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Biden's Foreign Policy: Reading the Tea Leaves

By Adam Garfinkle

SYNOPSIS

The 3 March 2021 White House-issued Interim National Security Strategy Guidance is as important for what it is as for what it says.

COMMENTARY

BUSINESS IS always brisk in the tea-leaf reading industry at the start of a new US administration. As the Biden administration approaches its first hundred days in office on 30 April 2021, the ASEAN world is abuzz with analysis and prediction, and the usual ensemble of premonition and hope.

Among the questions posed as torque points for inquiry is this: What to make of the 3 March White House-issued Interim National Security Strategy Guidance (INSSG)? What does it mean for Singapore and Southeast Asia?

The INSSG

The INSSG is the most significant and lavishly verbal of the Biden administration's early signals. It's also unique in being the first time since Congress mandated the Strategic Guidance obligation on the Executive Branch in the hallmark 1986 Goldwater-Nichols legislation that a new administration promulgated an interim assessment, and so quickly. Why did the Biden White House do it? Three reasons converge to explain it.

First, while it remains to be seen if the new administration has actually worked out substantive policy choices, it does show every sign of having a communications strategy whose principal audience is domestic more than foreign. This is not incidental,

for it sees domestic political equities as being at the very core of US foreign and national security policy. Why?

Administration principals believe that if the Republican Party in its current state of manic xenophobia, and with its anti-democratic, conspiracy-addled siege mentality, should reclaim control of the Congress in 2022 and the White House in 2024, the very basis of US foreign policy would likely disintegrate. This entails its liberal positive-sum principles, its alliances and institutions, and the substrate of domestic political support for an active, constructive US global role.

They are not mistaken, which helps explain the INSSG's simplistic Manichean democracy-versus-authoritarianism organising template, one that reminds us more of the Truman Doctrine than anything else. This choice speaks to a domestic audience, the bet here being that cold-hearted Trumpian transactionalism in international affairs appeals not to the American soul.

Non-Traditional Dimensions of National Security Policy

Second and accordingly, the INSSG deviates from the by-now standard Democratic narrative about "non-traditional" dimensions of national security policy in three key ways, all attuned to domestic politics.

It doubles down on the national security impact of "climate change", which amounts to a secular religious calling whatever its actual scientific basis; it expresses a preference for selected protectionism to align trade policy with the needs of the American middle class; and, relatedly, it sharply prioritises both the domestic bases and impact of foreign and national security policies over traditional perspectives.

In sum, the United States used to have "foreign and national security policies" seen as more separate than not from its domestic policies and politics; now it has for all practical purposes domestic policies (and politics) with foreign/national security aspects.

Third, the White House appears to have wanted to quickly dispel concern that it lacked bandwidth for foreign policy given such a full and portentous domestic agenda, and that it could not see beyond the contours of restoring what foreign policies existed on 19 January 2017, the last full day of the Obama administration. The truth is that these constraints are real.

A President "All In"

That said, it was wise to try to manage impressions with the INSSG, and it was done with shrewdness aforethought. Whatever material NSC Advisor Jake Sullivan pulled off the shelf for quick editing, President Biden himself is understood to have put his own hand on the document.

That matters; it means that, whatever the policies may be, the president is "all in" with them, and not randomly at odds with his own advisers as Trump was for four years of mayhem and ceaseless uncertainty. It is a statement about the relationship between sound process and coherent outcomes, and it is a statement well worth having made.

Having a communications strategy is important, and a proffered US\$715 billion defence budget is a signal at least as powerful, if cruder, as the INSSG. But in the end substance matters more than symbols. Here the picture so far is mixed.

Despite much talk about democracy and human rights, the actual complexity of applying aspirational idealism has come clear in early dealings with Saudi Arabia. The early speeches and the INSSG have not made it any easier to deal with Afghanistan, or to restore some version of the JCPOA with Iran, or to parry increasingly bold Chinese tests over Taiwan and Russian tests in Ukraine, or to work out effective and practical policies over Myanmar or North Korea. They have not made it any easier to decide how to parry Iranian proxy threats whose territorial ground-zero includes both Iraq and Syria. And that's the short list of pressing issues the president does not have enough time for.

Southeast Asia?

The 23 pages of the INSSG mention Singapore and Southeast Asia once, *after* Europe, the Western Hemisphere, Israel and the Middle East, Australia, India and New Zealand, and *just before* the Pacific Island nations: "We will deepen our partnership with India and work alongside New Zealand, as well as Singapore, Vietnam, and other Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states, to advance shared objectives."

Could have been worse: Africa is not mentioned at all. But not much worse if you are trying to read real priorities into a text like the INSSG.

You should not be doing that, however. Many readers in foreign governments and media establishments tend to treat documents like the INSSG as scriptural, as containing gnostic wisdom to be found by careful exegesis of subtle hints.

The INSSG expresses important nuances even though its actual signals do not reside within the four corners of the document but outside them. But a new administration still staffing up and yet to deal with a major foreign crisis does not even know what it thinks about most things to a level of specificity that actually matters.

Biden & the Indo-Pacific

In general, while the Indo-Pacific will concern the Biden administration a great deal, if only because of the presumed centrality of China as singular challenger to US preeminence, it will depend on the Quad quasi-alliance and, within the Quad more on its relationship with Japan, to help manage the challenge.

That was the signal from the first-ever, if virtual, Quad summit on 12 March. Southeast Asian countries are liable to be seen mainly as stakes in the competition and puzzle pieces to be assembled tactically to add to the larger picture, not as co-equal diplomatic partners.

It is useful to think of a new US administration in foreign policy as a brain full of dendrites waiting to be shaped into neural pathways by contact with reality. The brain,

connected obviously to the body politic, owes much to inheritance, and reality does not typically jump out of its own skin. But there is still plenty of variation to make predictions about how that brain will work risky exercises in tea-leaf reading. Best to enjoy the tea, and leverage its stimulating qualities for purposes of careful observation.

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