

INDO-PACIFIC: IMPACT OF U.S. POLITICAL TURMOIL

Introduction:

The United States has experienced an unprecedented year of political turmoil in both the lead up to and aftermath of the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election. This tumult has significantly impacted countries throughout the Indo-Pacific region. The outcome of U.S. Presidential elections always has an impact on the diplomatic, economic, and security dynamics around the globe—even more so when the results lead to a change in the President. But the 2020 U.S. election has been unique for several reasons: first, the allegations of fraud, which began before election day and dramatically escalated following the count, polarizing the nation more than ever; secondly, the election occurred concurrent with the pandemic—further exacerbating virtually every aspect of extant issues; and finally, the Trump administration differs sharply from previous presidents' administrations in rhetoric, tone, and adherence to previous standards of behavior. As President-Elect Biden is preparing for inauguration on 20 Jan., President Trump has only recently, and grudgingly, conceded that there will be a change of administration. The U.S. populations remains deeply divided. This situation violently erupted on 6 Jan. with the storming of Capitol Hill. America's internal political unrest has not been isolated to the United States—indeed it has reverberated across the globe, and the countries in the Indo-Pacific region have not been spared.

BLUF:

- The 2020 U.S. election increased the outpouring of opinions on divisive issues that have plagued America for decades – and served to bring focus to those contentious issues across the Indo-Pacific
- Reflecting the discourse in the U.S., Australia, too, has witnessed an increase in support for extreme right-wing ideologies. Followers likely have been significantly influenced by American social media content
- Sentiment analysis of Chinese-language media shows no great difference in popularity between Trump and Biden, indicating no significant change in Beijing's approach to U.S. relations
- Japan is wary that the threat from the People's Republic of China (PRC) will grow under a Biden administration
- The turmoil following the U.S. presidential election has increased worries surrounding the upcoming presidential election in the Philippines

Australia

According to the data collected in Babel X and analyzed by Babel Street, Australia has seen an increase in groups and individuals spreading extreme nationalist agendas. Extreme right-wing beliefs have been promulgating throughout Australia for many years with limited levels of community support. Groups such as the 'United Patriots Front' have formed and dissolved overtime, only to be replaced with new names for the same concept. These groups have largely come out in order to protest messages of inclusion and multiculturalism, both from other groups and the Federal and State Governments. This has been persistent for many

years, but there has been an increase in Australians expressing extreme right-wing beliefs online in 2020. While fear and stress related to the pandemic have likely also been a factor, the turbulent situation in the U.S. in both the lead up to the election and the period between election day and inauguration day has had a direct impact on this trend in Australia, as seen below.

The ability for like-minded people to share ideas and values online has allowed opinions and theories to be shared internationally, particularly from the U.S. to Australia. Network and influence analysis was conducted looking at accounts on social media that were sharing extreme right-wing content (Figure 1). The analysis showed a large international network between Australia and the U.S., in addition to input from a smaller number in the UK. The most influential individuals in this network are based in the U.S.. Many Australian supporters absorb these messages and disseminate them with an Australian focus to the local audience.

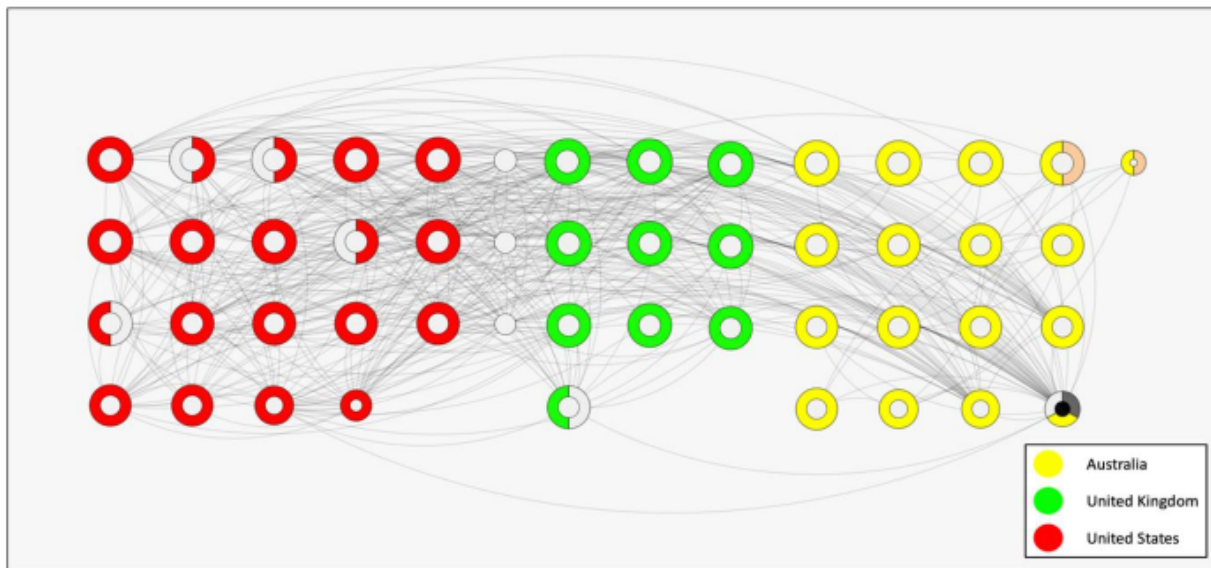


Figure 1 – Social Network Analysis Chart (Babel Synthesis)

The widespread talk of voter fraud in the U.S., stressed by the Trump campaign and their supporters—despite a lack of evidence—has also led to discussion online of rampant voter fraud in Australian elections. Distrust in the government is high. There are posts on social media and message boards alleging that Australian elections have been rigged for decades (Figure 2). This creates an opportunity for independent and smaller parties to gain seats in future elections as people move away from the now distrusted traditional two-party system in Australia.



Figure 2

Japan

Analysis reveals there is concern from the Japanese online community, especially on the platform 5 Channel, that the country will be disadvantaged under Biden due to his expected softer stance on the PRC (Figure 5). Trump has taken a particularly hard stance on the PRC during his term in office. He has been considered by many in Japan to be keeping the PRC in line, which has resulted in less threat to other countries in the region. This is directly in contrast to the previous Obama administration, during which Biden was vice-president. There is an expectation that when Biden is inaugurated, the PRC will have more power, as the new administration will be unwilling to maintain the pressure set by Trump.



Figure 3 – Original Japanese and English Translation

Philippines

Analysis of online posts from the Philippines reveals negative opinions of President Trump and President Duterte as well as concerns for voting integrity in democratic countries in the future. Similar to the countries above, the Philippines has been following the results of the U.S.

elections to anticipate how alliances will be impacted. While Trump is not overly popular in the Philippines, his stance on China has been one redeeming feature for Filipinos (Figure 4). Due to territorial conflicts in the South China Sea, the foreign relations between the U.S. and PRC are a high priority in the Philippines.

The Philippines presidential and vice-presidential elections are scheduled for May 2022. There is concern about the probity of elections as a whole based on the recent example in the U.S. (Figure 5). It remains to be seen what the long-term impact will be on voting systems, in the Philippines and the rest of the world.

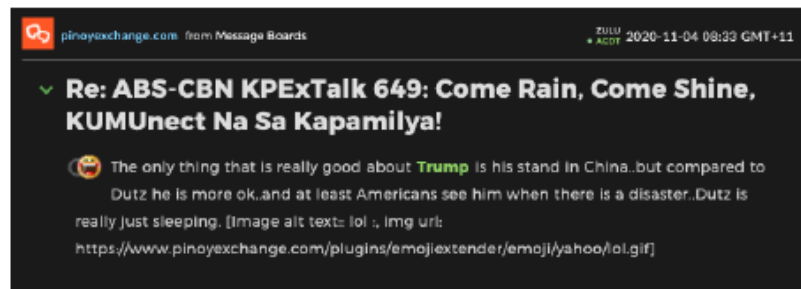


Figure 4



Figure 5

China

Interestingly, Babel Street analysts did not see significant reverberations within Chinese-language content following the U.S. presidential election. The sentiment of Chinese-language publicly available information was assessed to determine whether there was more positive sentiment towards either candidate in the week following Election Day, a possible indication of Beijing's views given the heavy role the central government plays in media and online content regulation. Sentiment analysis results towards each candidate are eerily similar, as seen in Figure 6 and Figure 7. It is unclear the exact reason for the similarities. Negative sentiment is expected from the PRC, a country that has had serious tensions with the U.S.. The results indicate that the overall perception of the U.S. from the PRC does not and will remain relatively unchanged based on the election results. This is surprising given that other countries, such as Japan, believe that the U.S. stance on the PRC will soften under President-Elect Biden. Furthermore, the chaos surrounding the United States' election process likely only confirms Beijing's preconceived ideas about the dangers of representative democracy.

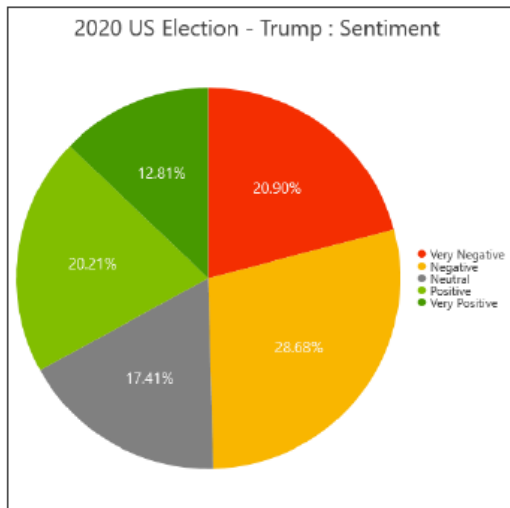


Figure 6

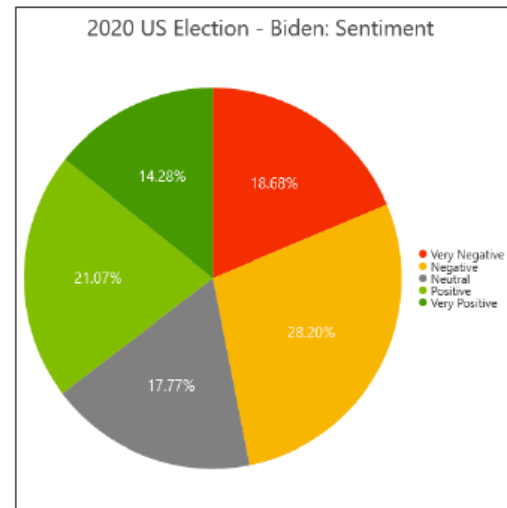


Figure 7

Conclusion

The turmoil surrounding the U.S. election results has begun impacting countries in the Indo-Pacific region as the U.S. prepares for the inauguration of President-elect Biden. The refusal from the Trump campaign to concede the election, in addition to their staunch insistence that there was widespread voter fraud, has seen an increase in support from far-right sympathizers in Australia. The message continues to spread that the voting systems cannot be trusted; therefore, those in power or coming into power should not be trusted. In the People’s Republic of China, there does not appear to be a favored candidate, likely due to the bleak outlook on future relations regardless of who is President. Japan is wary of the inauguration of President-Elect Biden due to perceived improvements in relations with the PRC caused by President Trump. Although the fraud allegation in the 2020 U.S. election is spurious, it has set in motion a wave of skepticism about voting processes and democracies as a whole. Ultimately, it appears that even in chaos, the United States continues to have a significant impact across the Indo-Pacific region.

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