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Why The Next U.S. President Will Support the Trans-Pacific Partnership

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Last night I wasn't sure if I was watching the Democratic National Convention or a military coup in action – a junta of hawkish figures flexing muscles and barking commands at a flag-waving audience. If the Democrats want their party to project U.S. strength, national security, and benevolent influence over global affairs, they shouldn't soon forget the centrality of an engaging trade policy to an effective foreign policy.

Despite the strident anti-trade rhetoric of the 2016 election cycle and the disavowals of the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement by both major-party presidential candidates, the next U.S. president will be happy to have the TPP in his or her foreign policy toolbox and will do what it takes to make that happen. While the world might be a better place if politicians could be taken at their word, rest assured that it will be a better place if the TPP is ratified and implemented.

For the anti-capitalists on the left and the economic nationalists on the right who might feel betrayed by the president's duplicity, wake up and meet reality. Long is the list of presidential aspirants who have used words to foment and exploit voter angst about trade and globalization. Over the past quarter century there were Ross Perot ('92), Pat Buchanan ('96, '00), John Kerry ('04), John Edwards ('04, '08), Hillary Clinton ('08, '16), Barack Obama ('08, '12), Mitt Romney ('12), Donald Trump ('16), and Bernie Sanders ('16), among others. Each attempted to inspire emotions by wrapping protectionism in the flag or portraying trade as an instrument of class suppression. Each attempted ingratiation to excitable elements of the electorate by denigrating trade policy as a rigged affair, assailing U.S. businesses for investing abroad, or blaming foreigners and their trade practices for all manners of domestic woe – woes often properly attributable to their own domestic policy failings.

It bears noting that only one person on this list was elected president – and, in that role, he immediately reneged on his campaign pledge to reopen NAFTA, pushed for ratification of three trade agreements he had opposed on the stump, and negotiated and concluded the largest free trade agreement in U.S. history – the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Those were the right choices.

It turns out that while politicians seek connections with the electorate by demagoguing trade, those connections are always fleeting. The tendency is for the anti-trade political rhetoric to peak during the primaries, where it resonates with the extremes of the parties, who carry greater

weight in the nominating process. Then it subsides once the nominations are locked up and the candidates gravitate back toward the political center to strike a broader, bipartisan appeal. Moreover, despite the traction it gets as a campaign issue, trade is usually way down the list of concerns on voters' minds come election day. Clinton's and Trump's selections of decidedly pro-trade, pro-TPP running mates suggest that the same rules and assumptions still apply.

However, things are a bit different this time. First, the anti-trade rhetoric has been more strident and more desperate because the Trans-Pacific Partnership has been topical for the better part of the past two years. Professional protectionist groups from the left peddling fallacies to coopt the affections and energies of naïve, young idealists, and anti-Obama nationalists from the right, who mistake trade for war, have been mobilized since the 2014 elections made clear that TPP soon would be coming down the pike.

Second, Trump sees an opening to woo disaffected Sanders supporters who fear that Clinton will ultimately support the TPP, so the anti-trade rhetoric is likely to continue up until the election. Indeed, they're right. A President Clinton would support the TPP – as would a President Trump.

Every president since FDR, regardless of party affiliation, has embraced or promoted trade liberalization.

While candidates might rail against unfair trade practices and un-level playing fields on the stump, their perspectives change in the White House. Presidents prioritize broader, national interests over regional and parochial issues, and they see merit in projecting global economic leadership. They also view trade policy through the prism of foreign policy, and recognize the contributions that trade makes to economic growth and international stability.

As Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton presided over the beginning of the Obama administration's "strategic pivot" to Asia. The TPP was its economic centerpiece. The geostrategic logic behind the TPP hasn't changed – in fact it has been reinforced by events in the region. Presently, it is unclear whether China will abide a recent arbitration ruling against its territorial claims in the South China Sea. What better way to dissuade China from provocative activities that risk conflagration with Vietnam, Japan, the Philippines and, ultimately, the United States than to offer the carrot of a cooperation-based alternative to economic growth and security?

The TPP is a blueprint for securing U.S. geoeconomic and geopolitical interests now and into the future by updating the rules and institutions of international trade that facilitated 70 years of global economic expansion, poverty reduction, and relative peace. As an agreement that includes countries on four continents, the TPP is well-suited to fill the void created by the breakdown of the multilateral negotiating "round" approach to global trade liberalization. The TPP is open to new members and the fact that it has achieved critical mass (40% of global GDP represented) means that the cost of remaining outside the deal will rise with every new accession, so most eligible countries will choose to join.

As investment has begun to shift from TPP outsiders to TPP members in anticipation of implementation, non-members have been implementing various domestic reforms to improve their prospects for eventually joining. And with China's most important trade partners joining TPP, Beijing will have no better alternatives than to embrace the TPP, as well – and accept the

new rules that will rein in some of the abusive trade practices of which China is so frequently accused.

As for Hillary Clinton, this was part of the plan as it appeared on the white board at Foggy Bottom in 2009. As for Donald Trump, one must ask: What better way to make America great again than by reasserting U.S. global economic leadership and compelling China to play by the rules that will govern 21st century trade?

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