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Populism blinding US to Asia's reality

The heated rhetoric against China during the Republican primaries could crimp the next president's Asia policy

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THE American campaign season is gaining momentum, and the so-called 'Super Tuesday' contests saw the Republican Party inch closer to selecting President Barack Obama's opponent for the November showdown. Super Tuesday saw the Republicans allocate more delegates for the nomination of their presidential candidate than in all previous primaries combined.



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Two primary points can be taken from this formative day. Mr Mitt Romney remains the most likely candidate to represent the Republicans in the election, but he has fallen short in restoring his 'presumptive nominee' status. Second, Mr Romney's opponents Rick Santorum, Newt Gingrich and Ron Paul appear unlikely to abandon their bids for the presidency in the foreseeable future. Intra-Republican wrangling is likely to continue for months to come.

Leaving aside questions of the likely Republican nominee or the White House race, the atmospherics of the campaign season itself hold significant relevance for observers watching from across the Pacific. The future trajectory of the United States' presence in Asia will not only result from political outcomes, but also from the nature of American political debate over the coming months.

Rhetoric on both sides of America's political aisle is now defined by inward-looking policy platforms and at times blatant pandering to populist sentiments. The Republican presidential field is locked in a battle over who is the most 'conservative', and by extension who would be the greatest contrast to the more liberal President Obama in the election.

In practice, the race towards far-right conservatism has solidified the platform for American exceptionalist rhetoric and given pause to those hoping for an America more engaged in multilateral forums. Nowhere is this clearer than in the candidates' classifications of Sino-US ties.

Polarising Mr Santorum - currently posing the greatest challenge to Mr Romney - addressed the Sino-US trade relationship by stating: 'I don't want to go to a trade war. I want to beat China. I want to go to war with China and make America the most attractive place in the world to do business.' Mr Santorum, who seldom shies away from hyperbole, presumably (and hopefully) means a 'war' in the economic sense. Nevertheless, his zero-sum message of competition and victory remains clear.

Mr Romney, for his part, told a conservative South Carolina crowd late last year that the Obama administration is responsible for China 'stealing (the US') intellectual property, hacking into our computers, artificially lowering their prices and killing American jobs'. The Chinese, he opined, are 'smiling all the way to the bank, taking our currency and taking our jobs and taking a lot of our future'.

Mr Obama has also entered the populist fray. The President arguably benefits from the Republican primaries and has yet to begin his re-election campaign in earnest. The notable exception was his 2011 State of the Union Address, which saw him very much take to the stump. Bracketed by praise for the US military and acknowledgement of tough economic times, Mr Obama's message was one of renewed optimism and unapologetic patriotic fervour. He spoke of revitalising the American economy by bringing home jobs that have egregiously moved offshore. He regaled the audience with a vision of an America full of modernising factories and highly trained workers, along with a world filled with US-made cars and high-tech goods. Mr Obama hit his crescendo when, speaking of the need for a fair and duly enforced global economic architecture, he stated: '(O)ur workers are the most productive on Earth, and if the playing field is level, I promise you - Americans will always win.'

It is neither surprising nor unprecedented to see presidential candidates calling for domestic progress or appealing to their constituency's patriotic vanity. But the tenor of this campaign season suggests a lack of empathy with positions abroad, and does not have the earmarks of a country ready to improve its engagement with some of the world's key emerging players.

There are strong arguments that any election cycle rhetoric should be taken with a healthy pinch of salt and that, once installed, the next US president will be compelled to seek a pragmatic, and at times cooperative, presence in Asia and elsewhere. One need look no further than Mr Bill Clinton and Mr George W. Bush for tough election talk on China that failed to materialise into divisive policies.

However, one should not discount the importance of populist trends to the future of America's foreign policy. The Obama administration's strategic pivot towards Asia has reinforced America's sense as a 'Pacific nation', and there is no plausible scenario in which the United States does not remain a major player in the region. Uncertainty exists as to how the US will act in its various roles in Asia, and election year pulpitering can set the stage for cooperation and healthy competition - or economic antagonism and strategic posturing.

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Current rhetoric is trending towards the latter and, in this case, rhetoric could matter.

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