

Whoever wins, Australia can't rely on its great and powerful friend

by **Hugh White**

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Leaders matter. Whether nations flourish or stumble in the face of challenges depends a lot on how well they are led. America today faces its gravest challenges in many decades, so the quality of its leadership matters more than ever. And yet this year American voters have been offered a choice between Donald Trump and Joe Biden.

What a choice. Trump is wholly unfit for the job in terms of experience, intellect and character, and he has demeaned his office and his country for four long, sad years. Biden is a lacklustre journeyman politician with few ideas and no charisma, whose only compelling claim to the presidency is that he is not Donald Trump.

It is still not clear that Americans, through the dysfunctional electoral system they inherited from the 18th century, have rejected Trump. How deeply disheartening. How could it be that, after his disastrous first term, Trump still commands so much support that he remains within striking distance of a second term? We know what that would be like, and we know how bad it would be for America and the world.

Thankfully Joe Biden still has a good chance, though a close result risks endless wrangling in the courts or, even worse, on the streets. If he makes it to the Oval Office, Biden would restore decency, decorum and a measure of professional competence to the presidency of the United States. But relief at that prospect must be tempered by realism. Biden is not the leader to restore America's cohesion at home and leadership abroad.

He would not recreate the engaged, effective and benevolent hyperpower that, in the heady aftermath of the Cold War, seemed set to preside over a world united by economic globalisation and democratic politics. That America, and that world, are gone forever. Australia must learn to live with this.

Biden would face a bewilderingly divided country. The millions who still passionately support Trump would never accept him as their leader. America's bitter partisan divide means that even a truly compelling figure like Barack Obama would find it hard to unite the country.

Biden is anything but compelling. He has been a weak candidate and all the evidence suggests he would be a weak president, with no chance of building consensus around the major reforms required to address America's problems. And those problems go very deep.

Of course America has faced tough times before. In the late 1960s the Vietnam War and racial tensions seemed to be tearing the country apart. But back then America's economy was by far the largest in the world, with an innovative and dynamic manufacturing sector and an unchallengeable lead in technology and innovation. Wealth and opportunities were much more evenly distributed, its health and education systems were the envy of the world, and its political system, though always rambunctious, worked to provide effective government.

We cannot assume that America will prove as resilient today as it was 50 years ago, because it is a different country now. Its deep racial and social divisions play out against a background of growing inequality, declining opportunities, failing public services and severe political dysfunction, all amplified by the challenges of climate change and rivalry with China.

It would take a massive and sustained program of reform and rebuilding to overcome these problems. That demands a leader with extraordinary political energy and skills. Biden is a far better person than Trump, but he is not that leader.

So whatever the outcome, this election has grave implications for Australia. Economically, it means America will not regain its old place as a key engine of globalisation, innovation and economic growth. The slide from free trade to protectionism will continue, and the reforms required to rebuild globally competitive manufacturing will not happen.

China's economy will overtake America's to become the largest in the world on any measure, and it will continue to erode America's technological lead. US leadership of the key international economic institutions will not be restored. Increasingly, China will set the rules and norms that govern the global economy. None of this is good news for us.

The strategic outlook is even worse. America's global leadership faces major trials in Europe and the Middle East, but it confronts its greatest challenge in east Asia, where China seeks to take its place as the dominant regional power.

But for all Washington's tough talk of a new cold war to contain China, the Trump administration has done nothing effective to counter Beijing's growing power and influence, and there is little chance that Biden would do any better.

He and his advisers, underestimating China's strength and resolve, hope that mending relations with allies and tweaking defence plans will be enough to deter Beijing and restore US leadership. That is a fantasy.

Containing China in its own backyard will require a massive US effort, with huge costs and risks. There is no reason to think that Biden is any more committed than Trump was to that kind of effort, and nor are the American people on either side of the political divide.

Biden or Trump, nothing will change this central fact: American power in Asia will fade, perhaps quite quickly, in the years ahead, and Australia will face the new Asia without a great and powerful friend.

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