

PROGRAMME ASIE

TRUMP'S FOREIGN POLICY: Implications for Europe and East Asia

Interview with Barthélémy COURMONT

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FOR THE KOREAN DAILY NEWSPAPER *DONG-A ILBO* (IN KOREAN)

NOVEMBER 2016

ASIA FOCUS #6



DONG JUNG-MIN: WHY DO YOU THINK THE AMERICANS HAVE ELECTED DONALD TRUMP?

BARTHÉLÉMY COURMONT: My first impression about the result of this election is that the Americans have probably rejected Hillary Clinton more than they have supported Donald Trump. She remarkably underperformed in nearly every state compared to Obama's results in 2012, and overall, she has lost no less than six million of 2012 Obama voters who decided either not to vote, or perhaps even vote for Trump. Her pitiable performance in traditionally "blue" states such as Pennsylvania, Michigan or Wisconsin, alongside her incapacity to win the support of swing states (Florida, Ohio, North Carolina...) was the key of this election. Her campaign is certainly to blame, as she failed in mobilizing the democratic electoral base. More than Trump's victory, this election is Clinton's defeat, even if she came up with more voters than Trump at the national level, like Gore did against Bush in 2000.

Yet, the reality is that more or less half of the people who voted have given their vote to Trump. Although he has not received a full support from the Republican Party, his supporters are republicans, and have expressed their anger against the establishment (which includes some independent voters). The people who voted for Trump feel left behind, scorned, unheard, and a candidate like Hillary Clinton symbolizes all that this silent majority (although not an actual one) despise. The U.S. society is more divided and polarized than what pollsters and analysts have predicted, and this division served a candidate such as Donald Trump.

DONG JUNG-MIN: LET'S TAKE A LOOK AT THE RELATION BETWEEN RUSSIA AND THE U.S., SOMETIMES CALLED 'NEW COLD WAR ERA', IN REFERENCE TO UKRAINE AND SYRIA CONFLICTS. DO YOU THINK TRUMP IS ABLE TO KEEP GETTING ON WITH PUTIN? PROBABLY PUTIN WILL NOT GIVE UP CRIMEA. DO YOU THINK TRUMP WILL ADMIT CRIMEA IS A PART OF RUSSIAN FEDERATION? AND HOW ABOUT THE SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA AFTER ACTIONS IN CRIMEA? TRUMP WILL BE LIFTING THE ECONOMIC SANCTIONS? HOW ABOUT SYRIA. DO YOU THINK THAT THE NEW U.S. PRESIDENT CAN ACCEPT THAT AL-ASSAD KEEPS ITS POWER IN SYRIA, AS PUTIN WANTS?

BARTHÉLÉMY COURMONT: Throughout the campaign, Russia has been repeatedly criticized by Hillary Clinton for an alleged support to Trump's candidacy. This accusation is probably exaggerated, and indicates a weakness in Clinton's strategy, especially noticeable considering the fact that she served as State Secretary from 2009-2013. However, no one can deny that Trump's positions regarding Russia are to say the least very different from Clinton's – and Obama's – diplomacy, as he praised Putin's leadership and considers engaging solid relations with Moscow. Does that mean that the era of turbulences between the U.S. and Russia will inevitably come to an end? There is no certainty. First of all, the new U.S. President will face different views, within his administration (especially depending who is in charge at Foggy Bottom and the Pentagon), in the Congress, and among the strategic community in Washington DC, where Russia is still regarded as a competitor rather than a trustable partner. Second, it is too early to know if Trump will keep this type of promises, or if it will be forgotten. Many announcements have been formulated by the future President during his campaign, and many of them will remain unaccomplished. It is too early to know in

which category the relation with Russia, and by consequence the U.S. posture regarding Ukraine and Syria, will be. But it is certain that the personal relations between Trump and Putin will be better than what we have seen under the Obama administration. Is it bad news for world security, for Syria and for the Europeans? Well, my opinion is certainly not.

DONG JUNG-MIN: LEADERS OF FRANCE, GERMANY, THE UK HAVE OPPOSED TRUMP DURING THE CAMPAIGN. HOW TRUMP'S DIPLOMATIC ISOLATIONIST POLICY AFFECTS WESTERN EUROPE?

BARTHÉLÉMY COURMONT: I personally consider that it was a huge mistake to officially and strongly support one of the candidates, and therefore try to interfere in a democratic country's election, on top of being a close friend and an ally. It is actually pretty rare, if not new at such a level (even in 2008, the "Obamania" did not lead the European leaders to take such strong positions in favor of Obama, and against McCain). And the result comes as a bad surprise not only for the majority of the Europeans, but also for Western European leaders, who will have to engage with a man they bashed in a few months from now. That said, Trump raises more skepticism than confidence among European leaders, and counterparts such as Angela Merkel and François Hollande will welcome him without enthusiasm, fearing that his isolationist tendencies will jeopardize the U.S. involvement in world affairs. It is also certain that an isolationist U.S. will have a strong impact in Europe, not only because the talks on a free-trade agreement will probably resume, but also because the Europeans won't rely on Washington's diplomacy as much as they did in the past decades. It could be a major change in the U.S. – Europe relation. But again, between the campaign's promises and the use of power once in the White House, there is a gap that may result in a completely different approach in European affairs, and what is seen as isolationism now may change as a result of a particular event that would push the U.S. to adopt a more assertive posture. Remember Wilson in 1917, remember Bush in 2001: two presidents who were elected on the promise of non-intervention, and who were soon confronted to the reality of international politics. Trump sounded isolationist as a candidate, but does that automatically mean he will be an isolationist president?

DONG JUNG-MIN: NATO NOW FACES ONE OF THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES SINCE THE COLD WAR. DOES TRUMP REALLY WITHDRAW HIMSELF FROM NATO? COULD YOU PREDICT THE FUTURE OF NATO? HOW DO YOU EVALUATE THE POSSIBILITY TO SEE THE CREATION OF AN EU ARMY?

BARTHÉLÉMY COURMONT: The question whether NATO faces its biggest challenges since the Cold War remains debatable, and is actually subject to debates in Europe. It is true, however, that the relation with Russia has been considerably deteriorated under the Obama administration, and that the European defense initiatives have been overshadowed by what is presented as a new Cold War. Now the questions are whether that period of turbulences can come to an end, and what can potentially be the future of NATO. It is certainly not in the interest of the U.S. and its president to weaken an alliance that has secured the U.S. presence in Europe for nearly 70 years. So it is unlikely that Trump will engage a process of dismantling of NATO. However, the debates regarding

the evolution of the alliance, burdensharing and the necessity to leave more responsibilities to the Europeans have been carried by a certain number of conservatives in the U.S., notably after the 1999 Kosovo war, especially in the Congress. These debates have been eclipsed by the war on terror since 2001, but they may reemerge anytime, and maybe Trump's election will make it happen. This is the only condition that may lead the European countries to reconsider a proper common foreign and defense policy, and ultimately an army. But let's be fair, it is not the absolute priority for European countries at the moment, and we may not forget that with the Brexit, the EU is going to lose one of its major defense contributors, the UK. The Trump administration may boost such concerns, but it will take time.

DONG JUNG-MIN: IN EUROPE, THERE ARE SEVERAL IMPORTANT ELECTION FROM NEXT MONTH LIKE AS AUSTRIA, FRANCE, THE NETHERLANDS, GERMANY. DO YOU THINK FAR-RIGHT AND POPULISM PARTIES CAN OBTAIN THE POWER IN THE FOLLOWING ELECTION?

BARTHÉLÉMY COURMONT: Most certainly. Not only because of Trump's surprising election, but simply as we have observed in the past decade an increase of far-right and populist movements in most Western European countries. The Netherlands and France, where Marine Le Pen's Front National could come first in the first round of the next spring's presidential election (out of two rounds, which means her chances to win the election remain very limited), are particularly affected by this trend, which affects most democratic systems in the world, in times of uncertainties and vivid critics on globalization and its impact. It is therefore an interesting combination of a globalized movement and local forces that we have observed in the U.S., but also in most European countries in the past decade (and sometimes more), not to mention other parts of the world where populist movements have significantly risen. The case of the Philippines may be mentioned.

DONG JUNG-MIN: LET'S MOVE TO EAST ASIA. TRUMP HAS STRESSED THAT SOUTH KOREA AND JAPAN NEED TO DEFEND THEMSELVES. HE ALSO HAS COMPLAINED THAT THE US IS PAYING TOO MUCH TO DEFEND SOUTH KOREA, INCLUDING US ARMED FORCES IN KOREA. WHAT DO YOU THINK IS EXACTLY TRUMP'S PLAN? IS HE EVEN CONSIDERING THE WITHDRAWAL OF US ARMED FORCES FROM SOUTH KOREA?

BARTHÉLÉMY COURMONT: What has been interesting and intriguing during this U.S. electoral campaign is the lack of clear positions and proposals from both candidates on East Asia. In 2008, and even more in 2012, Obama and his opponents have made many mentions of that region, especially in relation with the rise of China. This time, neither Trump nor Clinton (who ironically claims the legacy of the pivot strategy to Asia) have made East Asia a priority of their foreign policy program, focusing instead on Russia, Syria, and of course ISIS. Trump's mentions of Japan and South Korea, last summer, appear therefore as the only clear, although quite provocative to say the least, plan in the region, especially when he invited both countries to develop their own nuclear capacities to counter Pyongyang's nukes. And when he implicitly considered re-organizing the U.S. military presence in the region. Let's be realistic: withdrawing the

U.S. forces in Japan and South Korea, a total of about 60 000 troops, cannot be decided abruptly and without a comprehensive dialogue with both Tokyo and Seoul, considering the strategic alliances. That said, it indicates a will to reconsider the U.S. strategic involvement in North-east Asia in the long term. And Trump is certainly not the only person in Washington DC who believes times of U.S. military presence in various regions have changed, and perhaps inevitably come to an end. This question will probably be subject to series of debates and studies among the U.S. strategic community, but again, it will take a long time.

DONG JUNG-MIN: AFTER TRUMP WAS ELECTED, THERE WAS NO OFFICIAL COMMENT FROM NORTH KOREA. HOW DOES KIM JUNG-UN EVALUATE THE TRUMP'S ELECTION? IS IT GOOD OR BAD FOR HIM? HOW WILL IT CHANGE THE TACTICS OF NORTH KOREA TOWARD THE U.S.?

BARTHÉLÉMY COURMONT: I don't think that one should expect any comment from Pyongyang. And it is too early to consider that this election is good or bad news for North Korea anyway. After all, both republican and democrat administrations have engaged in sanctions against the North Korean regime, and any U.S. president has always been vividly criticized in Pyongyang. So there is no particular reason why Trump should be praised more than his predecessors. There is also no reason why North Korea should suddenly change its attitude toward the U.S., without any guarantee that it will provide any benefit to Pyongyang. Kim Jung-un will continue to pursue a strategy that has worked for more than two decades, based on a constant bargain fed by North Korea's threat and the opacity of its actual military capabilities. Why should Pyongyang change a recipe that has proven so efficient, and probably delicious for three generations of North Korean leaders?

DONG JUNG-MIN: FOR SEVERAL DECADES, US GOVERNMENTS HAVE MAINTAINED THE PRESSURE AND SANCTION TOWARD NORTH KOREA. WILL TRUMP SUCCEED? OR CAN HE ADMIT THAT NORTH KOREA POSSESSES NUCLEAR WEAPONS?

BARTHÉLÉMY COURMONT: Let's face it, all different approaches with North Korea in the past 25 years have failed. Clinton tried to engage with Pyongyang after the KEDO agreements, and Madeleine Albright's trip to Pyongyang and visit to Kim Jung-il was then presented as the beginning of a new era in the relation between the two countries, especially considering the improvement of Seoul-Pyongyang relation at the same time under the Sunshine policy. But it did not work, as North Korea carried on its nuclear program and did not make substantial efforts. The Bush administration adopted a completely different, and tough, approach, by increasing the pressure on Pyongyang and enlisting North Korea among the "axis of evil" members, alongside Iraq and Iran. It also failed, and North Korea conducted its first nuclear test in 2006. The Obama administration has tried to pursue what was called a "smart power" approach, by keeping the pressure but opening at the same time the door to negotiations. The result is, unfortunately, no better than the previous strategies. North Korea is still reluctant to any significant progress in dismantling its nuclear capabilities, and has accelerated its program by conducting four more nuclear tests under the Obama administration (2009,

2013, and two earlier this year). We may disagree and debate on what should be the most appropriate approach, but a fact is a fact: all strategies conducted by the U.S. since the end of the Cold War and North Korea's isolation have failed. Considering that Trump will succeed where all his predecessors have been unable to untie the knot seems for that reason quite unrealistic, except by acknowledging the fact that North Korea has become de facto a nuclear power. I don't think the U.S. will take that direction in the forthcoming future, even under Trump's leadership.

DONG JUNG-MIN: DO YOU THINK TRUMP WILL BE HOLDING SUMMIT TALKS WITH KIM JUNG-UN? ON THE CONTRARY, TRUMP CAN CARRY ON AN AIR STRIKE AGAINST NORTH KOREA?

BARTHÉLÉMY COURMONT: Trump meeting North Korea's leader? Why not? It is not as weird as it may sound. After all, Bill Clinton considered meeting Kim Jung-il, but it never happened. Bush had no chance, as he publicly insulted his North Korean counterpart as soon as he reached the White House. Obama faced a difficult international agenda, alongside strong oppositions at home, especially in the Congress. He was not in a position of making such an iconoclast proposal, especially since North Korea conducted four nuclear tests during his terms. Trump has the advantage of playing the anti-establishment card, so that is a possibility. It will be, however, highly criticized as North Korea has moved toward a more radical posture since Kim Jung-un has been in power, with three nuclear tests.

On the other side, the possibility to conduct airstrikes against North Korea remains, to my opinion, extremely unlikely considering the consequences. Even the neoconservative movement, particularly influent under the first Bush term (2001-2005) never considered such a risky move. Trump may sound unpredictable, but he cannot decide alone, and he does not believe in a messianic mission for the U.S. worldwide. That makes him, to some extent, far less dangerous than the neoconservative. And the U.S. knows that striking North Korea will expose its allies in the region, as well as jeopardize the relation with China. Considering his will to disengage from some issues in Asia, I don't see Trump making such a dramatic move. It is more likely that he does not care much about North Korea, as long as it is not an immediate threat to the U.S.

DONG JUNG-MIN: HOW ABOUT CHINA? MANY EXPERTS BELIEVE TRUMP WILL CAUSE TRADE FRICTIONS WITH CHINA. BUT, THERE ARE BELIEFS THAT XI JINPING WELCOMES TRUMP'S VICTORY. WHAT IS THE FUTURE BETWEEN US AND CHINA?

BARTHÉLÉMY COURMONT: Whether or not it is officially acknowledged, China has become the U.S. biggest competitor, and also an emerging superpower. Trump could be the U.S. president witnessing the rise of China as the world first economy during his term, as it may officially happen around 2020. And he will also witness Beijing assertiveness in world affairs, not only within its regional environment, but in other parts of the world. At the same time, the pivot strategy was a China strategy more than an Asian strategy, as it was driven by the will to reposition the U.S. in Asia and respond to the rise of China. Yet, China was surprisingly absent from the debates between Trump and Clinton, which

tends to indicate the difficulty for both the Republicans and the Democrats to define a clear China policy.

Meanwhile, China remains pragmatic regarding who is leading in the U.S., although the past two decades have shown that a Republican administration has generally been better than a Democratic one in implementing strong China – U.S. relations. The Democrats have shown more interest in issues such as human rights, and the U.S. – China relation was quite difficult under the Clinton administration. On the other side, it has improved under the Bush administration, and it has become more complex under the Obama-Clinton diplomacy from 2009-2013, when Beijing welcomed the pivot strategy with skepticism. It does not mean however that China supported Trump more than Clinton, and it does mean either that it will be easier to work with a Trump administration.

The future of China – U.S. relation mostly lies in the balance of power between these two countries. And one may consider that this balance is changing in favor of Beijing faster than expected, even if the U.S. remains of course a major superpower. Considered a possibility for decades, the emergence of China has become a reality, and it is shaking a world order where the U.S. has been playing a prominent role. The recent developments in the South China sea are just one demonstration of that change of paradigm. And the implementation of mechanisms such as the Asian Infrastructure Investments Bank (AIIB) is a potential game changer. Will the institutions initiated and mostly led by the U.S., such as the World Bank and the IMF, resist this change? Will the U.S. influence in world affairs remain decisive? And will China propose a new deal to the world, especially emerging countries? The responses to these questions will be at the center of the international agenda in the near future, far more than U.S. – Russia relations for instance.

DONG JUNG-MIN: 'OBAMA'S PIVOT TO ASIA' WILL BE LIKELY TO FADE UNDER TRUMP. WHAT IS TRUMP'S DIPLOMACY TOWARDS ASIA?

BARTHÉLÉMY COURMONT: I think the Pivot strategy will come to an end, not only because of Trump's election and his positions regarding treaties such as the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) that he promised to abort both before and after his election, but because of its poor achievements overall. Besides reaffirming its strategic partnership with long-time allies such as Japan, South Korea and Australia, the pivot has engaged a dialogue with the Philippines and Vietnam. Rodrigo Duterte's recent trip to Beijing and his statements on the U.S.-Philippines partnership indicate that Manila is making a move toward China, and therefore is leaving at the same time the U.S. behind. Malaysia is making a similar move, mostly because of China's economic attraction and a pragmatic analysis of gains and losses.

The original plan of the pivot strategy was to counter China's rise in East Asia. But it failed, especially if one takes into account the Chinese improvements since the beginning of the decade: it has become the world's second economy in 2010; its military is constantly rising, making China Asia's first military power now; Beijing has implemented the AIIB and its economic exchanges with other Asian countries keep

growing. The U.S. has not much to oppose to that, and the irony is that Trump is perhaps more aware of it than the members of the Obama administration. It is very likely that the pivot strategy will be one of the first collateral damages of Trump's election, as he will certainly officially declare it over, both by dismissing the TPP and reinterpreting the U.S. strategic involvement in the region.

On the other side, the biggest chance for the pivot strategy was the popular support Obama benefited in East Asia. Trump will not be able to match Obama's positive image, and it will affect deeply the reception of the U.S. diplomatic approach toward Asian countries. So at the end of the day, not only that Trump may declare the pivot strategy over because of its poor results and the fact that he does not believe in it, but also simply because his credit in the region will be too limited to expect any reinforcement of the U.S. through the vehicle of its soft power and the image of its president. But to be honest, Hillary Clinton would have probably faced a similar challenge if the result had been in her favor on November 8. The Obama period will come to an end next January, and that is something the Asian societies have been preparing for. Maybe this is an element one must take into account when trying to understand Philippines and Malaysia's recent moves toward Beijing.

DONG JUNG-MIN: ANYTHING ELSE YOU WOULD LIKE TO ADD ABOUT THE FUTURE OF EAST ASIA AND EUROPE AFTER TRUMP'S ELECTION?

BARTHÉLÉMY COURMONT: First of all, do we have to consider that the future of East Asia and Europe still lies in the U.S.? Maybe not anymore. Some may see Trump's election as the beginning of a new era. But can we also consider that it is nothing but the confirmation of trends that have started years ago already? The U.S. remains, and will remain for decades, a major power, but is it still as influent as it used to be at the dawn of the post-Cold War era? Look at recent crisis and conflicts: the U.S. has been confronted to a growing, and concerning, incapacity to solve the problems.

Second, why should one consider that the result of this U.S. election will bring significant and deep changes for Europe and East Asia? Although we are not Americans and we did not vote in this election, we feel concerned by its result. But we base our analysis, fear and hope on Trump's postures during his campaign. But it is still too early to judge his actions as U.S. President. So one must remain extremely cautious, and wait at least until we know who will compose the Trump administration to identify what are the possible foreign policy orientations.

Last, one may not forget that international relations are not only driven by ideas and those who carry them, but also by events. The uncertainties of the current international affairs, both at economic and security levels, remind us that dramatic changes may happen without any notice. It is particularly visible nowadays in Asia, where political, economic and social changes have multiplied in the past few years, from Burma (Myanmar) to Thailand, from Philippines to Indonesia, and to some extent in North Korea or China. The unpredictability of international affairs cannot be underestimated. It also reminds us that more than relying on external actors, Europe and East Asia must face their own problems and act united and responsible. ■

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CONDUCTED BY

DONG JUNG-MIN / JOURNALIST FOR FOR THE KOREAN DAILY NEWSPAPER DONG-A ILBO

A Korean version of this interview was published in the November 23, 2016 edition of the Dong-A Ilbo.

NOVEMBER 2016

ASIA FOCUS

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