



CIGS Daniel Sneider Seminar

“The U.S. Midterms: What Happened and What it Means for U.S. Foreign Policy”

(Summary of Q&A)

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Venue: CIGS Meeting Room, Tokyo, Japan

Kuni Miyake, Research Director, Canon Institute for Global Studies (CIGS): First, Trump may become tougher on Iran, but I think the Iranians are patient and will outsmart the United States. They will do their best to avoid any confrontation. Second, concerning trade, in Japan we hate numerical quotas. Third, with regard to U.S.-China relations, rather than a New Cold War, I see a U.S.-China Cold Star Wars. It is not hot because nobody wants to fight a war, but like Star Wars there will be many episodes. For example, the first episode could be North Korea, the second episode trade war, and so on. Finally, concerning North Korea, I am most worried about Trump wanting to give more concessions.

Daniel Sneider, Lecturer in International Policy, Stanford University: I agree with everything you said. Regarding the last point, most analysts share your view and are worried about a bad deal. It is a very delicate situation.

Questioner 1: What are your thoughts on Trump's position on Russia? Japan is very interested in this question.

Sneider: It is very clear the President has some strange personal tie to Russia. Everybody noticed at the meeting in Paris when all the world leaders were there and Trump looked kind of unhappy until Putin came in and Trump openly made this big smile. I think part of the reason is that Trump is increasingly isolated, both within the United States and globally. The Russians have positioned themselves as his friend. He likes people who like him. Trump desperately wants to embrace Russia.

Trump and others in the administration fantasize about the United States and Russia allying together against the Chinese. The Russians are not stupid enough to do that. The rest of the political establishment in the United States is opposed to this idea, both Democrats and Republicans. Even his fervent supporters in Congress will not support this.

A lot of it is, of course, linked to what happens to the Mueller investigation. It will be hard for Trump to realize this plan if Robert Mueller files a report that says there is evidence that the Russians not only actively intervened in our election but that there also was some degree of collusion with parts of the Trump election campaign. I think that is what Mueller is going to say.

In terms of how this will impact Japan, I assume you are referring to Abe's efforts to make the final peace deal on the Northern Territories. The Japanese always underestimate the power of Russian nationalism. Russians do not give up territory. I can see the Russians going back to the 1956 formula and giving Habomai and Shikotan to Japan but nothing more than that except for symbolic things. If Abe is ready to do that, a peace treaty with Russia is possible. Trump would not object to that.

Questioner 2: At what stage will an economic crisis happen and how would it affect Trump's policies?

Sneider: The Republican Party lost this election despite the fact that we are in the midst of probably the greatest economic boom in the last 30 years, maybe longer. The tax cut was not very popular. The Democratic Party did a very good job of characterizing it as a tax cut for the wealthy. Republicans were not able to convince voters that they delivered a big bonus to voters' paychecks. That is why, just before the election, Trump mentioned another tax cut for middle class people but it was an obvious lie. He also did not campaign on the tax cut. He was not even talking about the economy. He was talking about immigration, attacking the news media, claiming that he had made America great and powerful, etc.

The Republican leadership in the Congress was asking Trump to talk about the economy but he did not want to do it. I do think he has very good political instincts sometimes and I think he understood this was not an issue that was going to move voters. He was mainly concerned with getting his voter base excited to vote. Interestingly, looking at the polls, the economy was not an issue, not for Republican voters, nor for Democratic voters.

Even a good economy does not work really well for the President. If there is a recession, I think Trump will just double down on anti-immigrant themes and trade protectionism. The Republican Party invested heavily in a pretty openly racist campaign this time. The use of race is not new but this was the most blatant use of racism I have ever seen.

Questioner 3: In America, the immigrants live in urban areas, not rural areas, but it is the urban people who support Democrats and welcome immigrants, and rural people who support Republicans and dislike immigrants. Why is this?

Sneider: The strongest anti-immigrant feelings are mostly in places where there are not so many immigrants, which does not seem to make sense. One correction to what you said is that immigrants are not only in urban areas. A large number of the immigrant population of California lives in the rural parts of the state and California is the first state in the United States to be a so-called minority-majority state, that is, white people are the minority. These rural areas are agricultural areas. Agricultural laborers are mostly immigrant workers and the biggest issue in those parts of the country is shortage of labor. You cannot operate a service economy or an agricultural economy in the United States without immigrant labor.

That is true even in parts of the Midwest, where there are not as many immigrants. They are very crucial to the workforce. In places where there are immigrants, people understand that immigrants are just like them. The most anti-immigrant feelings are where there are no immigrants because that is where people can construct an imaginary idea that these people are a threat to your way of life. People feel very defensive about what they consider to be the American way of life.

I think this is different from Europe. In Europe, my sense is that you have the problem of Muslim immigration, people for whom there is a real cultural difference and not just a racial difference. I do not think immigrants in the United States pose the same kind of challenge. Even Asian immigrants assimilate very well in the United States. Anti-immigrant feeling is to me an expression of insecurity and racism. Some of that is economic insecurity, but I think there is also a feeling of a cultural threat.

Questioner 4: With technological progress and the movement towards 5G technology, do you think it is actually possible to decouple U.S. firms from their dependence in China?

Sneider: I do not think so. I think most American firms agree with me. It is not something that the U.S. government can control. It is a decision that firms themselves make. What the U.S. government can do is tighten supervision and scrutiny of Chinese investment, and block Chinese investment in U.S. high-tech firms. Still, one of the big problems is that, even if U.S. companies want to shift their supply chains out of China, a lot of the production by foreign multinational firms in China is not for export to other markets but for the Chinese market itself. If you decouple, you decouple yourself from a huge market. Who wants to do that? I think the market would take a very harsh judgment of any such moves.

In some ways I think it is an insecurity dilemma. That is why this idea sounds interesting until you look at it in practical terms. The Chinese have a decoupling problem too. Maybe a lot of Chinese would like to decouple from us to assume technological leadership, create a sealed-off market that they can dominate, and so on, but they need the global market also. They cannot really decouple either. I think we are way past the point where decoupling actually makes sense but I am not an economist.

Questioner 5: I have two questions. First, can we take Vice President Pence's speech last month about China as a watershed and as a new Truman doctrine at the beginning of the New Cold War? Second, what will happen if we see further bipolarization between conservatives and liberals?

Sneider: I took the Pence speech as a doctrinal statement. I doubt Trump really understood what Pence said. I think Trump has an economic dimension in his mind but does not have the bigger strategic dimension. I am not trying to be dismissive of him, but I doubt that he read that speech before or after it was given. However, his views overlap with that vision. There is a sort of alliance of this neoconservative anti-China policy with Trump's economic nationalism. That being said, I do not know what will happen.

Regarding your second question, we live in two Americas now. There is a blue America and a red America. I think the blue America is bigger than the red America in population terms and maybe in electoral terms but the country is pretty deeply divided. I do not predict any bipartisanship at all. I do not think they can pass a single piece of major legislation in this Congress. With regard to foreign policy and trade, I think Democrats are mostly going to challenge the President in domestic policy instead.

Questioner 6: I think a lot of European Muslims are victims of Islamophobia the way that black people are victims of racism in the United States. Still, 14 members of the Bundestag are Turkish Germans, the Mayor of London is from a Pakistani Muslim family, and so on. I do not think it is culturally more difficult for people from North Africa and Turkey to assimilate in Europe than people from around the world in the United States.

Sneider: I defer to you on that but let me clarify. My main point was that I think the anti-immigrant feelings in the United States are heavily about racism and about a sense of economic, cultural, and other insecurity. People have a yearning for a simpler time of

life. It extends beyond the issues of race to questions of sexual preference or gender. It is no surprise that the President's main bastion of support is white men and not white women. I think the anti-immigrant feelings are a kind of fear of the outsider. It is a dangerous phenomenon in all societies.

Questioner 7: Who are the strongest candidates for the Democrats against Trump?

Sneider: First, I think that Trump will face a challenge from within the Republican Party but probably overcome it. Within the Democrats, there is debate of whether to go with a very centrist candidate or a more progressive candidate. I think what most people really want is somebody who is a little bit of an outsider, personally attractive, and not necessarily about ideology.

A lot of people were very excited about Beto O'Rourke's campaign in Texas for the Senate. He lost but only by a small margin and ran a good campaign that was not about ideological war. He was very personally attractive. A lot of people think he should run for president even though he lost.

I think we are going to see somebody emerge who is a little different from a traditional politician. I do not think Hillary Clinton will be a candidate. Joe Biden is too old. Bernie Sanders did a great job of bringing the Democratic Party back to some of its most important fundamental, social democratic ideas, and is a wonderful and interesting character, but he could not be President of the United States. He could perhaps drive the agenda of the Democratic Party. We will see what happens. We are headed into the deep unknown in American politics.