

Who will rise to replace the US?

Written by Paul Lin 林

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US president-elect Donald Trump announced that his first task on entering the White House would be to withdraw from the US-led Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement. If the US moves toward isolationism, a host of nations will rise that want to replace the US.

The first nation that will try to do so will be China: the world's most populous nation and second-largest economy. In such an event, Russia, militarily the second-most powerful nation in the world, would not be prepared to simply watch from the sidelines. Japan and Germany would also wait for an opportunity to pounce, in order to prevent China and Russia from achieving dominance in Europe and Asia.

It is likely that the US-Russia relationship will be the hammer that breaks the traditional global order. It is really just a continuation of the 1917 October Revolution — in particular the standoff between the free world and the Soviet bloc that followed the end of World War II.

Although Russia has long since discarded the ideology of communism, Russia's autocratic, hegemonic mentality is still giving Western nations nightmares and has led to the West neglecting China's rise. In the past few years, the US has begun to wake up to this and take action, albeit far too late.

However, once Trump takes office, will the recent effort to redress the balance be all for nothing?

The West has looked on Russia as its principal enemy partly because of historical tradition, but also because of being misled by old "China hands" and a lack of understanding of the hypocritical nature of Chinese culture. This has caused Washington to apply a conventional Kremlinology approach to studying the inner workings of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In doing so, it arrived at the wrong conclusion and ended up appeasing the Chinese tiger.

Russian cultural tradition is closer to that of the West than it is to Chinese culture, which is demonstrated by how the two nations behave within the UN Security Council. Moscow often adopts a confrontational stance, voting against the US. Beijing, on the other hand, often gives up its veto in order to win favors from Washington, while secretly plotting against the US.

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It is possible that, in the era of Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin, US-Russia relations will improve. During the US election campaign, Trump and Putin both openly sung each other's praises. Trump has also appointed former US Defense Intelligence Agency director Michael Flynn, who is believed to be on good terms with Putin, as his national security adviser.

Many of Trump's appointees to important government posts are likely to be US Republicans who will not stand for Chinese threats, be they political, economic or military. The Trump administration might therefore decide to turn on its head former US president Richard Nixon's doctrine of siding with China to defeat Russia and instead form an alliance with Russia against China.

What is Russia's view of China? Today, Putin is second to none in his opposition of both communism and China. Very few people openly criticize Vladimir Lenin, the spiritual father of the CCP. Yet in January, within the space of five days, Putin twice strongly criticized Lenin for his actions, including the massacre of the Russian Romanov Dynasty and their servants in 1918, and for selling Russian land and ethnic autonomy.

Putin's opposition to China can be seen in his prohibition on Chinatowns in Russian cities and his government's hostility toward Chinese immigrants.

In this respect, Trump's brand of nationalism is similar to Putin's and conforms with Putin's strategy of forming alliances with distant nations while attacking states closer to home.

Of course, Chinese President Xi Jinping (习近平) has exerted a great deal of energy in trying to curry favor with Putin by paying high prices for imported Russian oil, in addition to purchases of Russian military hardware. In trying to build a new "Greater Chinese Empire" based upon the old tributary system, Xi has instead inadvertently allowed China to sink to the status of a tribute-paying nation under the thumb of the Kremlin.

Beijing has already gone ahead and signed a border agreement with Russia, which offered as tribute vast swathes of Siberia and Central Asia.

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Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is working hard to forge closer relationships with Russia and India. If Europe remains in its current form, the US, Russia, Japan and India might end up containing China. If so, in a situation similar to the dying days of the Qing Dynasty, movements for autonomous rule and independence within China's restive western provinces might spring up and bring about sweeping political change.

Taiwan has a rather good relationship with Russia. During former president Lee Teng-hui's (李登輝) term, then-Moscow mayor Gavriil Popov visited Taiwan, which was followed by then-Taipei mayor Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁) paying a reciprocal visit to Russia.

In his capacity as Taiwan's envoy to the recent APEC summit, People First Party Chairman James Soong (宋楚瑜) engaged in small-talk with Putin — without avoiding the taboo subject of China. President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) must work harder to form alliances with the north.

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Translated by Edward Jones

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