

Why Assigning Ambassadors is A Tough Labor for President Biden?

Mainstream Media and Organic Views

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The State Department of the U.S. (DOS) is far more complex than a foreign ministry of any country. DOS is organized under the Secretary and the Deputy Secretary with six undersecretaries each has assistant secretaries and directors heading specific department with designated responsibilities. There are a total of 23 Assistant Secretaries and a number of Directors, Office Managers and Ambassadors in charge of various political, economic, security, technological and financial and budgetary affairs, all staffed with a sizable organization. In addition, there are ten direct reports to the Secretary consisting of two Assistant Secretaries, one Director, three Ambassadors, Ambassador at large, Inspector General, Legislative Affairs and Legal Adviser. During the Trump Administration, there was some effort of streamlining DOS, but the current DOS organization chart is still a mammoth as outlined above.

To the casual observers, DOS functions under two ‘tracks’, one may be called professional diplomatic career track and the other political appointee track. Under the U.S. partisan democracy, the presidency may be rotated between two parties by the will of the citizen-voters, that is shifting from Republican to Democrat or vice versa. Therefore, the appointed leadership positions in DOS are typically partisan serving at the pleasure of the President. The career diplomats in the department would generally stay politically neutral and focus on specific assignment of duties. Such an ideal situation is hard to maintain since each individual does have his or her own political view, thus, the political appointments at DOS after each new Presidency elected from an opposing party to the previous administration will make a big upheaval in the department from the top down. Generally, the public only pay attention to the top positions such as the Secretary, Deputy, Assistant Secretaries and Ambassadors that need to be scrutinized by the media and confirmed by the Congress, that itself is not a small deed for the Administration.

All ambassadors must be appointed by the President and confirmed by the Senate. This system strengthens the power of the President and enables the President to conduct inter-national affairs with ease. Under this notion, ambassadorships are often treated as a form of political patronage to reward high-profile or important supporters of the president with like ideology and party affiliation as the President. For continuity, most ambassadorships are still assigned to career diplomats, who are the Foreign Service Officers. Typically, a new President will appoint about 30% of the total ambassador positions during his initial term, that is about 35-45 Ambassadors. However, President Trump has diligently made appointments for 44% of all the ambassadorship in his term. This naturally adds more workload on Biden’s administration to select ambassador appointees. There is no shortage of people interested in serving as a prestigious U.S. Ambassador even at a financial loss (The salary of ambassador at \$150,000 a year can hardly support an ambassador’s social expense). However, as the international relations are getting very complex with a rising China taking some of the limelight of the world arena, the diplomatic services have become harder work and more critical for the U.S.

As China becoming the world’s number two economic power, the U.S.-China relations has become contentious to the point that the U.S. had declared China as her most serious competitor. China had maintained a healthy economic growth over several decades with trade relations expanding with nearly

all countries in the world. As expected, China's diplomatic relations have improved with not only many developing countries but also strengthened with nations participated in her Bridge and Road Initiative (BRI). Diplomacy functions better with stronger economic strength or rich purse, therefore, China has been able to exert her weight on global issues which have made the U.S. especially the DOS uneasy.

No question about it, at the moment the most important foreign relationship is the U.S.-China relationship. Biden and his team apparently have chosen to continue the combative China policy accentuated by the previous Administration with perhaps a twist: 'strengthening the diplomatic approach towards international affairs'. So the functions of DOS and U.S. ambassadors have to be sharpened. This is the fundamental reason that Biden is careful and taking time to name his ambassador appointments. For example, nearly a month ago there were news reports about the U.S. and China will name new ambassadors to each other. The present Chinese Ambassador to the U.S. , Cui Tiankai, is 69 years old and has served the ambassadorship through Obama, Trump and Biden. It is understandable that he may be retiring and a younger diplomat, Qin Gang (55), a seasoned career diplomat (Ambassador, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson, Director of the Office of Protocol, Deputy Foreign Minister under the capable and charismatic Minister Wang Yi) is reported to be Ambassador Cui's possible replacement. At the same time, Nicholas Burns (66, career diplomat, Professor at John F Kennedy School at Harvard), a friend of Biden, was reported to be the possible next ambassador to China. However, a month already passed neither of the above news was confirmed.

Granted Biden was pre-occupied with COVID in his first 100 days in office, but the U.S.-China relation was Biden-Blinken's primary focus of foreign affairs. Currently, Charg'e d'Affairs Robert W. Forden is leading the U. S. Mission to China since October 5, 2020, following the departure of former Ambassador Terry Edward Branstad appointed by President Trump. Biden-Blinken had initiated a 'Quad+' China policy, attempting to ally Japan, South Korea, Australia and possibly India to check the rise of China in commerce, trade, technology and military. (Human Rights was mainly a rhetoric issue, judging on China's effort in lifting her citizens' standard of living) However, Quad may be the second reason that assigning ambassadors have becoming a laboring task. Again, news reports have mentioned the possible appointments of Ralm Emanuel (61, Mayor of Chicago, former Chief of Staff for Obama) as ambassador to Japan and Eric Garcetti (50, Mayor of Los Angeles) as ambassador to India but with no confirmation in sight. In the meantime, the U.S. Ambassador to South Korea is vacant with Rob Rapson appointed as Charg'e d'Affairs ad interim on Jan. 20, 2021 and Ambassador to Australia was held by Arthur B. Culvahouse, JR. (appointed by Trump since Mar. 13, 2019) till Jan. 19,2021. Obviously, Biden needs to put together a new team to make sure 'Quad+' is effective. These considerations must trump the conventional appointments rewarding president's supporters.

The third reason for making US ambassador assignments a labor is probably subtle and not obvious to the public. This has to do with the falling of the U.S. reputation on the world stage according to public opinion surveys. The Biden Administration knows it and must conscientiously make an effort to correct that. Obviously, ambassadors and foreign services have to make extra effort in order to restore the prestige the U.S. used to enjoy when the U.S. can spend the money to get her wills. Today, China is a formidable competitor with a strong economy, a large sum of foreign currency reserve and an effective government whether you like it or not. The U.S. must do a serious reform on DOS and its practices. Credit to Trump was his recognition of a bloated DOS having too much on its plate to be done well. Of course, Trump did not have an effective team to revamp DOS, a change of Secretary for DOS after one year (Rex Tillerson, 2-1-2017 to 3-31-2018, John J. Sullivan, 4-1-2018 to 4-26-2018, and Mike Pompeo, 4-26-2018 to 1-20-2021) speaks well for a failed reform. Whether Blinken can do differently remains to be seen. In particular, whether the 'Quad+' policy is built on a sound assumption is very

much a DOS debatable topic. There is a camp at DOS favoring a more cooperative relationship with China.

For the above three reasons, we can appreciate that assigning ambassadors seems to be a tough labor for the Biden Administration.