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What's next for the United States?

Part 4: Restoring Democracy in the United States and Abroad

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How is the Biden administration changing the direction of the U.S.? The KAS Office USA takes a first look, in a series of five country reports. This report looks into the Biden administrations' efforts to strengthen and promote the tenants of democracy including human rights at home and abroad.

Key Policy Goals

In July 2020, while on the campaign trail, then-presidential candidate Joe Biden announced his plan for a new U.S. foreign policy – a plan that recommits the United States to her leadership role among the democracies of the world within multilateral alliances and marking a reversal of Trump's isolationist policies which undermined America's democratic alliances and weakened her position and credibility as a world leader¹.

In Biden's essay in *Foreign Policy* on "Why America Must Lead Again - Rescuing U.S. Foreign Policy After Trump"², he argues that as domestic and foreign policies are closely connected – even dependent on another, the former must align with the latter. He echoed this conditionality once more during his first public speech on foreign policy as president on February 4th, 2021 at the Department of State. Before this, however, Biden had declared that the U.S. "cannot re-engage with the world and re-establish herself as a global leader without first doing the hard work of rebuilding, strengthening, and expanding the tenants of her democracy at home first." The Biden campaign's foreign policy platform emphasized that for the U.S. to be seen as a credible force by her partners and rivals alike, she must, once again, lead by her example.

„But democracy is not just the foundation of American society. It is also the wellspring of our power. It strengthens and amplifies our leadership to keep us safe in the world. It is the engine of our ingenuity that drives our economic prosperity. It is the heart of who we are and how we see the world—and how the world sees us. It allows us to self-correct and keep striving to reach our ideals over time... As a nation, we have to prove to the world that the United States is prepared to lead again—not just with the example of our power but also with the power of our example. To that end, as president, I will take decisive steps to renew our core values. “

During his run for the presidency, Joe Biden created a label for himself as having "a plan" for every policy aspect and indeed he did. His vision for the U.S. "Restore American Leadership Abroad"³ is a comprehensive blueprint for renewing and re-establishing America's core values and exemplary leadership claim. This plan, characterized by introspection and self-correction consists of two main objectives; both the promotion of democracy at home and abroad.

Reinforcing Democracy in the U.S. & Restoring America's Leadership

Among his early actions as president, Biden promised to address structural deficiencies obstructing the healthy functioning of democracy within the United States from the bottom up. As the foundation for Biden humanistic policy approach, these include:

- Restoring America's commitment to science and truth,
- Seeking greater transparency in the U.S. campaign finance system, dedicating greater resources towards the protection of the U.S. electoral system, and restoring the U.S. Voting Rights Act⁴
- The establishment of strict conflict-of-interest and anti-corruption policies for the administration and public servants, as well as the re-introduction of government transparency via daily communication with the public as a means of promoting public informed consent on domestic and foreign policies,
- Acknowledging racial inequity and enacting policies to create more equity in the education and criminal justice systems,
- A series of policies addressing immigration to the U.S. including:
 - Re-establishing the United States and a nation of immigrants
 - Ending forced family separations at the U.S. Mexico border and institution of more sensible policies to improve screening in cooperation with North American partners; Canada and Mexico
 - Reviewing temporary protected status for vulnerable populations and the reversal of Trump's asylum policies; including raising the quota of refugees the U.S. will admit
 - Ending the Muslim travel ban,
- Revitalizing national commitment to advancing human rights and democracy around the world including:
 - Reaffirming Women's and Girl's Rights at home, including focusing on measures that address gender-based violence against them and adverse policies affecting women's reproductive freedom
 - The protection and promotion of LGBTQ rights,
- Reaffirming the ban on torture and restoring greater transparency in U.S. military operations.



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FOUNDATIONS.”

Joe Biden, February 4, 2021

In turn, these main objectives focus on three main tenants of liberal democracy: Human Rights, transparency, and fighting corruption. They are to become the pillars for United States' new foreign policy and President Biden has committed to addressing all of these objectives before calling on democracies around the world and reestablishing herself as a leader among the free democracies of the liberal world order.

Global Summit for Democracy

Before becoming president Biden stated that “corruption is an insidious pandemic” that “fuels oppression, corrodes human dignity, and equips authoritarian leaders to divide and weaken democracy”. In the past, the world’s democracies looked to the U.S. for leadership. However, according to Biden, Trump gave “free license of impunity to other autocrats and kleptocrats around the world by presiding over the most corrupt administration in modern American history”⁵. To reverse this downward spiral, Biden, while still a presidential candidate in 2020, announced that he would host a global Summit for democracy early in his administration in which he expects to galvanize significant commitments from the world’s democracies and non-democracies alike in three areas: fighting corruption, defending against authoritarianism, and advancing human rights in their nations and abroad.

Biden announced the Summit would include civil society organizations from around the world that stand on the frontlines in defense of our democracies and include a “Call to Action” for the private sector, including technology corporations and social media giants, to make their own commitments, recognizing their responsibilities and their self-interest in preserving open, democratic societies and protecting freedom of speech. When exactly the Summit will take place is still open due to restraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. No details have been made public by the Biden administration so far. However, President Biden will have likely hit the ground running and is believed to have discussed the Summit in his many calls to world leaders during the first weeks in office as the Summit is slated to be a major tool of his foreign policy.

Regionally, Biden announced to refocus U.S. foreign policy i.e. democracy promotion efforts towards Asia, Africa, and Central America, and in doing so has committed to elevating diplomacy as the first means of rapprochement. Biden also announced his administration would strengthen democratic cooperation with partners beyond North America and Europe towards establishing and normalizing respect for democracy, human rights, and rule of law in these regions, especially as these relate to the protection of ethnic minorities, women and children, protection of unjust prosecution, freedom of belief and LGBTQ rights and protections.

First Steps and Announcements

On the afternoon of his inauguration on January 20th, President Biden issued 17 EOs, directives, and memos including barring the executive branch from acting in their private interest, reversing the Muslim travel ban, extending deportation deferrals, and fortifying Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), requiring non-citizens to be counted in the U.S. Census (which will significantly affect the promotion of racial, social and political equity), and preventing workplace discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity.

Since then, he has issued further guidance on the additional protections of minorities and Native Americans, has re-established the president’s Council of Advisors on Science and Technology, and rescinded the Mexico City Policy⁶. Additionally, Biden reversed justification for forced migrant family separations, reinstated the refugee admissions program, and ensured that LGBTQ+ refugees and asylum seekers have equal access to protections. Most recently, he sanctioned military leaders and a number of their associates who have taken part in undermining human rights in Myanmar – following up on his condemnation of human rights abuses in Myanmar on February 4th.

Additionally, the Biden administration has released a plethora of statements and press briefs, and phone conversation readouts with foreign leaders addressing various aspects of the democracy agenda. This included a call upon the Burmese military to relinquish the power it seized and demonstrate respect for Burmese people as expressed in their November 8th election. Biden also had a phone call with Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India, in which he underscored his desire to defend democratic institutions and norms around the world and noted that a shared commitment to democratic values is the bedrock for the U.S.-India relationship⁷.

In his first foreign policy address at the Department of State on February 4th, President Biden reaffirmed his commitment to all of his foreign policy campaign promises and declared that his administration had already moved quickly and delivered on many of them to "restore American engagement internationally and earn back our leadership position to catalyze global action on shared challenges." As previously mentioned, he issued a scathing condemnation of the military coup and Myanmar as a gross violation of rule of law along with cautioning Russia that the U.S. "will become more effective" in dealing with the country in cooperation with international partners to counter the suppression of freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. His remarks come in direct response to the recent jailing of activist Aleksey Navalny. The president also warned China that the U.S. "will counter its aggressive course of action to push back on China's attack on human rights, intellectual property, and global governance".⁸ Since coming into office, Biden has said the U.S. will halt support for the Saudi military campaign in Yemen, and drop the Houthi militant group — Riyadh's rival in Yemen — from the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism.

President Biden's tougher stance and tone towards democracy violators signals that America is back in the game and will hold other players accountable – and it seems that notice has already been taken. This past week, and after three years in jail, women's rights activist Loujain al-Hathloul, who lobbied for women's right to drive in Saudi Arabia, was released. The move is mostly seen as a low-stakes overture to President Biden by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who knows that the new U.S. administration will not be as friendly as Trump's was.

Organizational Changes and Important Players

President Biden has promised to replenish his administration with a competent and diverse workforce of public and civil servants. And the first view at his cabinet confirms this. Not all political appointees have been confirmed by the Senate yet and the top-down process of filling all key roles is estimated to take several more months. Additionally, Biden's democracy agenda is quite broad and crosses several executive branches, agencies, and offices that deal with the various objectives within his agenda as well as various regions. So far, there are no major organizational changes or re-structuring efforts that affect Biden's democracy agenda, but are likely to emerge soon. For now, the top democracy agenda player can be found amongst his cabinet, the State Department (DoS) and United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

Key Agencies and Players for Biden's Democracy Agenda

President Biden has appointed **Susan Rice**, as Director of the United States Domestic Policy Council which is embedded in the Executive Office of the President of the United States

(EOP) lead by White House Chief of Staff, **Ron Kain**. A member of the Democratic Party, Rice served as the 27th U.S. ambassador to the United Nations from 2009 to 2013 and as the 24th U.S. national security advisor from 2013 to 2017. Rice is part of the administrations' team tasked with organizing the Global Summit for Democracy.⁹

Linda Thomas-Greenfield has been appointed Ambassador to the United Nations. She previously served as Director General of the United States Foreign Service as well as Ambassador to Liberia. She is a thirty-five-year veteran of the United States Foreign Service and headed the Bureau of African Affairs during the Obama administration.¹⁰

Antony Blinken was sworn in as the 71st Secretary of State on January 26, 2021. He previously served as deputy national security advisor from 2013 to 2015 and deputy secretary of state from 2015 to 2017 under President Barack Obama. During his tenure he helped craft U.S. policy on Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the nuclear program of Iran. Within the Secretary's office **Katrina Fotovat** is the Senior Official for the Office of Global Women's Issues.

Slated to become the next Deputy Secretary of State is **Wendy Sherman**. Sherman is a professor of public leadership and director of the Center for Public Leadership at the Harvard Kennedy School and a diplomat who served as Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs from 2011 to 2015. Additionally, she is a senior counselor at Albright Stonebridge Group and a senior fellow at Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs.

Lisa Peterson is Senior Official for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights and Acting Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor. She joined the U.S. Foreign Service in 1989. Before joining the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor as Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary in December 2020, and previously served as Ambassador to the Kingdom of Eswatini (Swaziland) from 2016 to 2020.

Nancy Izzo Jackson is a career member of the Senior Executive Service and serves as Senior Bureau Official for the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration. From 2019-2021, she served as Deputy Assistant Secretary in the Bureau of South and Central Asia Affairs where she supported the formulation and execution of US policy toward Afghanistan, and from 2015-2019, as Deputy Assistant Secretary in the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration.¹¹

President Biden has nominated **Ambassador Samantha Power** to the role of Administrator of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Power previously served in Obama's NSC and as UN ambassador.

Biden's agenda at USAID is additionally supported by a career member of the U.S. Senior Foreign Service **Karl Fickenschner**, as Acting Assistant Administrator of the Bureau for Development, Democracy and Innovation (DDI), which is the central resource for providing technical assistance to USAID's field missions. Previously, he oversaw DDI's Private Sector Engagement Hub, the Center for Economics and Market Development, and managed the agency's relationship with the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation.¹²

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