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# This is bad for the US

Xenia Wickett on why the antics of Trump and co should worry America's allies

America's presidential election process is well underway. As always, it is wise to take much of what is said by the candidates during this primary season with a pinch of salt. Nevertheless, the level of debate this year has reached new lows and there could be long-term consequences to what has been said. Is it time for America's allies to be worried?

This period is often described as the 'silly season' in the United States. The long, drawn out primary period that starts at the beginning of the election year and runs through to the Republican and Democratic conventions in the summer is the culmination of a process that now lasts some 18 months, with less visible preparations happening even farther in advance. This process has two main characteristics.

The first is the candidates' moves to the margins of the political spectrum, where Democrats adopt more liberal positions and Republicans move to the right in response to the fact that primary voters tend to be more partisan than the general electorate. The second associated trend is to use any available tactic to undercut rivals, including media blitzes, exaggerated claims, rumour-spreading and mischaracterizations of rival policies.

Most international observers have come to recognize this period for what it is – raw, unadulterated competition. America's allies can take comfort in the knowledge that once it is over and the next president is chosen, the US will revert to its traditional position of being at times frustrating, but a mostly positive force around the globe.

In many respects, the same is true this year. The candidates appear more extreme than in recent election cycles, but once the two parties have chosen who they want to run, they will move towards the middle to pick up moderate voters in the knowledge that the base alone is not enough to win the presidency. And then, once in office, the president will find him or herself constrained by Congress (which may be in the hands of the opposition) and the judiciary.

However, there are three factors that are more worrisome than normal and should make America's allies more concerned about how this election is playing out.

The first relates to the tone of the debate, particularly on the Republican side. The depths that the candidates, led by Donald Trump, have plumbed could have some real consequences.

Following the Second World War,

America was seen, particularly in Europe, as a 'shining city on a hill', a moral leader globally. In research published by Chatham House in 2014, European elites continued to desire such leadership but at the same time noted their significant concerns that it was in decline. Given the tenor of the public conversation that has been taking place over recent months, it is hard to imagine how that might be reversed.

If this perceived decline in moral leadership continues, the consequences could be dire. America as a representation of what is strong and right in a democracy, a leading example for other aspiring nations, and a node of attraction for nations wavering between authoritarianism and democracy, could be at an end. This would have tangible consequences over the longer term.

The tone and content also has resonance in the Middle East in particular. Trump's support of a (possibly temporary) 'total and complete shutdown' of US borders to Muslims will no doubt be remembered for years to come. Regardless of whether he is ultimately elected or whether the US constitution would even allow it – which it probably wouldn't – such sentiment and the apparent public support for it will colour how many in the region see the United States. It will be thrown back in America's face again and again.

The second factor that should make America's allies nervous – and its potential adversaries smirk – relates to what this rhetoric says for the political environment in the United States and how it is likely to drive further polarization.

We tend to think of America as having a two-party system. But it is hard to define either side in a way that encompasses all their disparate parts. There is little that John Kasich at the moderate end of the Republican Party has in common with Trump – whose politics don't generally align with the priorities of the contemporary Republican Party – and Ted Cruz at the extreme conservative end. Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton are not as far divided, but even here there are significant divisions: Sanders, an avowed 'democratic socialist', didn't formally join the Democratic Party until 2015, whereas Clinton is running on a more moderate, pragmatic platform.

These intra-party – along with the inter-party – divisions are going to make it extremely hard to govern. This has been manifest in recent years in the House of Representatives and eventually led to the



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retirement of the former Speaker, John Boehner, who found it impossible to bring together his conservative Tea Party representatives with his more traditional Republicans. For many watching from outside the US the polarization has stymied progress both domestically and internationally. This election process could make the situation even worse, heightening concerns among America's allies that it would be unable to act if they were threatened.

The final reason for America's allies to worry relates to what these debates and divisions represent. The level of the conversation taking place in the US today is a symptom of a far more troubling challenge to the American system; one caused, in large part, by the rising levels of inequality in the US and the inadequacy of the current systems and institutions to deal with it.

Trump and Sanders have tapped into different, but similar, sentiments. Much of their support comes from the disenfranchised in society, those who feel left behind by the system. Unfortunately, neither Trump nor Sanders is likely, even if elected,

## 'If this perceived decline in moral leadership goes on the consequences could be dire'

to be able to resolve the obstacles causing their perceived exclusion. No state has found the policies to solve un- or under-employment or low wages. America is unlikely to choose, and Republicans wouldn't permit, a Scandinavian-style social safety net, and the effects of technology and globalization are likely to increase the disparities between winners and losers over time.

So, America is going to have to deal with these problems in the coming years. If they are unable to due to political disagreements or a slowing economy, the challenges are only likely to get larger – and tensions will perhaps manifest themselves through other means. So, for America's

allies, and America itself, there are major domestic obstacles ahead that will have international consequences with regards to policies ranging from immigration and trade to military assertiveness.

On the one hand, these divisions are normal in America's election process and we should expect a certain amount of extreme rhetoric. On the other, in small ways, it could be different this time. The combination of changing international perceptions, heightened political polarization, and serious social challenges, America's ability to act internationally could be affected. These obstacles are likely to lead to a starker foreign policy: where America's vital national interests are engaged, it will always find a way to act, but on issues of less direct concern, America's allies could find themselves with its backing in word, but perhaps not deed.

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