr. Kissinger saw the election as enabling American to establish coherence between foreign policy and domestic politics. He sees an opportunity for the new president to reconcile the incoherence.

Governance will be difficult. American voters missed the opportunity to address the underlying causes of their grievances from Globalization, digitalization, technology change and loss of identity. Political elites failed to master the effects of these tectonic shifts. Trump tapped them. Sadly, these shifts have resulted in conflicts over gender, race, religion, and the environment.

The president-elect must now shape future American policy. Some Republican leaders will likely return to the party, and will seek to influence his conflicting policy positions. They will need to mold policies dealing with his rejection of NATO's Article 5 guarantee, his call to renegotiate trade treaties, his support for isolationism, his demands to ban Muslim immigration, his plan to erect a wall against Mexico, his rejection of the TPP and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership and other issues. The most critical international issue will be his misunderstanding of the fundamentals of non-proliferation, and his encouragement of the Republic of Korea and Japan to acquire nuclear weapons.

Trump will have a difficult time reversing these positions. His assertions have already undermined current policy. For example, his suggestion he would recognize Russian annexation of Crimea. Russia, Iran, and China will study every decision the new president makes. Truly Trump's election is the stress-test for democracy at home and foreign policy abroad.

Transatlantic relations are critically important for maintaining peace and promoting prosperity in this 21st century. Europe, the logical democracy to stand up for our values, will turn to

Germany. Germany has begun to step up for international responsibility. The 2016 German Defense White Book takes several strides to define German interests and sees a Bundeswehr “Führungsrolle” for military deployments. That White Book with its foreign and security policy mission as a Framework Nation in alliances and partnerships is a turning point in German security policy.

Chancellor Angela Merkel's congratulatory statement to the new American president made it clear that the great unraveling of the World Order has taken an existential turn. In her congratulatory statement she emphasized the close partnership Germany has with America through common values of democracy, freedom, rule of law and respect for human dignity. That partnership is the foundation stone of German foreign policy and will remain so as we tackle together the great challenges of terrorism, climate change, poverty, hunger, disease and intervention for peace and security. She offered close cooperation to the new president.

The liberal international order with its practical realism was built with European partners, is, however, in a mess. Public support is needed for the resolution with refugees, territorial disputes in the Asia Pacific and Ukraine conflict in Europe and ISIS and Syria in the Middle East. Who in Europe will win the votes of the disadvantaged, the disinherited, the demoralized, the lost from globalization, digitalization and technological change. In France Front National is running 45% in the polls. Geert Wilders has gained on the way to the March elections in the Netherlands, AfD and the CSU are fighting over the center-right in Germany. Putin's tactics for internal disruption in the U.S. election drove out Clinton, next he will want to drive out Merkel, leaving Europe in disarray.

Political leaders need to rebuild the public's trust in their governance. They must meet the people's needs and not only those needs of the establishment. The new American president may find wisdom in the words of Cicero, who when writing “On Friendship” offered a way forward: “Nature has so formed us that a certain tie unites us all, but ... this tie becomes stronger from proximity.” Will the new U.S. president chose Europe for his first overseas visit and confirm the transatlantic relationship? If so, then we can disagree without unraveling the world order.

You can't lose hope. If you lose hope, you lose everything. Let us believe in the liberal international order and in our ability to meet these challenges.

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