

Foresight Synergy Network Discussion on the Results of the US Election in the Context of Pre-election Turmoil & Anticipated Protests Post-Election

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Moderator's Report (Feel free to comment)

The Session addressed the results of the US election. Open to all FSN members, it attracted seventeen participants, mainly from across Canada, the majority with academic and technical backgrounds, as well as those with senior government and business development experience. The five questions, enumerated below, served as the organizing template for our conversations.

The first two questions were taken together.

(1) What just happened? Did the US just dodge an authoritarian bullet, thanks to its decentralized electoral system? What does that say about the future, especially its executive branch?

(2) What is the emerging US political alignment and its implications for governance?

The questions triggered immediate feedback that critiqued the scope and apparent underlying assumption that a “new normal” remains open. Participants argued that the combination of crises of climate change, Anthropocene animal extinctions, the obvious shift in geopolitical alignments and the economic crisis exacerbated by COVID-19 taken together strongly indicate that the “new normal” is unclear as to its form as well as how and when it will happen, if at all in the foreseeable future.

After further discussion, there was agreement that while the US may have “dodged an authoritarian bullet” in the election, Trumpism and an authoritarian-minded GOP in fact increased their popular support and their hold on governorships and other down-ballot positions, and have largely taken over the judicial system.

While it may be true that technically Biden could seek to impose Democratic Party solutions via aggressive use of the powers intrinsic to the Presidency (like Trump, in effect), he does not seem to be that kind of a president and as a first step is seeking national reconciliation. Biden is himself a compromise, yet pragmatic choice for the party, based on the calculation that he could carry the election, whereas its progressive wing could not. There was some speculation that Biden may not complete his first term and may resign to let the vice-president take over.

(3) The US geopolitical position and the costs of the Trump admin: Can the US regain global confidence in its leadership and has it a political economic strategy for “building back better”?

While participants cautioned that it has generally been a bad idea to bet against the United States, and some expressed optimism that positive change could begin in the cities and spread across the country, there was considerable pessimism in the video room. The failure of the US to lead the suppression of COVID-19 underlined how national division and weakness at the top have put the US in a wholly disastrous situation. While Asian countries have already resumed post-COVID growth, especially China, the US continues to be ravaged by the disease. The vaccine on the horizon offers some hope. But the US performance will not soon be forgotten by its allies.

Others pointed out that China is the leader of a more general and fundamental change in the world, namely the Rise of Asia. Asia has developed some effective models of national governance and economic management that reflect their values and scale. The West should get ready to have to accept some of these, much as we used to impose our standards and models on Asia. This may be particularly true in the area of global financial arrangements and the move by central banks to adopting block chain.

(4) Technology: In the wake of COVID, can the transition lead in the adoption of 5G ITC, 4th gen manufacturing and the IoT – and would a “green new deal that includes nuclear” be a feature of that transition?

On this issue, the participants again pushed back on the underlying assumption that the US is still a leader in the important applications of next gen tech. It is now almost entirely absent from 5G equipment suppliers, and has few if any actual deployments currently in the market, whereas Asian and European companies are already competing globally in his space. Nevertheless, participants recognized, the US has indeed some very strong technological advantages as well as tremendous depth in its research and innovation capacity. In this connection, confidence was expressed that the millennial generation would constitute an accelerator to US development, bringing a new depth of tech skills to national competitiveness and governance.

(5) Finally, can the US regain productive balance of “freedom and organization” (Bertrand Russell) to redesign itself so that it gets its mojo back?

Throughout the session, participants traded observations on the special nature of US democracy and its adequacy for the 21st century. In particular, the role of institutions like the Electoral College, the absence of election oversight by a central body and uniform rules and standards to ensure clean and accurate results, coupled with the SCOTUS ruling permitting unlimited corporate financial political contributions; which in turn mean US election standards seriously lag North Atlantic democratic norms. Also, earlier in the discussion, a participant who has done extensive work on the issue of ultra conservative ideas in US politics described how the rise of a figure like Trump had been carefully prepared since the 1950s. However, the discussion was by this point reaching the end of its time limit, so this question kind of died on the order paper as it were, perhaps to be resurrected at the next session in late January.

Three big questions/scenarios for future consideration:

- As the US wobbles, who can step up to lead the West? Or are we in a Jimmy Carter moment?
- The IMF HQ has to be in the world’s largest economy. If it moves to Beijing, who will serve as the global economic hegemon? Is the theory still valid? Will China sign up for the job (basically global lender of last resort)?
- If the GOP persists, the character of the USG must change, perhaps to a Marie Le Pen form of national authoritarianism. How will the allies react?