Biden Should Appear ‘Tough & Fierce’ on China, but Cooperate ‘Below the Radar’

Abstract The main preoccupation for the Biden Administration will be to solve its domestic issues and prevent the future reelection of Donald Trump. While this may mean that Biden has to appear tough on China, he should quietly work with allies in Asia to cooperate with China.

A diplomat for 33 years, he served as Singapore’s Ambassador to the United Nations from 1984 to 1989, and subsequently 1998 to 2004. In between, he held the position of Permanent Secretary at Singapore’s Foreign Ministry from 1993 to 1998.

Sitting down with Mothership for an interview a few days before President-elect Joseph Biden is set to be inaugurated on Jan. 20, he gave his thoughts on what a Biden presidency would mean for Singapore and the region, his cabinet picks so far, as well as the future of American democracy, especially in the wake of recent events like the Capitol Hill siege.

Here is the transcript of the interview Mothership did with Mahbubani:

The inauguration of Joe Biden is next week. Do you think he’s the right man for the moment?

Absolutely. Because the United States has never been as divided and as polarized as it is today. It’s a deeply fractured society. And it’s shown by the fact that 74 million Americans voted for Donald Trump, even though most people in the world think that Donald Trump is not fit to be the president of the United States of America, but that’s an indication of how divided and polarized American societies have become.

So what you need in America, is some kind of grandfatherly figure, who’s a very nice guy who speaks softly, whom you sort of fall in love with immediately. And that’s Joe Biden.

Actually, America is very lucky that it is Biden that is becoming the President on Jan. 20, because just imagine, if he has a heart attack, and Kamala Harris becomes the Vice President. She’s very competent, but she cannot bring the country together in a way that Biden can. And therefore, it’s very important that Biden succeeds.

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What do you think will be his priorities in his first 100 days?

I suspect for his priorities in the first 100 days, he would clearly want to focus, number one, on fighting Covid-19.

I mean, it's actually quite shocking in terms of number of deaths, in terms of the spread of Covid-19, the Trump administration has been completely incompetent in its management of Covid-19. So I think clearly he's got to find ways and means of stopping it.

And then, of course, it's always the economy. I think he's aware that the one reason why 74 million Americans voted for Donald Trump is because many of them in the working classes, lower middle classes, haven't seen their incomes improve in 30 years. And this is documented in my book "*Has China Won?*".

And so this creates what the Nobel laureate Angus Deaton has called "a sea of despair" among the white working classes. So he's got to address that. He's got to find ways and means of improving the living standards of these angry white working classes. And if he succeeds, then America will become less polarized.

Have you met Biden personally? Can you share with our audience about your personal interactions with him? Or what you've heard from some of your American friends?

Well, I have not had the pleasure of meeting Biden personally, but at least two of my good friends are among his close advisers, and they've been with him for decades.

From them, I get a firsthand feel of how Biden is doing.

Let's say we were having this interview exactly a year ago, on Jan. 15, 2020. If you had asked me then, does Biden have a chance of becoming president? I would have said no, he's too far behind!

But when I spoke to his advisers, they said "Kishore, we know he'll do bad in New Hampshire, he'll do bad in Iowa, we know that. But we just got to keep going till we get to North Carolina, and then we'll take off."

And that's exactly what happened.

Who is winning? Trump or Biden? Biden has more routes to 270 than Trump.

Because you heard about him already from your friends, were you surprised by the election results?

I was surprised by how well Donald Trump did.

I bought the conventional wisdom, as you know, before the elections that there will be a blue wave. There was a lot of support for the Democrats. Democrats will increase the number of seats in the House, they failed, would maybe take back the Senate, but they barely got that. And that they would win more seats in the legislature and they didn't.

And they thought Biden would win handsomely. But actually, it is quite amazing how many people voted for Donald Trump, including, by the way, some of the minorities, some of the blacks, some Latinos. So it shows that there are a lot of people in America who are still very, very angry.

But at the end of the day, we should be grateful that Biden has won because just as he will calm America down, I think he will also calm the world down.

Turning to China, do you think the Chinese government was surprised? Do you think the Chinese would prefer to deal with Trump or Biden?

I think the Chinese always take a long view.

And the Chinese realize that they cannot control the outcome of the US elections, and they just have to live with whoever gets elected. Either Donald Trump or Biden.

But the paradox about Biden being elected for China is that on the one hand, everything will change. Because for a start, Biden and his cabinet will be very polite. They'll be very civil. They won't insult China. They will make policies slowly and carefully. No more tweets or tantrums. That's what Donald Trump did, right?

It'd be very, very different. His style would be the exact opposite of Donald Trump.

But on the other hand, nothing will change because Biden's hands are tied. There is a very strong anti-China consensus in Washington DC.

And there is a very strong feeling that this time around the US must stand up to China. So if Biden is seen to be soft on China, he'll be attacked in Washington DC.

So on the one hand, it looks as though everything is changing. On the other hand, nothing is changing.

Do you think relations between China and the US would improve under the Biden administration?

Well, the answer to that question is very, very complicated. I'll give a three-part answer if you don't mind. Part one, this is what Biden should do. As I mentioned earlier, he should focus on fighting Covid-19, he should focus on improving the economy, on improving the livelihood of the Americans. These should be his three priorities.

But to do that, he should therefore press the pause button on the geopolitical contest with China and say, okay, first, let me fix my mothership, the United States of America before I come to deal with China. We should be the logical, rational, sensible thing to do. And we all think that the US is a logical, sensible, rational society. Sadly, it's not.

Because the US, especially key members of the establishment, have become very emotional about China, they see China as a real threat, and they are really frightened that America would become the number two power. So because of the rock solid consensus in Washington, DC, that the US must stand up to China, he cannot press the pause button. He has to be seen to be tough on China.

So for example, one thing he could do is to just get rid of the tariffs that Trump has imposed on China. But if he does that, he'd be attacked on all fronts, right? So he can't do it, his hands again, tied. But this is why that's all.

So that was what he cannot do. The final part is what can he do, and I would say what he can do is to be very cunning. He should pretend that he's beating up China every day. So in his rhetoric, he should be very strongly anti-China.

But behind the scenes, he should quietly work to see where he can cooperate with China on issues where they have a common interest, like climate change, like

Covid-19, and also in growing the economy. So there are many areas of common interests—which actually I documented in my book *Has China Won?*—where he should work under the radar screen.

So above the radar screen, he should be very, very tough and fierce on China. Below the radar screen, he should cooperate with China. But that requires a certain degree of political dexterity on his part, but clearly, outside of the US, China is his number one challenge.

It was just announced that Kurt Campbell is going to be the top US diplomat for this region. What do you think this signifies?

Well, I think very highly of Kurt Campbell. In fact, during the Covid-19 shutdown, Kurt Campbell and I were on the same debating team, and we debated two other Americans, Minxin Pei and Susan Thornton on a channel called Intelligence Squared Debates (US).

So you can watch that video, you'll see how Kurt and I were on the same side, arguing for a more rational approach toward China. And so in the course of that, I also had a long conversation with him when we were preparing for this debate. So I think very highly of Kurt Campbell, I think he's a very good choice because he's a calm, stable and rational actor. And I also did, by the way, a podcast with him once. So I've had lots of interactions with Kurt Campbell.

So someone like him, I believe, would be a calming influence on US-China relations. But at the same time, I've also no doubt that Kurt Campbell will be very tough on China.

And his background, by the way, he's more of a Japanologist. And I'm told that he's a very good friend of the current Japanese Prime Minister, Mr. Suga. So all that will, I guess, play in the equation also.

And what do you think of Biden's Cabinet picks so far?

From working at Tsukiji fish market to being Prime Minister of Japan: Self-made man Yoshihide Suga.

I think they've been very good. I think the choice of Secretary of State, I don't know him, Tony Blinken. But I have friends who have worked with him, worked for him. And he's a very calm, stable, rational person. I think in many ways, history will see that Trump's Secretary of State Mike Pompeo will be regarded as one of the worst American secretaries of state, because he's very erratic, and he makes decisions emotionally.

So for example, almost the last two weeks of the Trump administration, he suddenly lifted all restrictions on Taiwan.

Hang on a second, these agreements on Taiwan were negotiated over years, and they maintain a very careful balance between American interests and Chinese interests. They were negotiated by some of the top negotiators like Henry Kissinger. Then you just throw them away! That's amazing! How can you do that?

And in future, why should any country sign an agreement with the US if the Secretary of State can just tear it up unilaterally?

I mean, that's exactly the wrong sort of behavior that you should get from the Secretary of State. But of course, Mike Pompeo was not stupid. He was doing it for a reason. He wants to become the next President of the United States of America. And he wants to become the next Donald Trump. So he's going to behave like Donald Trump.

So you have a lot of confidence in Biden's team. What do you think would be their impact on our region here?

I think we cannot tell now, because a lot depends on the capacity of the incoming Biden administration to listen to what Southeast Asia wants. And it's very clear, if the Biden administration sent anybody to Southeast Asia, and talk privately to all the countries, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, and all that, they'll get a very clear message.

And the message is in two parts. Yes, we want to see a strong US presence in Southeast Asia. We want to see more US investment in Southeast Asia, we want to see a US military presence in Southeast Asia.

Part two, don't make us choose between the US and China. We want to be friends with the US. We want to be friends with China. In fact, that's also what DPM Heng Swee Keat said recently, that's also what PM Lee Hsien Loong said in his article in the magazine, *Foreign Affairs*.

So that will take some adjustment. So it's very important for the people in the Biden administration who used to work in the Obama administration, they mustn't think they can go back to the world of the Obama administration, because Southeast Asia has moved on in the last few years. There's a new Southeast Asia.

Storming of Capitol Hill shows division in US society, but also strength of its institutions: DPM Heng.

So it's very important that the new Biden team make an extraordinary effort to come to Southeast Asia and listen carefully to what Southeast Asians want.

And of course, the Biden administration is more likely to listen than the Trump administration, which had lost completely the art of listening.

We'll like to get your views on the future of US democracy. We have seen very sad footage of what has happened in the Capitol Hill siege. What do you think caused the violent outbreak to happen?

Yes, I think it's an absolute mistake for the liberals in America just to blame Donald Trump. Donald Trump, of course, aggravated the problem. But the problem is a deep structural problem in American society, which I mentioned earlier, that the living conditions of the bottom 50 percent have not improved over 30 years.

So there's a very angry white working class in America. And at the same time – is why I devote an entire chapter of my book to explaining what has gone wrong in American society – it's a deep rooted structural problem, which is explained in chapter seven of my book, "America has become a plutocracy".

You must spend some time trying to understand how dangerous a plutocracy is. And the difference is very clear. In a democracy, you have a government of the 100%,

by the 100%, for the 100%. In a plutocracy you have the government of the 1%, by the 1%, for the 1%.

So in the past, in the US, which had a lot of social mobility, the playing field was tilted in favor of the poor, is easier for the poor. So if you're playing football, right, and you're running downhill, you're more likely to score goals. And the rich have to run up here. And that's fair, you must give more chances to the poor to score goals so that they can compete with the rich.

But in the last 30 years, the playing field has shifted. Now the poor in America have to run uphill to score goals. And the rich can just run downhill. So the whole playing field is tilted in favor of the rich in America.

As a consequence of this, the US, which was known for its social mobility in the past, has lost its social mobility. And if you look at the magazine, *Foreign Affairs*, there's a very famous economist, Branko Milanović, who came out with an article and just read the last line.

The last line says: the only way to save America is to get politics out of the grip of the rich, because the rich control, not just the economy, but also the political system. And the people at the bottom suffer.

So this is a very deep structural problem. And trying to change the playing field to make it either even level or balance it in favor of the poor, is going to be very difficult.

The sad part is that many Americans have not accepted the reality that America has become a plutocracy, even though very important people in the world like the late Paul Volcker, who was a friend of mine, told me America has become a plutocracy.

Martin Wolf of *The Financial Times* says America has become a plutocracy. The Nobel laureate, Joseph Stiglitz, says America has become a plutocracy.

So the first thing that America needs to do is to accept the reality that it is a plutocracy. And when it accepts that reality, then you can solve that problem.

Recently, with social media companies censoring Trump, there have been criticisms from some world leaders, including German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who think that this is against the spirit of democracy. What do you think of this view?

This is an issue on which opinion is very, very sharply divided. And the answers given by different societies reflect their own historical experiences.

So for example, in Europe, they went through tyrannical leaders like Hitler. That's why Chancellor Merkel has criticized Twitter for censoring Donald Trump. They say no, you must always allow everyone to speak out. So that's one point of view, which may be right or which may not be right.

But I think it is important for each country to understand its own circumstances. And I think in the case of Singapore, for example, I am actually very grateful that Singapore is very tough, and cuts off anybody who might inflame opinions in Singapore because, at the end of the day, we are still a new society, we are a multiracial society.

So it's important for us to have much tougher safeguards. And so for example, in Europe, Macron will support the drawing of cartoons of Prophet Muhammad. We Singapore will not allow that at all. No way, right?

So it's important to understand the national context of different countries that influences these decisions.

But at the end of the day, I truly believe that anybody who talks about rights, tell him you must never just talk about rights, you must talk about rights and responsibilities. There are two sides to the same coin.

What advice would you give your American friends, with regards to the future of American democracy? Do you have any advice for the American leaders?

I think my advice for the American leaders is that they should realize that the US has had an exceptionally good run for over 100 years.

But right now, America is going through a very difficult patch. So it's got to ask itself a very basic question. Do I keep going on autopilot? Or do I make U-turns and change my policies?

And one thing that heartens me, by the way, on the positive side, is that if you give Americans strong rational arguments, they will accept it.

So like Fareed Zakaria chose my book as one of the books of 2020. And, you know, Larry Summers, the former treasury secretary, former president of Harvard, chose my book as one of the three books of 2020.

That is what I consider the strength of the United States of America. At the end of the day, they're trying very hard to listen and to learn. So I hope that the Americans should go through a period of deep reflection now because that's what America needs today.

And frankly, I want to emphasize that we want to see a strong United States of America. We don't want to see a weak and divided United States of America. So it's in our interest to see the country spend some time healing itself, taking care of its tremendous internal problems, emerge stronger, and that will be better for the world.

We're also keen to ask you a question with regards to China and of course, its influence. This is something that some of our readers are concerned about with the recent case of Dickson Yeospying on the US for China. So, how real do you think is the trend of influence operations from China is, especially in Singapore?

Well, I'm going to give away a big secret. Every country, every serious country in the world, carries out influence operations and looks for spies. So this is normal behavior on the part of countries.

And one of the strengths of Singapore, going back to our founding fathers, Lee Kuan Yew, Goh Keng Swee, S. Rajaratnam, is that they were all very suspicious of all the great powers.

So Singapore has become a very vigilant place. And we've always been looking out for such operations. And as you know, we have expelled American diplomats, and then we have also taken actions against other countries, sometimes quietly.

So I think we have to accept that as a reality. So it's very important that ordinary Singaporeans understand very well, to be very careful, to ensure that they're not used in any way by any foreign power.

How do you think young Singaporeans can continue to stay vigilant? Do you have any advice for them?

The simple advice I have is not to become pro-China or pro-America or pro-India or pro-Malaysia. Just remain pro- Singapore.

And we must always defend Singapore's national interests and that's our responsibility as a citizen of Singapore. So we should be very careful and not be caught on one side or another when other countries have problems.

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