

Center for Strategic and International Studies

Online Event

“Taiwan and Indo-Pacific Regional Security Architecture Conference – Day 1”

Keynote Address by Representative Ami Bera (D-CA)

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FEATURING:

Representative Ami Bera (D-CA),

Chair, House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, and Nonproliferation

CSIS EXPERTS:

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Bonnie S. Glaser: Hello. Welcome to our event today. I'm Bonnie Glaser. I'm director of the China Power Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Today is the first session of a two-part program in which we will examine the interrelated issues of Indo-Pacific security, the regional security architecture, and Taiwan. And we have a stellar lineup of speakers from the Indo-Pacific region. Today from Japan, Australia, the United States, and Taiwan, and then tomorrow from the Philippines, Vietnam, India, and Taiwan. And also we will have a special guest tomorrow, the foreign minister from Taiwan, Joseph Wu. So all together we will hear perspectives from seven different countries. And I hope many of you will join us for both events. Tomorrow's session will begin at 8:30 a.m. eastern standard time. And it will run until 10:15.

But today it's really a privilege to start our program with a segment with Congressman Ami Bera. Many of you may know that Congressman Bera has been a member of the House of Representatives since 2013. He's the longest-serving Indian American in Congress. And he's a member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, where he serves as chairman of the Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, and Nonproliferation. Last month Congressman Bera chaired a hearing on U.S.-Taiwan relations, which I participated in as a witness. And Congressman Bera, of course, has been a leading voice on many issues pertaining to national security in the Indo-Pacific region, including those related to COVID-19. I should mention that he's a medical doctor and he had a more than 20-year career in medicine before joining Congress.

So before I turn the floor over to Congressman Bera for a few introductory remarks, and then we'll have a conversation today, I want to mention just to our viewers that we will take questions. If you'd like to pose a question to the congressman please send it through the event page at CSIS.org, the one that you used to register and log on to the event. You can click on "ask a question" button, and feel free to send in your questions at any time.

So I'll now turn the floor over to Congressman Ami Bera for his introductory remarks. Welcome, Congressman, and thank you so much for joining us today.

Rep. Ami Bera: Bonnie, thank you for having me on. It's always a pleasure to be back with CSIS, and the breadth of the programming that you do. And again, it's wonderful to find myself on the opposite side of where we were a month ago, when I got to ask you questions. And you get to ask me questions this go round.

I'd be remiss if I didn't start by just, you know, framing the events that happened here in Washington, D.C. last week, because I – you know, that certainly is top of mind for many of us here in Congress, but also for our allies and adversaries around the world. Obviously, they saw what happened. And, you know, it's – it was a sad day in our nation's history, and certainly for democracy. But you know, it is my sense that a democracy is never a perfect form of government, but it is one that is constantly moving forward.

And you know, we have faced a challenging, divisive political environment over the last year, if not three or four years. But what we did see in our election in November was record turnout of voters, people showing up in the midst of a pandemic after a vigorously contested election and casting their ballots. You saw

the counting of the votes. You saw electoral challenges. You saw the courts rule on these challenges. You saw certification of what was widely deemed a very fair and transparent election, probably the most transparent we've ever had. And we identified the winner of that election, President-elect Joseph Biden and Vice President-elect Kamala Harris.

Despite what we saw on our television sets last week or what I have lived through, you will see next week a transition of power – a peaceful transition of power – and that is a hallmark of, you know, any mature democracy. And America clearly is a mature democracy.

With regards to, you know, the Indo-Pacific region and how we move forward vis-à-vis the broader region, as well as U.S.-Taiwan, U.S.-China, I think it starts with understanding, you know, the values of President Biden and what a Biden administration might look at. And I think it'll start with reengaging multilateral conversations and coalitions. And you know, in the question-and-answer session, you know, we can certainly get into what those coalitions potentially look like vis-à-vis the security of the region.

In addition, I think you will see a more robust investment in U.S. national security and diplomatic efforts. You already see that with the team that President-elect Biden has started to name in terms of his Cabinet secretaries and the folks who will focus in on this area. You know, the administration has already made comments on the importance of looking at the strategic-power competition between the United States and China. I think all of these are going to be very complicated, and we'll have to take a long-term view.

And you know it's my hope – and I'll finish with this. You know, I've started conversations with my Republican colleagues on the Foreign Affairs Committee but also more broadly throughout the – throughout Congress because I do think this is an area where even many Republicans were uncomfortable with President Trump's approach to foreign engagement, to – you know, the lack of diplomatic engagement and the lack of the administration working with Congress. I think this is a place where we can start to rebuild some of that bipartisan trust. I don't think, you know, that the Democrats and Republicans are that far off in terms of how we look at engagement abroad and certainly in the region. And I actually think our allies, our traditional allies in the region, our likeminded allies and democracies, are looking for a return – a more traditional U.S. engagement. Not necessarily the same as it was previously in terms of U.S.-led coalitions, but you know, I think more broadly how we work together to address some of the challenges but also address the opportunities that clearly exist in the region.

So I'll stop with that and let's have a conversation.

Bonnie S. Glaser:

Great. Thank you, Congressman. And thank you for your remarks about the events on the Capitol last week, and I'm glad you addressed them. And I share your views about the resiliency of our democracy. I think when we have a crisis, I hope that that will give us an opportunity to come together as a nation and recommit ourselves to the principles of the founders of our nation, and we will go forward as a nation and improve ourselves at home and reinvigorate American leadership abroad. And I'm so that that you're in Congress to help lead that effort. So, again, thanks for your remarks.

I think I'll start by asking a question about the Pacific Deterrence Initiative, which was part of the – our NDAA, the National Defense Authorization Act, and \$2.2 billion have been advocated – have been, excuse me, allocated. It's about half the amount that was allocated for the European Defense Initiative this time around, but it is new and it's really a significant development. And I wonder if you could comment on what you think should be the priorities of the Pacific deterrence initiative, what are the gaps that it should fill.

Rep. Ami Bera:

You know, certainly we could use more but I think it's a good first start and does give the administration and all of us a working opportunity to create a framework and foundation by which to approach the region. Obviously, areas that I focus on that, you know, I'd like us to focus on is, you know, the maritime issues, freedom of navigation issues in that region. But also, as we're building our ties on defense to defense bases we're looking at multilateral coalitions, like the quad, U.S., India, Japan, Australia. How can we use some of those resources not just in a traditional defense setting but also to build these coalitions? And look at the particular assets some of the countries in the region bring to the table. You know, the – we do more defense to defense exercises with the Indian Navy than, I believe, just about anyone else.

So what does that look like? What does a 21st-century Japanese defense posture look like in the region? What are some things that we could do to – you know, we're talking about Taiwan – where we could help Taiwan with their own self-defense capabilities, as well as, you know, working with our allies in Taiwan to have them invest more in their own internal defensive capabilities. You know, we can talk about the trilateral relationship between the U.S., Japan, and Korea, vis-à-vis, you know, what, you know, is happening on the Korean Peninsula. And what should that look like going forward at a time when our allies are afraid?

And then, you know, China will be the elephant in the room that really impacts all of these conversations. So how do we use the resources that are allocated to recognize that we are in this strategic competition. With China we clearly will be competitors. You know, there will be tensions. But, you know, none of us wants to see a kinetic confrontation. But how can we use the resources and, as we start to see what the Biden administration's priorities are as well as we set our priorities here in Congress, what's missing here and what – you know?

And I guess the last thing I'd say is, we have to think about this the way we thought about the Cold War. That, you know, we got to play the long game here because, you know, this is going to be a long engagement. And I think this will be the most vibrant region, as – and challenging – but also a region full of opportunities. And it shouldn't be Democrat versus Republican, or one administration to the next administration. Again, what was successful in Cold War strategy was it was less a partisan issue and was less an issue of one administration to the rest, and we had a long-term game plan that we could execute.

Bonnie S. Glaser:

Since we're going to be focusing a bit in these subsequent panels on the regional security architecture I'd be interested in your view as to whether the sort of hodgepodge of mechanisms that some people refer to as almost an alphabet soup in the region – whether you think that that's working. There's – this is – it obviously exists for historical reasons. The Indo-Pacific is nothing like the

European theater. I personally don't believe we should have a NATO-like organization in Asia. But do we need to strengthen existing institutions? Do you think we should create something new? And how do we integrate Taiwan into this – into this regional security architecture?

Rep. Ami Bera:

You know, certainly some of the most traditional alliances that we've had – you know, U.S.-Korea, U.S.-Japan – you know, came under tremendous pressure in the current administration the last four years. And, you know, the trilateral defense relationship that we have with Japan and Korea, you know, is not at a great place right now. So and I think a starting point is addressing some of the easier issues – let's say U.S.-Korea – you know, getting the burden sharing, the SMA issues, resolved. You know, trying to bring both our friends, the Koreans and the Japanese, together to address some of the issues.

I think those are some things that the Biden administration and we certainly in Congress will take up fairly quickly. I think they matter. They matter vis-à-vis Taiwan's security as well because, you know, some of the challenges and – “aggressiveness” is probably too strong a term, but you know, some of what we're seeing, you know, in the Taiwan Straits and, you know, some of the air flights, you know, coming out of China in that region, I think if we can create those alliances with regard to other potential young but maturing alliances – and certainly from a defense perspective, I mentioned the Quad earlier. I think that's another one that – we can continue to build the U.S.-India-Japan-Australia, you know, potentially even expand some of these conversations, mutual exercises, mutual training exercises.

But I think I agree with you, Bonnie, that, you know, I don't think it's building a NATO type of mutual defense structure. I think it's something different. I think, you know how you take, you know, some of the leading democracies, the leading likeminded allies that have mutual concerns in the region, but then also how do we bring in some of the other countries in the region – the Philippines, you know, the Vietnams, the Indonesias, the Malaysias, and others – and what does that look like. Had you asked me four or five years ago I was really thinking about it less from the traditional defense strategy, and I always thought that TPP was a tool as much about economic opportunity as it was about strategic opportunity.

And you know, to me that – you know, the transatlantic relationship is different than the transpacific relationship. I think this one – you know, the competition with China has much economic competition, which that wasn't the case with Russia or the former Soviet Union. That wasn't an influence. This is going to be as much an economic competition as it is, you know, a traditional defense competition, and I think we have to – we can't lose sight of that.

So I don't know that the Biden administration joins CPTPP. It's hard for me to not to call it TPP. But you know, I think it's important for us. And that's an area we – Congress will weigh in on: What does that trading relationship look like? And I think it has to be more than a bunch of bilateral agreements.

Now, with Taiwan – and we can talk about this if you want – you know, do we try to get the bilateral trade agreement? We talked about it, you know, at the hearing, you know, last month, and you know, certainly I think that's an opportunity where, you know, we can use tools of economics to also, you know, be tools of strategy.

Bonnie S. Glaser: Well, since you mentioned the economic architecture, maybe you can give us your thoughts on what both you think we should do – the United States, under the Biden administration – and also maybe what the U.S. and Congress can do to promote Taiwan's economic integration in the region. We've recently had the signing of the Regional Economic Cooperation Partnership, RCEP, and of course you mentioned CPTPP, the United States not being part of that. And as a result, the prospects for Taiwan joining will be diminished because the United States is not a member. And this has an impact going forward, I think, on Taiwan's economic competitiveness, as well as its prosperity, and I know that you have supported the signing of a bilateral trade agreement – a free trade type agreement – with Taiwan. And unfortunately, we have not seen any negotiations launched with Taiwan. And so it seems to me that regional economic cooperation is going forward and it is – it is progressing, and everybody in the region will benefit from it. And I feel like both the United States and Taiwan are on the sidelines. So what do we do?

Rep. Ami Bera: Yeah. So, again, I think this is an area where you can get bipartisan, Democrats and Republicans in agreement. As you saw on our committee last week on, you know, whether it's a full-fledged bilateral trade agreement or something akin to that, I think that's an important early win, again, in the context of a broader U.S.-China strategy.

But then can we bring in some of our partners in the region, as well, to create broader trading relations – you know, Japan, Korea, others? You know, can we work with international organizations, you know, much like the WHO, to get China back – or to get Taiwan back in, at least as an observer category, given just their remarkable success in dealing with this pandemic, with COVID-19.

I also, then, think – yeah, I don't know exactly how the Biden administration will engage the trade conversation, but I do think you'll see members of Congress, Democrats and Republicans, you know, really encouraging the administration to take another look at TPP, because I think, you know, it does hurt us not being there, both economically but also strategically. It creates a vacuum where China can, you know – RCEP is not TPP, but it is an agreement that they can build off of. You know, the countries would rather have a CPTPP. And in our conversations with the countries in the region, they would much rather have the United States working with them to set the rules of commerce.

So, you know, maybe it is a conversation around supply chains, where, you know, that certainly is something that we're going to hit the ground running on looking at in the midst of the pandemic, in the midst of, you know, defeating this virus. But how can we incorporate Taiwan into some of the redundancy with regards to supply chains and the like? So I think there's opportunity. So –

Bonnie S. Glaser: Let me ask you about what you think needs to be done to bolster deterrence in the Taiwan Strait. Obviously, the Chinese have been developing a range of anti-access/area denial capabilities that are aimed at imposing costs on the United States should we choose to intervene to defend Taiwan. And this comes, of course, amid their building their capabilities against Taiwan, although I think that there's still some way to go before they would have great confidence that they would be able to take Taiwan. And so this is – this is an important moment, I think, for the United States, Taiwan, and for other countries that are concerned about the potential failure of deterrence.

So my question really is whether you think we should – should we further strengthen our defense ties with Taiwan? Is this about more offensive arms sales to Taiwan, working more with our allies? Is it about modifying our rhetorical policy? I know during the hearing you asked me about my views of whether the United States should have greater strategic clarity about whether it would come to the defense of Taiwan under all circumstances, and I've written about that that I think that I'm concerned about provoking China and also concerned about whether or not it would have an impact on Taiwan's politics going forward and in their own commitment to their defense. So I have reservations. And I'm curious about your thoughts on what we need to do to strengthen deterrence in the Taiwan Strait.

Rep. Ami Bera:

You know, certainly, you know, we can increase our defense sales to Taiwan. I know in the hearing we talked a little bit about Taiwan also investing in their own defensive and offensive capabilities.

You know, I think that I would agree with you. I don't think most of us think there's a(n) imminent potential attack or – on Taiwan because I think the Chinese understand that, you know, it would not be easy and, you know, certainly it would not play well on the global stage. But I think a lot of us watching what has happened in Hong Kong, watching, you know, Chinese aggression in the South China Sea, et cetera, we don't take this lightly. If we do nothing, we think, you know, there's a(n) imminent challenge. And again, it is similar to the South China Sea. We didn't do enough to stop it five, six, seven years ago, and we have a much bigger challenge today.

So I do think, you know, thinking about defense sales, thinking about working with Taiwan to increase their own investment in defense. I think the answer lies somewhere between strategic ambiguity and strategic clarity, but we certainly need more clarity. So, you know – because the ambiguity just creates a vacuum where the Chinese will – you know, will interpret that however they want to interpret that, and I think we have to, you know, as the United States really lay out with some level of clarity – not full clarity, maybe, but some level of clarity – our commitments.

And then I think this falls into the broader damage that the last four years has done with regards to our reputation and the region, and globally. You know, are we a reliable partner. Nobody ever questioned that before. Everyone always understood the broad reliability of the United States military and the United States. And I think that is something that has to be a priority for the Biden administration. And again, I think you can find Democrats and Republicans in Congress that would be willing to work to repair that and regain our reputation as a reliable partner here that folks can depend on.

Because I think – I do think our adversaries – in this case China – have taken advantage of the lack of the Trump administration's focus on the region and presence in the region. We can only do so much as members of Congress – you know, traveling there, talking to our, you know, counterparts. But it really does take a president of the United States, as well as a State Department and the Defense Department, along with Congress showing that, you know, these relationships are incredibly valuable, and we are a reliable partner.

Bonnie S. Glaser: Absolutely. Couldn't agree more. And I think the visits by Congress to Taiwan are extremely important, so don't underestimate them. (Laughs.) Parliaments around the world – and the, you know, European Parliament is certainly an example where their support for Taiwan has been – has been growing and increasingly important. So I hope that that will continue. And I think we should all be proud of the bipartisan support of our Congress for Taiwan. And it's been so clear in the last couple of years. And I'm confident will be forward.

Maybe just I'll ask you one last question about the World Health Organization and how we might think about creatively working to restore Taiwan's observer status. The planned visit by U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Kelly Craft to Taiwan was cancelled, as all State Department travel through the end of the Trump administration – it was just announced today – has been cancelled. So she will not be going. I was personally ambivalent about whether that move would help or harm Taiwan in these final days of the Trump administration.

But I am deeply supportive of Taiwan being able to share its expertise with other countries. And you know better than most how important their work has been. This is – this is a government that has not shut down. They've had no lockdowns. Everybody has gone to school. And they also have very few cases of COVID-19, and a tiny number of deaths. I believe it is still seven. So what can we do to help Taiwan in this regard?

Rep. Ami Bera: You know, Taiwan's record with COVID-19's been remarkable. And there's a lot that we could learn from Taiwan. And you know, not just with the immediate pandemic, but what were the steps that they took after SARS, after MERS to build the public health infrastructure that let them deal with this pandemic so well? They should be able share that with the rest of the world. You know, I don't know exactly what the next steps, other than, you know, the fact that we're not engaged with the World Health Organization, we don't have our board position filled, has created a vacuum that has allowed others, in this case China, to exert, you know, undue influence on organizations like that – on the U.N. and others.

So the first step is immediately reengaging in these multilateral organizations, like the WHO. Starting to put together coalitions, you know, using what historically would have been our influence in the elections as the chief executives of these organizations are being selected, because that all matters. And you know, the fact that we haven't been sitting at the table for the last four years or haven't had a great presence in these organizations has allowed others, in this case China, to exert, you know, influence on things like, you know, whether Taiwan can have observer status. So.

Bonnie S. Glaser: This has really been an excellent conversation. I'm so glad that you're able to join us. I know you must have so much on your plate at this moment, but I want to thank you for all of your hard work in Congress. And look forward to continuing to working with you and your committee going forward. And thanks, again, for joining us and sharing your views today.

Rep. Ami Bera: Well, thank you, Bonnie. And thanks, CSIS, for all the work that they do.

Bonnie S. Glaser: Great. Hope to see you soon.

(END)