



10th Giri Deshingkar Memorial Lecture Series

DOMESTIC FACTORS AND FOREIGN POLICY: WILL A REGIME CHANGE MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

Andrew J. Nathan

Class of 1919 Professor of Political Science,
Columbia University

**GIRI DESHINGKAR
MEMORIAL LECTURES
WERE BEGUN IN
2001, AS A TRIBUTE
TO THE WORK AND
CONTRIBUTION OF
ONE OF INDIA'S
LEADING CHINA
EXPERTS, A
PHILOSOPHER OF
SCIENCE AND AN
EXCEPTIONAL
SCHOLAR ON THE
HISTORY OF CHINA
AND INDIA**

Prof. Nathan provided a nuanced analysis of the commonly understood discourse that nationalism is the primary driver of Chinese foreign policy and that China aims to replace the western system with its own traditional tributary system. Prof. Nathan argued that while domestic factors are important in the formulation of Chinese foreign policy, and even though nationalism exists as an important driver, there are other domestic concerns that are predominant in the making of Chinese foreign policy.

Borrowing from his self-authored book written along with Andrew Scobell titled, China's Search for Security, the speaker put forth the argument that China, though seen as a potential threat, itself suffers from a vulnerable security position. In his view, 'the China threat' discourse ignores the need to understand China's actions in a broader perspective.

Jointly hosted by



In Nathan's framework, Chinese security can be divided into four rings. The first ring tries to analyse the inside of claimed borders of China. Given that the primary aim of the Chinese leadership is to secure China's borders, therefore, in order to understand Chinese policymaking, it is essential to understand what Chinese policy makers see as their borders and territorial claims. This, Nathan argued may mean maintaining territorial control over Tibet or trying to establish control over regions China considers as its part. Looking at a comparative internal security situation between China and the US, Nathan argued that unlike the United States where internal security issues are mainly domestic, China's internal security issues are deeply connected to its foreign policy, with "territorial integrity" and "regime survival" being organic issues. China, unlike India or the United States, does not view regime change as political succession. The Chinese political system has defined itself as one in which opposition to the Chinese Communist Party (CPC) is seen as a threat to national security. Thus, regime survival has become the prime security concern and since domestic challenges to the regime are very weak owing to heavy policing and security, foreign actors such as international human rights groups and others which help and aid public pressure groups in China with capacity-building measures aimed at challenging and protesting against Chinese state policies, are seen as a threat to the regime. Therefore, "regime survival" becomes a foreign policy issue that the government has to deal with.

On the issue of territorial integrity, Nathan argued that China has issues of separatist movements in Xinjiang, Tibet, Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government in exile; issues in minority areas where China shares borders with Laos and Myanmar; and Taiwan's integration continues to present challenges. These issues though domestic, have penetrated into China's foreign policy concerns, making both connected. Prof. Nathan further elaborated on China's borders, and stated that unlike any other major power, China shares its direct land and sea borders with 26 states, and with most of these, China has or has had issues, owing to errors and misdemeanours of history. Prof. Nathan argued that China does not have natural allies, except if you consider North Korea or Pakistan, whom Nathan terms as a "quasi ally". If viewed from a cultural perspective, Korea, Japan and Vietnam emerge as its natural allies, but all of them have China as a top foreign policy agenda with who they have all had historical disputes. Thus, Prof. Nathan argued that geopolitical factors and realities define China's foreign policy.



Expounding on the second layer, Prof. Nathan explained that China lacks linkages with its neighbours, many of whom are big and strong. Referring to China-Russia relations, he argued that from a Chinese policy maker's perspective, it is logical to do everything to keep peace and stable relations with Russia. Today China-Russia relations are more stable than ever and yet Russia remains a permanent threat for China. Other nations such as India and even Vietnam present a risk to Chinese interests in the region. Further, countries like North Korea and the Central Asian republics that present risks for China, are politically unstable. Even though China does not share borders with countries like the United States, yet the latter poses a challenge to China's security owing to the presence of American bases in countries like Korea, Japan, and the Philippines, including US cooperation with Vietnam and India.

For Nathan, Obama's pivot to Asia policy has a re-balance mandate reflected in the United States description of itself as a "non-resident Asian power". In his view, this is a meaningful policy approach in line with its policy of power projection in the region. Issues of commodity supply, oil markets investment, regional interests and so on are pivotal to how China sees the US and its presence in the region. At the same time, he argued that it's a vulnerable position for the US to be in contrary to the popular American discourse on China, which sees China as a "threat". Notwithstanding, he emphasised geostrategic realities and the role of culture and history underpinning the same, thus arguing that China's foreign policy is formulated to be defensive of regime and territorial integrity.

In Nathan's understanding, the Chinese regime is both strong and fragile at the same time, thus, making it a paradoxical system. The Chinese state's attempt to control both international and domestic threats, imply that "regime survival" is the primary domestic driver of Chinese foreign policy. The issue of control of territories, economics, and so on are becoming contentious as China continues to grow. With increased economic dependence on market commodities, China's economic engagement has become closely tied to its domestic developments, quite similar to the US and India.

Approaching the end of the memorial lecture, Nathan held on to the position that although nationalism exists as an important factor, it is not a driver of Chinese foreign policy. It is more the case that nationalism acts as an instrument of Chinese foreign policy whereby, the rhetoric of nationalism helps it to disperse the challenges or opposition to its policy. He cited the example of the South China seas to make his point.



Turning his attention to India-China relations, Nathan argued that domestic concerns do not capture the whole story. Yet, they are very crucial given that the two issues, Tibet and Dalai Lama have a very strong India linkage. He explained that the Indian government's decision to provide asylum to the Dalai Lama and allowing the Tibetan government in exile to exist on Indian soil, including other actions by India are seen as contributing to instability in Tibet. He added that territorial disputes are crucial from the Tibet aspect. On China's rivalry with India in South East Asia, Nathan held the view that as the two nations grow and expand their economic interests, they are bound to jostle for influence and resources, similar to China-US relations.

Read more about the Lecture and find previous lectures on our website:

<http://www.icsin.org/>