

“Can a Single Leader Make a Difference?” Or Does It Take Collective Efforts by Global Players to Protect Public Goods?

By Kazumasa Kusaka

What is the Trump phenomenon? Here I would like to discuss styles of governance and international concerns over both so-called protectionism and the absence of commitment to global leadership.

We have recently observed distinct support for strong leadership not only in the United States but also in China and Russia, partly as a backlash over poor economic performance and subsequent weakened leadership following the Lehman Brothers collapse and the financial crisis in many countries. The question is whether the Trump phenomenon is transient or not. Like a matryoshka doll, are we going to see another Donald Trump after Donald Trump? We have to face the political reality that the current US president could well win successful re-election should the next presidential election be held tomorrow. The point is we should not just see the trees, but the wood itself: which is the changing dynamism of voters and constituencies. This could be a long-lasting structural problem.

If “America First” is not an isolated personal movement, just labeling it as protectionism based on populism might not be a good prescription. Professor Sota Kato points out that historically populist-empowered political capital was a vehicle to destroy the protectionist coalitions of narrow vested interests. The question is what side does the public take? Are the public consumers or workers whose jobs are being threatened?

We are facing a challenge over how to interpret these developments and distinguish the symptoms and causes. In addition, we need to understand how national decision-making is undertaken.

In the models of political decision-making, there is a classical case study of the Cuban missile crisis by Graham T. Allison. In the bureaucratic politics model, the organization you are working for would change your perception of “national interests”, and therefore quite often actors end up pursuing policies that benefit the organizations they represent. At the end of bargaining among actors and organizations in the decision-making process, a decision emerges as if it were a rational decision by a rational leader.

The opposite end of the model is the classical rational actor model which assumes that policy decisions are made by a unitary, rational decision maker. The latter has been used to analyze the intentions of unknown decision makers, such as in the case of the Kremlin or the North Korean leader, with little knowledge of their internal power structure.

In a modern democracy, separation of power within the government is institutionalized to secure checks and balances. Can an autocratic leader of an administration make a marked difference? The question is whether a strong leader like Trump

makes decisions as a single rational leader, or whether there still exists an effective bargaining process. If elements of the latter remain, how do other actors effectively exercise influence in the decision-making process?

In recent years, the effort to realize policy objectives and value systems has been taken in the form of a coalition of stakeholders, not within national borders but beyond them, while leaving unsettled domestic confrontations aside. A clear-cut example is the global warming environment lobby versus the skeptical schools. With this structure in mind, what can the international community do to prevent the decisions of a major country from leading it toward straightforward protectionism in trade and investment?

A model answer is shown in the very *raison d'être* for the GATT/WTO dispute settlement mechanism. It has proved to be effective to protect the weak, but is it robust enough to deal with a superpower and survive as an institution? History tells that the League of Nations and the Kyoto Protocol lost the US. *Pax Americana* is based on a protective spirit to promote the Bretton Woods system, which has met US national interests until recently. However, where are we now? Is the US beginning to pass over the guardian role to rising powers like China or India? And can any emerging power replace the US role? Two problems exist: firstly, the international economic order they aim to see might be different from the one currently shared among OECD countries, and secondly, it will still take another decade to accumulate experience and foster professionals to sit in the driver's seat, as we have observed in the difficulties with the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank.

There is the case of the tragedy of the commons, a situation where individual users acting according to their own self-interest end up in destroying the common good. Commons first or “one's own interest first” are the opposite poles, especially if interest is perceived in a zero-sum game context. When a country which needs to play a leading role cannot play that role anymore, then naturally others have to take the responsibility.

It is time for the TPP11 signatories to stand and shine forth. Let's start forming a coalition of like-minded actors regardless of national boundaries to fight against those who would destroy the commons.

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