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By Kishore Mahbubani

CNN

10 November 2016

Why Trump should work with China

Story highlights

- Kishore Mahbubani: America needs a strong economic partner to meet its infrastructure goals. China can be that partner
- By working with China, Trump can also help our planet, Mahbubani writes

(CNN) Donald Trump has just won a shocking election victory against Hillary Clinton. He won against all odds. Yet that was the easy part. Now comes the hard part: governing a deeply divided nation. There will be no easy options.

Trump will have to make some painful choices, especially in regard to policy in Asia. His instinct will be to take a hawkish stance against America's No. 1 geopolitical competitor, China, and to look for opportunities to trip China up.

For example, he could continue to call out China over the South China Sea issue. He told The New York Times in March that he finds China's building and reclamation activities there "so brazen, and it's so terrible that they would do that without any consultation." On the economic side, he could double down on his plan to "instruct my treasury secretary to label China a currency manipulator" and to "instruct the US trade representative to bring trade cases against China, both in this country and at the WTO." He has also warned that China would "enter the TPP through the back door ... if we don't stop it."

However, America's No. 1 priority has to be economic growth. The only way to meet the expectations of the millions who voted for Trump is to deliver a booming economy with jobs growing. One easy way to do it would be to unleash a surge in infrastructure spending. Having been a builder all his life, Trump, of all people, should understand the importance of infrastructure. He has promised that under his leadership, America "will build the next generation of roads, bridges, railways, tunnels, seaports and airports that our country deserves. American cars will travel the roads, American planes will connect our cities, and American ships will patrol the seas. American steel will send new skyscrapers soaring. We will put new American metal into the spine of this nation."

But a fiscally challenged America will not be able to unleash massive infrastructure spending. America needs a strong economic partner to achieve this. And the current infrastructure-building superpower is China. As Trump has noted, "You know, they've made so much economic

progress because of the United States. And in the meantime we're becoming a Third World nation. You look at our airports, you look at our roadways, you look at our bridges are falling down. They're building bridges all over the place, ours are falling down."

Former US diplomat Chas Freeman notes an interesting statistic. When President Eisenhower unleashed the last big wave of road building in America in 1956, he built 41,000 miles of highways. China has built 76,000 miles since 1990. Freeman also notes that at 12,000 miles, China has the most extensive high-speed rail lines in the world, ferrying 1.1 billion passengers a year. Seven of the world's 10 largest and busiest ports are Chinese. In 2015, China laid 1.6 million miles of fiber optic cable. It is also the world leader in long-distance ultra-high-voltage power transmission.

Given the current condition of the global economy, a massive infrastructure collaboration project between America and China would be like an economic dream made in heaven. Both the American and Chinese peoples would benefit. In theory, America leads the world in innovation. Yet, in the critical area of high-speed rail, for example, America's infrastructure does look distinctly Third World. US-China collaboration can change this. Either in the Northeast or in California, China can build state-of-the-art high-speed rail for the United States. But after the China-bashing rhetoric of the campaign trail, Trump will have to expend significant political capital to explain why greater economic collaboration between America and China makes good economic sense. And he will have to suppress his geopolitical instincts.

To do this, he will first need to be intellectually convinced that cooperation with China is in America's long-term interests. As Chinese Ambassador Cui Tiankai wrote in 2014, "When China and the United States find ways to work together, all nations benefit ... the United States and China have a unique opportunity to find ways to combine their expertise and experience to find innovative ways of enhancing our economies, as well as those of our friends in the region." If Trump stays in office for eight years, he will see the dawn of the post-American world that Fareed Zakaria wrote about. He will have to prepare America for this.

At the same time, by working with China, Trump can also help our planet. The evidence is clear. We live in a small, increasingly fragile, massively interdependent planet, fraught with complex cross-border problems such as terrorism, epidemics, refugee crises and climate change. The era of playing 19th century zero-sum geopolitical games is over. To save planet Earth, we need great power collaboration of the type US President Barack Obama and Chinese President Xi Jinping demonstrated on climate change. It is clear that in the 21st century, America and China should cooperate more, even as they compete from time to time.

This is why the time has come for Trump to experiment with a massive infrastructure partnership with China. If it gives both economies a major boost, and also gives the global economy a major shot in the arm, it would lay the foundations of trust for greater collaboration between the world's No. 1 and No. 2 powers on many global governance challenges. The result will be a happier planet.

Kishore Mahbubani is dean of the LKY School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore and the author of "The Great Convergence." The views expressed are his own.