



America's Priorities

The US Presidential election put on display the deep divisions in the US and something US president Donald Trump for long played upon. The new US president now faces significant challenges in navigating the US through numerous strategic challenges. The electoral victory of the Democrats in many ways doesn't change the fact that the US faces a whole host of challenges and whoever would have won the election would be tasked with dealing with these strategic issues. The most important of these are as follows.

China is now officially the regional power on the ascent that is challenging the US position in South-East Asia. The Trump administration took an aggressive position on China and began economic warfare. Despite a number of rounds of tariff increases and designating China a currency manipulator (and later removing it), on the substantive issues nothing has been resolved. Whoever would have won the presidential election would be facing this strategic priority. The challenge for the US is its actions against China that are not achieving their intended aims and during this period China is strengthening its position. The US will soon be reaching the position of having tried everything to halt the rise of China, short of actual war.

The US had long had its eyes on Afghanistan, even before the events of 9/11. The country's proximity to Central Asia and Russia, as well as China made it ideal as a forward base in the region to deal with emerging challenges to US power. President Trump inherited the Afghan war which his predecessors failed to solve. Whilst Trump spoke about ending the war, he did a U-turn on this. Trump has given much publicity to his personal efforts on negotiating a settlement with the Taliban. But in reality, the US faces considerable difficulties in achieving this aim, which Trump did not help by his publicity-seeking interventions. The reality on the ground is that the US is progressively losing Afghanistan to the Afghan jihad and they know it is only a matter of time before they are fully ejected and are desperate to conclude a peace agreement while they still have some control.

The US now faces the problem all empires face of having to be present in all places at the same time to maintain what it has colonised. Like the empires before it, the US uses its military, with a high readiness rate around the world to maintain its position. This all costs money, money that cannot then be used to fund education, infrastructure or health. Domestic taxes are insufficient to fund this so the US resorts to debt, which has created a \$22 trillion debt bubble! The Afghan war was meant to remove a ragtag, 7th century militia force, but it is now an open ended battle with no end in sight. Its sole justification is now to maintain credibility rather than achieve any strategic ends. US officials are now admitting that their country is overstretched having to deal with so many domestic issues and international commitments. The US is living beyond its means; it is facing regional challenges across the world which will stretch it. Whoever would have won the 2020 Presidential election, they will be faced with tackling this problem.

The Trump administration's policies have harmed the alliances and friendships the US carefully developed over the decades and has been one of its greatest assets over the last 70 years. Trump's 'America first,' mantra has left a vacuum which China is quickly filling. For the nations of the world, the US is no longer the power it was prior to the Iraq and Afghan wars and with the US pulling out of multilateral organisations, China really does appear to be the more reliable partner, with huge spending power. Whilst Trump may believe he is destroying the US in order to save it, the US needs cooperation, submission and obedience of other nations in order to achieve its global agenda.

Whilst a new US president always attracts global attention, in reality the president has very little ability to make radical changes to US strategic policy. The US president shares power with the Senate and a host of entities from the financial sector, defence establishment and transnational corporations. All presidents bring their unique approach to achieve US strategic goals, but these strategic goals are rarely altered. The US does face a crisis as a superpower as it has had very few foreign policy successes since 2003. Domestically, since the global economic crisis in 2008, America's domestic challenges have grown and become more troublesome. At the same time, successive administrations have shown little ability to solve them.

Written for the Central Media Office of Hizb ut Tahrir by

Adnan Khan