

## Time to reflect, or not

By Bunn Nagara



*No mincing words: Trump has no gift of a smooth persona like Obama, and his grating bluntness signals an open and direct character.*

***Now that the US presidential inauguration is over, all parties need to reconcile themselves with the Trump presidency regardless of preferences and inclinations.***

AFTER all the hype and hoopla of Donald J. Trump's inauguration as the 45th US President, the opportunity now exists to reconcile political differences and begin to rebuild a more unified United States.

The opportunity at least is there, whether or not all parties choose to seize it. From all indications, personal, ideological and partisan ill will still rankles.

According to Gallup, Trump's public approval rating rose from 34% to 42% following his election win. However, his 40% last Tuesday is the lowest historically going into a presidential inauguration.

It had been a rough and bruising campaign, and an unprecedented degree of bitterness lingers. And much of it comes from the anti-Trump side of the fence, from libellous false news to boycotts of the inauguration to protest rallies on the streets.

Trump's pugnacious style alienates many, including conservative institutions and liberal interest groups. In the US context, dissent swirls around such issues as racial and gender equality, abortion, conflicts of interest and the future of healthcare provisions.

Trump has no gift of a smooth persona, soothing public relations in self-promotion, or even an appreciation of the need for good PR. His grating bluntness signals an uncompromising, open and direct character.

In taking Establishment sacred cows head-on, he displays no Establishment slyness, deception or double-dealing. How he handles political expediencies as they filter through his aides later remains to be seen.

His is a love-or-hate, take-it-or-leave-it position on issues that offers no room for fence sitters. Appropriately, he finds fence-sitting awkward, feeble and uncomfortable.

The US remains the most powerful and influential country in the world. Naturally, other countries need to understand the Trump presidency to avoid mistakes and make the best of their bilateral relations.

There is no need to project forward on the basis of a Trump assassination before the inauguration. When independent analysts do this it is rejected as conspiracy theory, but when CNN did it two days before the inauguration it was accepted as healthy media fare.

This was the same CNN embroiled in controversy over reproducing false news from such sources as BuzzFeed to malign Trump in a familiar partisan broadcast. Trump supporters say CNN's projection only encourages assassination attempts in an already emotionally-heated environment.

The fact remains that no country in the world is able, anxious or inclined to attack or undermine the US. Trump knows this, however much his opponents in the US may try to demonise Russia and implicate Trump to delegitimise his presidency.

Such attempts at casting guilt by association to already presumed guilty parties have only a limited effect. It saw the departure of Trump campaign chairman Paul Manafort, who allegedly acted as consultant to Ukraine before President Viktor Yanukovich was toppled in a pro-Western coup.

Beyond US borders, three issues stand out: will Trump actually proceed with a wall on the border with Mexico, will he really restrict Muslims entering the US, and how many undocumented immigrants will he deport?

These issues were controversial when they were first aired during the campaign, but they have since been modulated by Trump himself.

The US-Mexico border already has a fence as most borders do. Trump has said parts of the border may remain a fence, since the objective is to keep illegals out effectively.

He first said travel restrictions would be placed on Muslims from troubled countries like Iraq and Syria. This was followed by restrictions to be placed on individuals linked to suspect groups.

Would Trump deport as many as two million or so illegal immigrants as he said? Al Jazeera reported that Obama had already deported 2.5 million people, more than the total deported by all previous presidents throughout the 20th century.

The prospect of a meeting between Trump and Putin has already been floated. It will be a first, and the mainstream media are already poised to spin it to vindicate their allegations of Trump's "allegiance" to Putin.

Clearly both men share certain attributes: a "take charge" personality with a penchant for grandstanding, no patience for time-wasters, and little respect for established practice just because it is established.

But that is not the same as one being beholden to the other. By their very character, neither is given to being beholden to anyone or anything else.

Trump's earlier comment about possibly lifting sanctions against Russia has now been revised to exchanging it for a cut in Russian missiles. Whatever the practicalities of such a deal, he is suggesting a quid pro quo with Moscow instead of a blank cheque.

For international strategists, Trump's dismissive comments about Nato remains an issue. However, his Defence Secretary James Mattis holds the opposite view that is set to dilute if not neutralise his own.

The Trump administration's approach to China is actually more nuanced and interesting. Ultimately, it may also be more significant for China, East Asia and the larger Asia-Pacific.

At its crudest, it takes the shape of cudgels in China-bashing over Beijing's alleged financial and economic improprieties. Much of this comes from anti-China hawks among policy advisers like Peter Navarro.

On another level, it is about reacting to provocations from Beijing. When China scolded Trump for "consorting" with Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-Wen over her congratulatory phone call to him, he reciprocated.

China's weakness remains a dogged misreading of Trump. By continuing to press the wrong buttons, Beijing may well "succeed" in provoking him into a trade war of sorts that both sides say they reject.

So far, the negative exchanges have not dwelt much on China's contested actions in the South China Sea. If Beijing remains as wooden in mishandling Trump, he will easily adopt the Pentagon's position on the issue to China's own detriment.

Much of what prevails in US relations with China and Russia over the next four years at least may result in the quiet campaigns of one individual: Henry Kissinger.

The former Secretary of State and pioneer of US-China relations has both been hailed and criticised as a pro-China dove. The reality may be more complex.

Kissinger has lately been active in three areas: renewing ties with China, promoting relations with Russia, and getting close to Trump. Some observers see his efforts as eventually distancing China from Russia.

In recent years, Russia and China have been working more closely over a range of issues outside the ambit of the US. Kissinger may regard this as a strategic challenge to Washington.

If driving a wedge between China and Russia is Kissinger's current objective, it is not new. The US opening to China in the early 1970s that he led was already an attempt to distance Beijing from Moscow.

Given Trump's personality and character, he is more likely than not to attend the Asean Summit in Manila in November. His host is admirer President Rodrigo Duterte, who has been likened to Trump.

With Duterte's Philippines chairing Asean, it is virtually a foregone conclusion that Trump will be in the region. Only his absence will be in doubt.

Trump and his Asean counterparts will have to work out what to say in their diplomatic exchanges by then.

But well before that, Asean leaders need to understand the implications for the region in "make America great again."

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