Trump just complicates Washington-Beijing tensions

How likely is it that Donald Trump really can win the US election?

According to Simon Jackman, new chief executive of the US Studies Centre at the University of Sydney, it’s so unlikely that it can be discounted as a realistic possibility. He points out 28 per cent of the American electorate is composed of minorities, including blacks and Hispanics. Not only do they tend to overwhelmingly favour the Democrats, he says, they are completely alienated by Trump in particular. At the same time, the Democrats who voted for Bernie Sanders will return to rally in favour of Hillary Clinton when confronted with the real enemy.

Veteran US political analyst, William Schneider, is not so convinced – even if he agrees that a Trump presidency still looks relatively unlikely at this stage. He quotes the famous line from the even more famous US baseball player and coach, Yogi Berra, about never "making predictions – especially about the future".

There’s certainly no doubt the success of the Trump candidacy has confounded predictions from political experts while Clinton still attracts extremely high negatives as a presidential candidate, even among Democrats.

Schneider told the Crawford Australian Leadership Forum the chance of a terrorist attack on the US – or even the prospect of a third candidate emerging as an independent – could also change the result.

Trump attracts a lot of support, he says, precisely because he is the "Un-Obama" – just the opposite of the current president just as President Barack
Obama had been the "Un-Bush" in 2008.

While Trump's primary base of support is centred on white males with no college education and worried about their jobs, according to Schneider, his appeal is also a cultural one. Trump is not politically correct, not a politician and not a candidate of the establishment status quo – when Clinton is all of those things. In foreign affairs, he is also playing into the politics of the strongly isolationist tradition of the US rather than its post-1947 role as effectively guarantor of world order and humanitarian values.

"Trump sees no necessity to continue that," says Schneider, while also describing him as an "ignoramus" about America’s history.

World's diplomats rattled

But the new risks in international relations under a Trump presidency have much of the diplomatic and security world rattled in ways extending well beyond the fears of the market about the economic impact.

An immediate potential flashpoint is the accelerating tensions between China and the US due to China's aggressive behaviour in the South China Sea and its reclamation activities.

Former president of the World Bank and US deputy secretary of state, Bob Zoellick, for example, called Trump "close to crazy" during another Crawford discussion about China and the US. Zoellick says it is important the existing international order – which he argues has also served China well – is not taken for granted.

But even without the White House wild card in November, relations between the US and China only seem likely to become more tense as China continually asserts its alleged territorial rights over its neighbours in various disputed maritime areas. That also includes building up runways and other infrastructure on rocks and islands in order to claim them.

A retired major general of the People’s Liberation Army provided the forum with a clear – if chilling – explanation of the Chinese approach. According to Pan Zhengjiang, China's priority is economic development but he maintains protecting China’s "own territorial integrity" is integral to that.

He also argues maritime regional disputes must be settled via bilateral negotiations with no interference from "outside powers" (read the US). According to this view of history, the region was quite peaceful until disturbed by the announced US "pivot" to the Asia Pacific under President
Obama.

"What's the definition of being responsible?" he says. "Only acting on American terms? Why is it that the Americans can do anything to protect their own interests and have it seen as legitimate and responsible? We don't agree."

Instead, he says America cannot accept the rise of China and a new model of development for ideological reasons, while China's rise also threatens the alliance system fundamental to US "hegemony" in the region.

**Stabilising presence**

This interpretation is not shared by most of China's neighbours, of course. They are just as concerned as the US and Australia about China's actions and intentions and increasingly welcome the continued presence of the US as a stabilising counter.

The Philippines, for example, is currently taking China to court in the Hague in the first international legal test over what is known as the "nine dash line" – claimed by China to mark its rights over a large area of the South China sea.

The reaction to China's response to that legal ruling, expected shortly, is set to become a big test for the will of the international community as well as regional groupings such as the 10-member ASEAN.

Pan's implicit message – backed by similar views commonly expressed by other senior Chinese – is that China will not accept any adverse ruling. While China cannot currently challenge the US militarily, he says, the period of transition will be a dangerous time over the next few years because of the temptation on both sides for pre-emptive action. The US might want to take action "before it's too late" while some in the PLA might think China is strong enough to "stand up against the bullying of the USA".

In Pan's view, the many constraining factors, including close economic ties, means this situation will not actually come to blows and that rationality will prevail.

That seems to presume a distinctly Chinese version of economic rationality prevailing. The US version is still to be worked out. And that's without the irrational Trump factor.

*Jennifer Hewett is the AFR's national affairs columnist.*