

V P DUTT MEMORIAL LECTURE

Report

**BIDEN'S CHINA POLICY: OLD WINE IN NEW
BOTTLES?**

Speaker: Prof. Andrew J. Nathan

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Prof. Andrew Nathan started his lecture by referring to the ever-increasing significance of “China” in the security, political and economic landscape of the contemporary world. Central idea of his presentation was that the Biden administration’s China policy has substantial differences from that of Trump, while continuity in some areas. Upgrading the protocol status of Taiwan, increased military deployment in the South China Sea, imposing tariffs and greater emphasis on QUAD, all denote the points of continuity in Biden’s policy. These continuities in his words are consequent to a broader consensus evolved in US polity, during Trump era, between the mainstream parties, that the China has emerged as some sort of ‘threat’, or in other words a “strategic competitor,”

Prof. Nathan does not share the opinion that China under Xi Jinping is following a path of aggression or has expansionist ambitions, other than normal. Though China has undoubtedly emerged more assertive under Xi Jinping, Chinese territorial disputes, including with India, are long lasting. Therefore, those claims or disputes do not qualify to be called “expansionist ambitions.”

Prof. Nathan predominantly sees rising Chinese assertiveness justifiable. He argues that the increasing Chinese assertiveness is a reflection of security threats Beijing has been facing for decades. China is surrounded by US allies and US security installations in Western Pacific Ocean and South China Sea. Obviously as in the case of any sovereign state, Beijing has been uncomfortable with this encirclement. Therefore, for him, what the world witnesses today is a usual pushback from the Chinese side.

In the most important aspect of his speech, Prof. Nathan listed out how Biden’s China policy diverges from that of his predecessor. He is critical of Trump’s China policy for lacking both long term vision and strategy. Proclaiming an all-out war with Beijing, Trump was trying to obtain his domestic political goals. Trump’s trade war with China was also part of this. Another drawback of Trump’s China policy was lack of coordination. Senior officials of the Trump administration, like Peter Navarro and Robert Lighthizer, kept different, sometimes conflicting views on China. In his words, Trump’s China policy was simply designed for enhancing his domestic political prospects. In contrast, Biden’s China policy involves a long-term vision to defend China at the international system. This vision also involves the objective of economic decoupling to a feasible extent.

Second, Biden's China policy is far more realistic than that of Trump and starts from home. According to Prof. Nathan, Biden rightly and realistically anticipates that the Chinese behaviour may undergo changes over time and those changes may not be pleasant for the US. Thus, unlike Trump, Biden has proper domestic policy and that is least influenced by "China-factor."

Prof. Nathan says that the level of cooperation which the US seeks under Biden with its allies like Japan in defending China is another substantial change. While keeping a realistic view that allies alone would not resolve the China threat, Biden is keen to cultivate allies against Beijing. Third, the Biden administration makes "Human Rights" an important aspect of China policy. In his view, raising the human rights concerns would help the US to weaken China and pressurize Chinese government, targeting its weak point. Increased emphasis on human rights under Biden is a diversion from Trump's stance. One other factor that distinguishes Biden's China policy is its willingness to cooperate with Beijing on areas like climate change that requires collective action.

Prof. Nathan sees a bleak possibility for substantial security cooperation between New Delhi and Washington on China. The reason he explains is that the priorities of both India and US in Asia on defending China are predominantly divergent, limiting the security cooperation.

During the discussion, a question was raised on how the US failure to shield Taiwan from Chinese invasion would impact US prospects in Asia. Responding to this, Prof. Nathan explained that Taiwan is strategically and ideologically critical for both China and the US. US failure to resist Chinese attempts to invade Taiwan would question the reliability of the US as a security partner among its allies like Japan and South Korea. He also said that the expertise of Taiwan in chip manufacturing has brought US and Taiwan closer. Another question posed was concerning the Biden administration's commitment to prevent China from accessing sophisticated US technologies. In response to this, Prof. Nathan said that the technological upper hand over Beijing is necessary for the US to maintain its military edge as well as for making profits. However, China is accessing many of these technologies through legal means. They acquire stakes in US or European firms and also send students to American universities. Given this, he said that completely blocking China from accessing US technologies is really a challenging task.

This report was prepared by Jelvin Jose, Research Intern, Institute of Chinese Studies.

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