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The Biden Administration and US Foreign Policy Decision-Making

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President-elect Joe Biden's coming administration will have a lasting impact on American foreign policy decision-making process, most notably when it comes to the Middle East. President Donald Trump's White House marginalized both the Department of Defense and the State Department and undermined the national security interagency dynamics. The Biden Administration is expected to restore this institutional aspect of the US bureaucracy, which does come with its own set of disadvantages.

Despite a tumultuous transition period leading to the January 20, 2021 inauguration, the Biden transition team is in full preparation mode to take over at a time when staff morale remains low at the Pentagon and the Department of State after four years of tension with and neglect from the White House. Meanwhile, Biden has selected his core national security team, most notably long-time adviser Antony Blinken as Secretary of State, retired General Lloyd Austin as Defense Secretary, and Jake Sullivan as White House National Security Adviser. Three main questions in this context suggest themselves: how the departing Trump Administration undermined these key national security agencies; what the incoming Biden administration might do differently; and what impact might this shift have on American foreign policy in the Middle East?

Trump and the “Deep State”

Since taking the oath of office in January 2017, President Trump has publicly shown disdain for the Washington establishment, which was clearly reflected in his governing record regarding federal staff turnovers, proposed budget cuts, and lack of interagency processes. As of December 4th, the total turnover among members of President Trump's executive office was 91 percent, compared to 71 percent during the Obama Administration, and 63 percent during the George W. Bush Administration. Meanwhile, the total turnover at the cabinet level was at 11 compared to three under Obama and two under Bush.

During former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's tenure, “60 percent of the State Department's top-ranking career diplomats resigned and new applications to join the foreign service fell by half.” Last October, Trump issued an executive order giving himself wide authority to hire and fire federal employees in a final attempt to reshape the federal bureaucracy; however Biden is now expected to rescind the order. Since the US election on November 3rd, Trump has fired four top officials at the Pentagon, including Defense Secretary Mark Esper who last June disagreed with him on using active-duty troops to quell street protests during the country's racial tensions. On the other hand, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo last week forced the early exit of the State Department's Acting Inspector General Matthew Klimow, who had replaced the original watchdog Steve Linick, himself fired last May. Trump has gradually installed loyalists after purging leaders in both the Pentagon and State Department's civilian hierarchies.



The State Department has long struggled for relevance, most notably in the past four years even after Secretary Pompeo took over in April 2018. Pompeo's own clout increased in the Trump Administration rather than in the agency he leads; he was called the "Secretary of Trump." Despite the Trump Administration's proposed cuts to the State Department's foreign operations annual budget to nearly \$40 billion, Congress has pushed back in a bipartisan fashion to maintain a level of spending above \$54 billion. The significant damage, however, was rather policy oriented given that Trump conducted a self-centered turbulent foreign policy via his inner circle and Twitter handle, which marginalized career diplomats doing their job on the ground and undermined the interagency process.

Moreover, civil-military relations have been strained during this Trump's presidency. The circumstances behind the exit of former Defense Secretary James Mattis, himself a retired general, were difficult for the Pentagon after the latter challenged Trump's abrupt decision in December 2018 to pull American troops out of Syria. While Trump ultimately did not withdraw from Syria, he has ongoing plans to significantly cut the number of US troops deployed in Afghanistan and Iraq before leaving office, a move that was long rejected by US military leaders. Trump has ordered the pullout of American troops in Somalia and their relocation to Kenya at the beginning of 2021. He said last September that US soldiers are "in love" with him but "the top people in the Pentagon probably aren't, because they want to do nothing but fight wars so that all of those wonderful companies that make the bombs and make the planes and make everything else stay happy." However, his administration's actions reflect a militarized federal budget. According to an analysis by the Washington Post, the White House Office of Management and Budget projected that military spending for the 2021 fiscal year compared to the 2016 levels would increase by 29 percent (or some \$164 billion). Trump also boasted about the technology and job growth factor of the US military complex during his military sales pitches with some Middle East leaders.

What Biden Would Do Differently: Back to the Interagency Process

Following his win, President-elect Biden announced that "America is back" and affirmed that "we've been through a lot of damage done over the last four years, in my view. We need to rebuild our institutions." However, his national security appointments came as no surprise with both Blinken and Sullivan coming as former Biden advisors and Obama veterans. Michèle Flournoy, who co-founded with Blinken a political strategy firm (WestExec Advisors), was considered for the top Pentagon job but not chosen, apparently because of her ties with consulting and investment firms (Blinken reportedly had similar ties) as well as because of her endorsement as undersecretary of defense in 2009 of the surge of US troops in Afghanistan, which Biden rejected.

The President-elect seems keen to have a team with whose views he feels comfortable and with whom he prefers to work. Blinken and Sullivan are known to have a close relationship, and the latter



was selected as White House national security adviser because of his compromise seeking and inclusive approach. Biden is a believer in the interagency process of consultations across concerned federal agencies and he seems to bet on Sullivan to revive this national security process. Moreover, having former Secretary of State John Kerry as a cabinet level climate czar with offices in both the State Department and the White House might also complicate the interagency process given the wide portfolio Biden has given to Kerry. It remains unclear yet how successfully the young Sullivan can assume that leadership role in managing this complicated process and the different personalities involved.

Biden made a rare move of writing an op-ed for *The Atlantic* defending his choice of the first African American to lead the Pentagon. The recently retired general will need a waiver from Congress to become defense secretary, since he has not been out of uniform for the required seven years. Some in Washington are concerned about having a trend of recently retired generals running the Pentagon and how this might impact civil-military relations. Only twice before has Congress granted such a waiver, for George Marshall in the 1940s and James Mattis in 2017. *The Wall Street Journal's* Editorial Board called Austin “another General of Defense.” Biden came to know Austin from the White House briefing rooms during the Obama Administration when he was leading the United States Central Command (CENTCOM) and overseeing Middle East operations against the so-called Islamic State. Austin was once described as “the invisible man” due to his low profile approach in dealing with the media and public engagement. Another connection between the two men is that Biden’s late son Beau once served as an attorney on Austin’s military staff in Iraq.

Implications for the Middle East

It became evident recently that the Trump Administration is setting the stage to force new regional dynamics before Biden takes over with increasing pressure on Iran, new sanctions on Turkey, and a series of Arab-Israeli normalization deals in the final stretch of Trump’s presidency. Pompeo told *Fox News* about Biden’s national security appointments: “I know some of these folks, they took a very different view, they lived in a bit of a fantasy world. They led from behind, they appeased. I hope they will choose a different course.”

It is true that the Biden’s team comes with their own background and experiences that will shape their views on the Middle East. Sullivan played a key role in paving the way for the Iran nuclear deal in 2015. Blinken contributed to shaping the umbrella of over 60 countries to combat the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and was called Biden’s “alter ego”; he believes that “as geopolitical competition intensifies, we must supplement diplomacy with deterrence” and said in a speech in June 2015 “American leadership has a unique ability to mobilize others and to make a difference.”

In September 2015, when serving as CENTCOM commander, Austin was against the growing consensus in Washington to establish no-fly zones in Syria and he told the Senate Armed Services



Committee hearing: “it will take a ground force to be able to protect the refugees if we do that. I don’t see the force available to be able to protect them currently...So I would not recommend it at this point in time.” The late Senator John McCain was critical of Austin’s views, telling him: “I have never seen a hearing that is as divorced from the reality of every outside expert and what you are saying.” Austin believes in the traditional use of American power by maintaining military deployments overseas. He said during an interview in 2018: “I believe we should be doing all we can to preserve our current forward presence to the greatest extent possible rather than cede ground and regional partnerships.”

If they are both confirmed by the US Senate, Blinken is expected to have some interventionist inclinations when needed while Austin is most likely reserved on the potential use of US military power. Sullivan would thoroughly engage these debates while having the close ear of President Biden. Austin’s highest priority would be the protection of US soldiers in the battlefield, mainly in the Middle East. However, given his combat experience in counterinsurgency, there are those who are questioning whether he can maneuver the challenges of deterring traditional foes like Russia and China. This should not be a disqualifying challenge given that he will run an agency and a team that will be well versed in these daunting issues.

The assumption that Biden’s will be a third Obama term might not be entirely accurate even with Obama veterans serving in the next administration. There were lessons learned in the past four years and Trump has created new dynamics in the Middle East that will be hard for the Biden Administration not to recognize. Most importantly, Middle East leaders will have to navigate this diversity in the interagency process instead of going through a presidential advisor like Trump’s son-in-law Jared Kushner as they did in the past four years. This bureaucratic shift is a return to the inherent institutional rivalry in Washington, which means that the US decision-making process will be thorough and slower compared to Trump’s impulsive governing style.