TRANSCRIPT
Event
“Countering AAPI Discrimination and its Intersections with U.S. Foreign Policy”

Keynote Address and Armchair Conversation

DATE
Monday, May 22, 2023 at 3:05 p.m. ET

FEAUTURING
Ambassador Katherine Tai
United States Trade Representative; Co-Chair, White House Initiative on Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders

CSIS EXPERTS
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Transcript By
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Dr. Victor Cha: In this regard, we are extremely fortunate to have with us President Biden’s appointment of an individual who embodies the values, the commitment, and the diversity of the Asian American community, Ambassador Katherine Tai. Ambassador Tai was sworn in as the 19th United States trade representative in March of 2021. She holds Cabinet rank, and is the principal trade advisor, negotiator, and spokesperson on U.S. trade policy. Ambassador Tai is also co-chair of the White House Initiative on Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders and President Biden’s Advisory Commission on Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders.

Prior to being USTR, Ambassador Tai spent most of her career in public service focusing on international economic policy, monitoring, and enforcement. She previously served as chief trade counsel and Trade Subcommittee staff director for the House Ways and Means Committee in the United States Congress. In this capacity, Ambassador Tai played a pivotal role in shaping U.S. trade law, negotiation strategies, and bilateral and multilateral agreements, including the recently renegotiated United States-Mexico-Canada agreement.

The ambassador is an experienced World Trade Organization litigator. She previously developed and tried cases for the Office of the United States Trade Representative, eventually becoming the chief counsel for China trade enforcement.

Before federal service, she practiced law in the private sector, clerked for district judges, and taught English in China. Ambassador Tai earned a bachelor of arts degree in history from Yale University and a J.D. from Harvard. She is fluent in Mandarin Chinese.

It is our distinct honor to have Ambassador Tai join us today, and I’d now like to welcome her to the stage with your warm applause.

(Applause.)

Ambassador Katherine Tai: Thank you so much, Victor. It’s a pleasure to be back at CSIS to talk about a very important topic. And I look forward to our discussion in a bit as well.

It’s still May. And I’ve had the honor of speaking with Asian American, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander community leaders all over the country as we celebrate this heritage month. I was in Phoenix a couple of weeks ago and joined a roundtable event with local AANHPI leaders. One of the women that I met was Dorothy Lew. She is the executive director of the Pan Asian Community Alliance, which is a nonprofit that
promotes education and community services for AANHPIs throughout Pima County.

Dorothy’s team devotes thousands of hours every year to helping people with immigration issues, providing interpretation and translation services, and assisting people with filing their taxes. She and other leaders around the table unequivocally spoke of a need to be visible together. That it wasn’t good enough to have a few superstars representing our communities. That it is pivotal for all of us to be seen, heard, and respected together. And that is because we are a community of communities, the Asian American, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islanders. We are strong because of differences, not in spite of them. That applies also to America and the United States.

But despite this communal strength, progress, we know, is not linear and our communities still face real struggles. During the pandemic, we saw how reckless rhetoric enabled senseless violence against our communities. Of course, none of this is new. Whether it’s the Los Angeles massacre of 1871, or the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II, or the persecution of Muslim Americans after 9/11, we have painful scars of hate and bigotry.

But we also know that we will not be defined by these scars. And that is the genius of our great democratic experiment, that our union was designed to be perfected over time. We are, right now, living through a pivotal moment in our history, where this perfecting is more important than ever as tensions between the United States and the People’s Republic of China remain high. The U.S.-China relationship is a consequential and complex relationship. We are the two largest economies in the world, so how we relate to each other not only affects the two of us, our workers, our businesses, but the entire world economy.

And we need to acknowledge that there are real challenges in this relationship. The PRC’s growth and development over the last few decades have been substantial, but the impacts, especially the negative impacts on other economies including ours, are causing consequences that we cannot afford to ignore. But to appropriately respond to the challenge that we are facing, we need to be disciplined in clearly defining what the challenge is and what the challenge is not.

The problem is not Chineseness or Asianness. Our concerns are with the Chinese government’s policies and practices and not with the Chinese people or with people of Chinese descent or heritage.
The more that we can focus on the substance and filter out the noise the easier it will be for us to define the problem, and once you clearly define the problem only then can you formulate solutions that are properly tailored to addressing the problem.

Our administration has been doing exactly that by investing in America, in our working families and communities, to allow our economy to lead and to heal and that’s what President Biden has focused on – rebuilding our roads and bridges, expanding our domestic manufacturing capabilities, and ensuring that we can compete and collaborate from a position of strength.

We can fiercely defend what is ours and also fiercely embrace our different roots and upbringings. We can and must do both because we know too well what happens when we fail to do this the right way.

This summer marks the 41st anniversary of Vincent Chin’s brutal murder in Detroit. For those of you who don’t know, Vincent Chin, a Chinese American, was murdered by two white men who were upset about the competition U.S. companies were facing with Japanese automakers. Vincent was beaten to death with a baseball bat.

You may also remember the story and the experience of Dr. Wen Ho Lee. In 1999, Dr. Lee, who is an American scientist who emigrated from Taiwan, worked at a Los Alamos nuclear laboratory at the time. He was arrested and accused of providing nuclear secrets to the PRC. But for those of you who followed the story to the end you will also know that prosecutors were never able to link him to economic espionage and, yet, he was still incarcerated in solitary confinement for nine months without bail.

When he was finally released the U.S. district judge in charge of the case apologized to Dr. Lee from the bench publicly for the wrongs committed to him by his own government.

Geopolitical tensions are not going away, certainly, not easily, so it is up to us to decide how we choose to respond.

Norm Mineta embodied what it looks like to respond to hate with honor. This month marks the one-year anniversary of his passing and I find myself thinking about him a lot these days.

Born in California, Norm was the son of Japanese immigrants. During World War II his family was incarcerated in a camp in Wyoming.
Everything that his parents had built since coming to America had been broken and taken away from them.

Norm and so many Japanese Americans of that era were treated as a threat to the very communities that they called home. But despite these hardships and wrongs, Norm loved this country and spent his life giving back to it through public service.

He rose from the San Jose City Council to the mayor’s office to the halls of the United States House of Representatives. He served for two decades and co-founded the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus. He was the first Asian American ever to serve in a president’s Cabinet and was also the first chair of what has become the White House Initiative on Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders.

Norm was the first for so many things but he didn’t settle for just being the first. He dedicated his life to pursuing justice and did everything he could to ensure that our communities took steps forward together. He was adamant that our Constitution must protect all of us and he knew that what makes America great is our ability to admit and correct our wrongs, going forward.

He refused to stay bitter or angry and instead used his experience to better the American experience for the rest of us and for other marginalized communities and people with disabilities as well. Norm’s example is one we all need to keep in mind today.

One of the first things that President Biden did after taking office was to reinstate and reinvigorate the White House initiative and the President’s Commission on Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders, which I am extremely proud to co-chair. In January the White House also released the first-ever National Strategy on Advancing Equity, Justice, and Opportunity for AA and NHPI Communities, which lays out a whole-of-government approach to address our communities’ needs.

We also know that there is a systemic lack of disaggregated data on AA and NHPI communities, and that language access has been a longstanding barrier for many in our communities. So the White House initiative, WHIAANHPI, and the Equitable Data Subcommittee are working to correct this.

On trade specifically, my agency is working to better understand the distributional effects that trade has had on different communities
across our country, including on AA and NHPI workers. That is an important step to use trade as a force for good.

We are expanding language-access services and empowering AA and NHPI workers, businesses, and entrepreneurs. We are meeting people where they are and live and work, and demonstrating how government can be a force for good in their lives.

I’ll give you an example. WHIAANHPI started a series of summits where we are connecting AA and NHPI businesses with federal resources and with each other. These summits are happening all across the country – Chicago, New York, Las Vegas – and I had the pleasure to join the first one, which took place in Philadelphia. There, I met small-business owners and heard about their hardships during the pandemic. I met entrepreneurs trying to turn their ideas into reality. I also met workers and community organizers fighting against poverty, bullying, and discrimination. These summits are a part of our administration’s resolve to deliver real results for our AA and NHPI communities and businesses by investing in ourselves and fostering collaboration.

People often ask me what we can do to fight the bigotry and violence against AA and NHPIs. There’s no simple cure. But to borrow from Secretary Mineta, I think the answer is to get involved together because engagement is power and engagement together gives us the chance to change history – rallying others to participate in the democratic process, voting together not just for president but for school board and city council, jumping into politics at all levels to serve our nation, our people, our communities, and our future. And that is because we all know that we are stronger together when we push and pull for one another, when we are visible together.

Our communities have been an integral part of our nation’s social fabric for generations. We laid the foundations of our roads and railways. We built our schools, tilled the soil, cared for the sick, and reared our cattle. And we continue to carry that legacy forward today. We are teachers, firefighters, and scientists. We are artists, entrepreneurs, and steelworkers. We are farmers, chefs, and engineers.

To our communities, I want to say that we are all adding our pieces to a greater masterpiece, just like our parents and their parents, and that is the American story. Bask and celebrate in our rich heritage. Let it shine, and then let’s take it further.
Our administration has your back. We are taking unprecedented steps to help everyone write their next chapter in this story. So partner with us. Let’s continue to act to fight against injustice, to empower our people, and to build a better future for all of those who come after us. Thank you so much. (Applause.)

Dr. Cha: Well, thank you. Thank you very much, Ambassador Tai, for that wonderful address. I know you don’t have a lot of time, but if you could we had a few questions we wanted to ask you.

The first we were talking backstage is that you’re actually – you’re a hometown – you’re a homey. This is her hometown, so. (Laughter.) She was – she grew up in Bethesda, Maryland, so not very far from – not very far from here.

Amb. Tai: I have literally not gone far in life. (Laughter.)

Dr. Cha: But I was asking you, like, but your – when did your parents come over? They came over to the U.S. –

Amb. Tai: They came in the 1960s and it was part of President Kennedy’s immigration reforms that allowed them to come, pursue graduate studies in the sciences especially.

Dr. Cha: I see.

Amb. Tai: Yeah.

Dr. Cha: I see. Well, that’s terrific.

Anyway, as we have already noted, you are the country’s first Asian American and first woman of color confirmed as the U.S. trade representative. You’ve mentioned some of the challenges that the AAPI community has faced. How have you found your own background and experience as an Asian American public servant to be an asset in engaging with counterparts around the world?

Amb. Tai: Well, certainly. Well, I think that the first asset, to your point when you were discussing the challenges that our communities have been facing over the past years, which I feel like have really spiked in the most recent couple years, one of the most important assets is showing up with this face and with the title of United States trade representative. I am, when I show up in meetings outside of the U.S. but also inside the U.S. – I will say: I am here to represent the interests of the United States.
My mandate is to have in my mind all of the component parts of our country and our economy, and to be that representative. And for our counterparts to know that Americans also look like me. And for Americans to know that I am an American, and this is what it means to be America. I think that it is incredibly important, that visibility piece and that representation piece. And I take my job extremely seriously, and I know that every deal that we strike has to be a good one for the American economy.

Dr. Cha: Terrific. Thank you so much. You mentioned in your remarks today – you noted that in our approach to China the problem isn’t Chineseness or Asianness. Our concerns are with the government, their policies, and their practices, and not with the people – Chinese people, or people of Chinese descent or heritage. How has the Biden-Harris administration been making this distinction clear in its policies and its messaging?

Amb. Tai: Certainly. I think that one of the ways in which you will see us focusing on this is those words are also words that Tony Blinken has uttered in his speech on the U.S.-China relationship, certainly. But that whichever policy lane we are in, we will talk about the challenge that is presented by the government of China in fact-based terms. I think this is really important, to try to tamp down the emotion, to focus on the facts and the evidence, to make sure that the policy conversation that needs to happen and the policies that we need to develop are going to focus on the right things, the right challenges.

And I think that that discipline is incredibly important, that deliberativeness and strategic approach because of the way that we are. The United States, we’re comprised of so many different communities, people, great Americans – great patriotic Americans that come from so many different backgrounds. That if we are not disciplined in our approach, that we stand to do a significant amount of harm to our fellow Americans, and to America itself. So in the way that we approach many of these challenges, but also the White House initiative.

I really want to focus – it’s 32 federal agencies that are all tied together in this initiative, where each agency head has identified a team, dedicated talent, to then identifying the resources and the powers of that agency to figure out – and this is part of the National Strategy – how to harness the powers of the federal government to create more access to opportunity, equity, and justice for the AANHPI communities.
I’m tremendously proud to co-chair this initiative, and for those colleagues who work on this project, and have worked on it in previous administrations, we feel the call to organize and to harness the efforts here at an even higher level, to an even higher standard than we’ve done before, because it is even more important in this moment.

Dr. Cha: Yeah. I mean, what really strikes me, both in your speech and what you said in the answer, is the word “discipline.” I mean, because it can be a very emotional issue, and people can get very spun up and worked up about it. But at the highest levels, maintaining that discipline and messaging of what’s our policy, and what is it focused on versus what it’s not focused on, seems to be so important.

Again, as you noted again in your speech and earlier this month in Los Angeles, the backlash against Asian American and Native Hawaiian-Pacific Islander communities during moments of heightened national security fears is not a new phenomenon in U.S. – in U.S. history. You mentioned the Chinese Exclusion Act, the internment of Japanese Americans, the unfair targeting of Sikhs, Muslims, and Arab Americans after 9/11. What are the lessons that you are the Biden administration are taking from this history so that we don’t follow that sort of path again?

Amb. Tai: I think that one of the most inspiring aspects – because there are so many of Norm Mineta’s legacy –

Dr. Cha: Yeah, he’s amazing.

Amb. Tai: – is that, first of all, he is the first Asian American Cabinet member. He served in two different administrations, bipartisan, and so that was Clinton and then in the Bush administration that, when 9/11 happened at the beginning of the Bush administration, he was the secretary of transportation. And in the wake of what we saw happened, that he had the presence of mind and the wisdom of spirit to work on his own behalf, but also to advise President Bush to protect Arab Americans, Muslim Americans, Sikh Americans from what he knew was going to happen in terms of the backlash. Now, the backlash still happened, but I think that that spirit and that being able to pay forward very, very painful lessons from our own past has got to be on our minds at this moment in our history as well.

Dr. Cha: Yeah. I mean, he was an amazing man, Norm Mineta. I was – so I served in the Bush administration in the White House, and the first place I met him was at an AAPI event. That was when I first met him, so it was –
really amazing person. And the way you described responding with honor –

Amb. Tai: Yes.

Dr. Cha: – to discrimination is really profound.

Again, Ambassador, I know that you have an incredibly busy schedule that you’re traveling. You’re between Asia and Europe. When you’re not in Bethesda, you’re between Asia and Europe. We really appreciate the time that you’ve taken with us, and thank you for all that you’re doing not just for U.S. trade policy but on this very important issue. We’re deeply grateful. Thank you so much.

Amb. Tai: Thank you for – thank you for your work here. I know that you are also thinking more broadly about these issues in foreign policy as well. Just so important to keep that focus and to push the conversation.

But also thank you to CSIS for acknowledging this challenge at this time and fostering this conversation. I know there will be a panel following our conversation.

Dr. Cha: Yes, yes.

Amb. Tai: I know many of the panelists. I know it’s going to be a good conversation. Just thank you for doing what you are doing.

Dr. Cha: Oh, no, it’s our pleasure. Please thank the ambassador for joining us. (Applause.)

(END)