**John Torpey** 00:03

Welcome to the International Horizons, a podcast of the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies that bring scholarly and diplomatic expertise to bear on our understanding of a wide range of international issues. My name is John Torpey, and I'm Director of the Ralph Bunche Institute at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York.

**John Torpey** 00:23

Today, we discuss the Biden administration's foreign policy in East Asia with Scott Busby, the Acting Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State in the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, usually known as DRL, at the US State Department, where he currently oversees Bureau's work on Africa, East Asia and the Pacific, the Western Hemisphere, the human rights of LGBTQI+ persons, visas and sanctions involving human rights and business and human rights. And he's been with DRL since 2011, so for a decade. Thanks so much for taking the time to be with us today. Scott Busby.

**Scott Busby** 01:06

Thank you, John. Great to be here.

**John Torpey** 01:08

Good to have you. So at least since the Obama Administration, there's been this so called pivot to Asia in the American foreign policy establishment. And this, I think, became especially obvious in the Trump Administration, when the President promoted a rather contentious relationship with China. How is all this likely to change and to develop under Biden?

**Scott Busby** 01:32

Well, I think it is striking that ever since the pivot to Asia, which President Obama initiated, as you've said, John, that both the Trump Administration and the now Biden Administration have continued prioritizing our relationship with that region. I think that's partly demographically based, but I think it's economically based. So despite the profound other differences between these various administrations, I think there has been significant continuity in the prioritization of the region as a whole. And we see this with the fact that the Trump administration initiated something called the Indo-Pacific strategy.

**Scott Busby** 02:22

The Biden Administration is continuing with such a strategy, albeit with tweaks. The Trump Administration started something called the Quad, namely, the US, India, Japan, and Australia, getting together to talk about priorities in the region and coordinating in our response around those priorities. The Biden Administration has continued with that Quad. And as we've seen, the Biden Administration, the first two bilateral summits the Biden Administration held were with Japan and South Korea, in that order. So I think this all demonstrates that there is bipartisan recognition of the fact that Asia is a very significant region, and that we need to prioritize our approach to that region.

**John Torpey** 03:18

So you mentioned that part of the reason for this is demographic. I wonder if you could say a little bit more about that. Well, how do you mean that? I mean, this is obviously an issue now that China has just announced that families are allowed to have as many as three children after the so-called One Child Policy for a long time. So could you say a little bit about what you mean by the demographic kind of origins of this shift in policy?

**Scott Busby** 03:44

Well I think folks have come to recognize that between China, India and Indonesia, we have among the largest countries in the world demographically, and many of those countries are growing. Yes, China has tweaked its birth policy to address some of the challenges it foresees in its own population. But as a whole, the region continues to grow demographically at the same time as it is becoming an increasingly important economic influence in the world. And I think for both reasons, the US and others have come to see it as a significant, very important region.

**John Torpey** 04:27

Indeed, I mean, it's the three countries you're talking about approach 50% of world population. So as our economist colleague Branko Milanović at the Graduate Center has recently made clear, you know, things that happen in particularly China, but China and India obviously move the needle in big ways, when things happen there.

**John Torpey** 04:51

So I want to get back to the issue of human rights which is an important part of the portfolio of the bureau of which you're a part. Seems to me that Trump Administration was rather inconsistent about its pursuit of traditional American concerns regarding human rights in regard to China. And more specifically with regard to Xinjiang and Tibet, how is that likely to change under Biden? Why did Secretary Anthony Blinken decide to continue with Secretary Pompeo's determination that genocide is occurring in Xinjiang?

**Scott Busby** 05:31

I think it's first to recognize that the Trump Administration did take very significant actions vis-à-vis Xinjiang and ultimately vis-à-vis Tibet. On Xinjiang, decisions were taken to sanction a number of individuals and entities implicated in the human rights abuses there. Widespread export controls were put in place, which essentially restrict the export of US goods to entities implicated in human rights abuses. And there were put in place, so-called withhold release orders that precluded the importation of goods made with forced labor in Xinjiang or elsewhere in China. So I think it is fair to say that the Trump Administration took significant actions to address the human rights abuses in China. That said, as you mentioned, John, there was a times inconsistency when the President and others were anxious to strike a trade deal with China. We saw occasional easing up on these tough actions. So there was a sort of oscillation, depending on where the Administration was, at any given moment.

**Scott Busby** 06:47

I think the biggest change between the Trump Administration and the Biden Administration and this is not only as to China, it is really globally, is the fact that the Trump Administration often went it alone --often acted unilaterally. So we declared sanctions when we thought it was appropriate to do so. We spoke to others to encourage them to do so but didn't have much success. The Biden Administration sees such coordination as integral to implementation of foreign policy generally. So for instance, on March the 22nd, we announced in conjunction with the EU, the UK and Canada sanctions on some of the individuals and entities implicated in the abuses in Xinjiang, and we plan and hope to continue with that coordinated approach with our allies, because we think that is likely to have far greater impact than the unilateral approach taken by the Trump Administration.

**John Torpey** 07:49

I mean, you know, we've discussed this with a number of guests on this podcast in the past, but they haven't been representatives of the Administration. So I think perhaps it's, useful to ask you, you know, how should we think about China? I mean, India is less of a concern. It's less somehow seen, I think, as at odds with the United States, but China is, you know, obviously, the Trump Administration regarded China as a serious challenger, a serious I don't know, opponent. I mean, I wonder what words you would use to talk about how the Biden Administration sees China, and you know, how that perception shapes its policies --is going to shape its policies towards China?

**Scott Busby** 08:40

Well, Secretary Blinken has regularly talked about China as a competitor, as a country with which we might [have] cooperated, and then as a country that we may occasionally have to confront. So I think he and the Biden Administration see the China relationship in a very multifaceted way, so that there may be issues on which we are pushing the Chinese hard, such as human rights, at the same time as we're seeking to cooperate with them on climate change, on interdicting the introduction of drugs made in China to the United States, things of that nature. So I think it's, again, multifaceted. And I think each issue requires a different approach.

**John Torpey** 09:35

So I want to turn to some of the other developments in the region now. And perhaps one of the most significant or certainly one of the most significant in recent months has been the coup, the military coup in Myanmar. And, you know, this has led to many deaths, the suspension of civilian rule. Can you tell us how the Administration sees the situation there? What do you think is likely to happen?

**Scott Busby** 10:02

Well, the the Biden Administration is extremely troubled by the coup that has taken place in Myanmar. We declared it a coup for legal purposes soon after it took place, which meant that various types of assistance had to be terminated. We have imposed multiple forms of sanctions, both on individuals responsible for the coup, as well as the entities that benefit those responsible for the coup. And those are mostly military owned enterprises. And we continue to investigate additional, both individuals and entities, we might sanction to again cut off flow of resources to the military there, to try to get them to change their behavior.

**Scott Busby** 11:02

Hard to say where this is going to go. Obviously, the folks who led the coup were part of the generation that survived for decades, under sanction, but they were extremely isolated over that period of time. And ultimately, they became tired of their --of that isolation. Their children, I think, wanted access greater access to the outside world. And that is what led to the opening there approximately a decade ago. And our hope is that by reapplying some of the same pressure, we will encourage them to think twice about whether they wish to revert to the sort of insular state and society that they were previously. And I'd like to believe -- we'd like to believe --that the younger generation of Burmans are not interested in that type of future.

**John Torpey** 12:01

Right. So I mean, this is, you know, this general area as part of, I suppose, China's larger kind of sphere of influence. How do you see China's role in this neighborhood? And how are other countries kind of dealing with China's influence in the region?

**Scott Busby** 12:23

Well, there's no question that China has sought through its Belt and Road initiative, and other similar diplomatic forms of outreach, to exercise greater influence over countries not only in that region, but around the world. We've seen them undertake similar efforts in South Central Asia, and Eastern Europe, and in Africa, and even in Latin America. So the US is very concerned about these efforts. And we're doing whatever we can to push back on them.

**Scott Busby** 13:02

And I think one of the chief ways we can push back, is by demonstrating to these countries that ultimately, we're a more reliable partner than the Chinese, the Chinese turned a blind eye to corruption, they turned a blind eye to human rights abuses, their economic relationships are often coercive in nature. And we think by pointing to these sorts of factors, not only to the governments China's trying to influence, but to the people of those countries, that we can ultimately demonstrate to those countries, that China is not the way to go, that the US is the far more far better route over the long term to encourage the sort of prosperity, security and peace that all countries in the world are looking for.

**John Torpey** 13:59

Well, since you've mentioned Africa, and I note that that's part of your portfolio at the DRL, I think that's an interesting sort of matter to pursue. You probably saw the report in the New York Times recently about the demographic future of the world, one basically where, you know, increasingly the world does not have replacement rate of reproduction and population starts actually to decline in the not so far off, perhaps in a generation. And, you know, the one place that's really doesn't seem very likely, at least not anytime soon, is of course in Africa. So I wonder if you could comment on your own perceptions of where things are going in Africa, the United States posture towards it. I mean, Africa is obviously a big and complicated place with many different countries and cultures, but since you've also mentioned the Chinese influence there, I wonder if you could say a little bit about how you see all that unfolding?

**Scott Busby** 15:10

Well, there's no question, John, that the youth bulge you describe is one of the most significant continent-wide phenomenon in Africa. And I do think addressing that, in various ways is is absolutely critical. The Obama Administration started something called the YALI program, the Young African Leaders Initiative, which sought to identify and cultivate young leaders in Africa. And that initiative has continued and will continue. So that's one important thing to do, but that touches a relatively small portion of that young population. I think the other thing we need to do is we need to create job possibilities for these folks, as well as stability, such that folks can work in ways that are safe and that can last over the longer term. So security and prosperity go hand in hand.

**Scott Busby** 16:16

From a strictly democracy and human rights standpoint, I think the picture is mixed in Africa. There have been some striking positive developments in Africa. One need only look at Sudan, where unexpected sustained protests managed to manage to push out the long term authoritarian ruler in that country. No one saw that coming. And while Sudan is still taking baby steps in the direction of democracy, it's not solidified, it's still quite hopeful. And the US is working very closely with the transitional government in Sudan to help them get it right.

**Scott Busby** 17:04

This morning, I'm meeting with our Ambassador to the Democratic Republic of the Congo. And there too, we see some hopeful signs. The long time authoritarian ruler there, Joseph Kabila, stepped down, elections were held, everyone expected that his hand-picked successor would be elected in corrupt elections. But in fact, a long time civil society activist, Felix Tshisekedi, son of a father who was also very active in the democracy movement in the DRC. Felix was elected president. And while he's had kind of rough couple years since being declared President, he's recently succeeded in gaining effective control of the Parliament and is anxious to make many of the reforms that we have long urged that government to make. Indeed we are, when we meet with the Ambassador later today, we're going to talk with him about starting a human rights dialogue with the DRC to help it get its act in order.

**Scott Busby** 18:14

Similarly, in Angola, there was a shift in the presidency there. João Lourenço, succeeded the longtime, corrupt president who had been in power and much to our pleasant surprise, Lourenço has undertaken a significant number of reforms to address corruptions, corruption abuses and the like. Again, by no means perfect, there's still lots of challenges in Angola. But these three countries, among others, are countries where there is hope for genuine democratic change.

**Scott Busby** 18:48

On the other hand, you have a situation like Ethiopia, which we had some hope for, given the seeming liberal democratic event of Prime Minister Abiy. But with the conflict between the Tigrayan political leadership, which had formerly been in power, and Abiy's government, horrific things have happened. There are horrendous human rights abuses that have taken place, including those committed by the Eritrean security forces who were brought in to help put down the uprising in Tigray, irregular Amhara forces, and then, of course, with the Ethiopian army itself, just horrific abuses. And in addition to the abuses, the Ethiopian government still has prevented this sort of full humanitarian access to the people in need in Tigray, and that, too, has been very troubling to us.

**Scott Busby** 19:55

And of course, there are a number of other situations where things continue to be bad, Zimbabwe, among others. So a very mixed picture. But we definitely shouldn't write Africa off both because as you emphasize John, the youth bulge there presents tremendous opportunities, I think, for change, economic opportunities. And because there are people who want genuine democracy and respect for human rights on that continent.

**John Torpey** 20:30

Interesting. So, I mean, I wonder whether you could say, sort of more generally, I mean, the various comments you've made speak to, you know, the American interest in improvements in Sudan, or Angola or wherever these countries might be. You know, what is the nature really of that interest? Why does the United States care what happens in a relatively small country far, you know, halfway around the world with which it has, I'm guessing, you know, pretty minimal trade relations? I mean, why does the United States care about, you know, the arrival of democracy in Angola?

**Scott Busby** 21:15

You know, ultimately, and the data shows this, is that countries that are democratic and respect human rights are ultimately more secure, more prosperous, and make for better allies. Not long ago, I read the book, Why Nations Fail, at the encouragement of my son, and I think they do a very compelling analysis of why it is that inclusive societies that respect rule of law are ultimately more prosperous. Yes, the Soviet Union in its early years as it were underwent collectivization enjoyed high levels of economic growth. Same is obviously true of China for the past few decades. But their thesis, with which I agree, is that given the lack of rule of law in those societies, given the lack of public buy-in to what it is the regime is doing, ultimately, those countries are simply not going to be able to sustain the sort of innovation and economic energy that is necessary for long term economic growth. And I think that does make a powerful case for why a country like Angola, like the Gambia, a country of only half million people, ultimately, if and when they become fully democratic, are far in far better shape for themselves, as well as for the United States.

**John Torpey** 22:55

Well, so how would you assess? I mean, it's certainly widely thought that the world is facing, you know, a rising challenge of illiberal anti-democratic forces. You know, what are the chances that that kind of scenario that you've just described, is really going to play out in the coming years? I mean, what does the Biden Administration think?

**John Torpey** 23:19

I mean, we've recently concluded our intelligence services have concluded that, you know, the most important extremist threat in the United States is that of essentially white supremacist domestic terrorist forces. How does the Biden Administration view that kind of challenge? I mean, not necessarily white supremacist challenge, but, you know, a kind of authoritarian illiberal challenge worldwide?

**Scott Busby** 23:50

There's no question that things have been going in the wrong direction, as documented in Freedom House's annual Freedom in the World Report, as documented in our own intelligence conclusions, and and others who look at these phenomena. But again, I think ultimately, people around the world want some say in how their societies are run. And so ultimately, governments, societies that cater to that reflect and provide opportunities to their citizens, to have that say, are ultimately going to prevail. At least that's what we like to think in in my Bureau, but I think it is, I think it is demonstrably true as well. So while we are, you know, suffering, a backlash, if you will, a backsliding among some democratic countries around the world, I do think that people's interest in having a say over their own lives ultimately is going to produce energetic social and political movements that ultimately will prevail in keeping countries democratic and respecting human rights and the rule of law.

**John Torpey** 25:26

And I mean, I'm frankly, not sure whether you can get into this. But I wonder, you know, how's the mood at the State Department? I think it was a pretty open secret that things were troubled under the previous administration, and that there were lots of concerns about long time civil servants no longer feeling as though they could do their jobs very well. Could you describe the, you know, current mood at the State Department?

**Scott Busby** 26:03

Think current mood is is very positive. The Biden Administration and its budget released last week committed itself to building back the State Department, not just to the level that it was before the Trump administration, but beyond that level, because the Biden Administration recognizes that diplomacy is far cheaper, and far more effective, than sending in the troops in terms of trying to keep the peace around the world. So I think that is something that people here in the department feel very good about.

**Scott Busby** 26:44

I think it's also the case that the Biden Administration is very committed to making the State Department look like the rest of America to diversifying the staff at the State Department. And I think that has elicited a great deal of support from State Department staff as well. So I would say that, generally, spirits are up here at State Department, because the Biden Administration recognizes the importance of diplomacy to advancing US interests.

**John Torpey** 27:20

And I mean, we're all, you know, all countries at some level, at present are kind of preoccupied with dealing with this pandemic. But of course, the United States is in many ways, you know, opening up and sort of moving on. I mean, there's a way in which, despite the fact that originally we were the epicenter, or at least one major epicenter of the crisis, we've kind of more or less gotten it under control. It's not to say that people aren't getting sick and dying, they are. But in a way, it's now moved international. And it's become, you know, a crisis really for the rest of the world, especially India, but also Latin America and Brazil. So I wonder whether you see if the United States is kind of now in a position to kind of look after some of its own problems, you know, rebuilding our infrastructure, but also re-engaging with the outside world in a way that maybe wasn't the case during the crisis.

**Scott Busby** 28:22

Well, as you say, John, I do think it gives us an opportunity to focus on some of the other challenges we face. But I think we also recognize how important it is not only to others around the world, but to ourselves, to help get the COVID crisis under control. And that's why Secretary Blinken has appointed the very, very seasoned and skilled diplomat, Gayle Smith, to lead the COVID diplomacy of the State Department, to try to ensure that we are distributing as much [and] as many of the vaccines as we can to places around the world that need it. So I think even while we get our own situation under control, we will continue to be emphasizing and spending a great deal of effort in trying to help others get the problem under control as well.

**John Torpey** 29:20

Right. And that's obviously a major challenge. I mean, how do you see that unfolding, though? I mean, I think there's been a lot of concern that COVAX, this alliance of countries and organizations to get the rest of the world vaccinated, has been not thrilled I think about the way things have been going and the decisions that have been made or not made about relaxing patent restraints and those sorts of things. I mean, how likely do you think it is that the rest of the world will get vaccinated? I mean, there have been a number of studies and I've interviewed a couple of Turkish economists who did a study about how damaging it would be for our economies. You know, that's not obviously the only issue but for our economies to not get this done, because it will affect the ability of our trading partners, for example, to produce things and ship them out and that sort of thing.

**Scott Busby** 30:23

Look, I'm not a public health expert, so I don't want to prognosticate about whether and how we will get a response to COVID or COVID under control, but I can speak to the fact that Biden Administration is absolutely committed to addressing this problem internationally, as well as nationally. And again, the fact that the Biden Administration has appointed Gayle Smith, an extremely experienced diplomat who has worked in Africa and other key countries around the world, who knows public health issues, former Administrator at USAID, I think that demonstrates that this Administration really does want to do what it can to address the problem.

**John Torpey** 31:13

Great. Well, thanks very much for taking the time to talk to us today. I want to thank Scott Busby for sharing his insights about the Biden Administration's foreign policy in East Asia and elsewhere really. Remember to subscribe and rate International Horizons on SoundCloud, Spotify and Apple podcasts. I want to thank Hristo Voynov for his technical assistance and to acknowledge Duncan Mackay for sharing his song International Horizons as the theme music for the show. This is John Torpey, saying thanks for joining us and we look forward to having this for the next episode of International Horizons.