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China: Two Key Questions

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The interim National Security Strategic Guidance (NSSG) issued by the Biden Administration in early March 2021 articulated a central role for democracy and democratic values in guiding and shaping American national security policy: It calls democracy “the single best way to realize the promise of our future.” What does this mean for foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific? In particular, what does it mean with respect to the United States’s relationship with the People’s Republic of China, often called the most consequential bilateral relationship in the world today? What are the opportunities and challenges that accompany this framework? There are two key questions that this strategy will have to address in the coming months: one about how regional allies and partners will respond to this strategy, and one about how China itself is likely to respond.

Democracy vs. Autocratic ‘Advantages’

How does the Biden Administration see the role of democracy in shaping American national security? The answer seems to be that democracy is not just a value to be defended, but a strategic asset to be employed. This approach was first telegraphed in a report, “Linking Values and Strategy: How Democracies Can Offset Autocratic Advantages,” published in October 2020 by a task force that includes some of the senior-most national security and Asia personnel now in the Biden Administration. The report characterizes autocracy as posing an “asymmetric threat” that takes advantage of the openness of liberal democratic systems. It calls for measures that, among other things, build democratic resilience to authoritarian interference and information manipulation at home without compromising the norms of free expression; shape global technology and data governance in ways that are compatible with liberal democracy; emphasize anti-corruption and transparency efforts both domestically and internationally; strengthen investments in technology and attract innovators while protecting intellectual property against theft and illicit transfer; and work with allies and partners to draw attention to instances of authoritarian repression, corruption, electoral interference, and economic coercion. These measures are cumulatively described as an “offset strategy,” meaning that they aim to offset authoritarian advantages (and counter the erosion of U.S. advantage) by marshalling the unique strengths that democratic political systems can bring to bear.

Similarly, the interim NSSG characterizes a world in which “authoritarianism is on the global march.” It describes the threats aimed at democracies as ranging from “cross-border aggression, cyberattacks, disinformation, and digital authoritarianism to infrastructure and energy coercion.” It suggests that corruption is “weaponized” by autocracies to corrode democratic institutions. And it highlights the need for supply chains and emerging tech to be secured by “like-minded democracies.” The NSSG mentions, for example, revitalizing alliances with NATO, Australia, Japan, and Korea in order to (among other goals) “hold China to account” and to ensure that “America, not China, sets the international agenda” in a manner conducive to democracy.

Some of this language is consistent with the language used by the Trump Administration’s national security documents on Asia, which framed the region as defined by a “geopolitical competition between free and repressive visions of world order” and likewise characterized China as the focal point of that competition. And neither the Trump nor the Biden administrations were the first to argue for democracy in China; back in the George W. Bush Administration, Robert Zoellick’s “responsible stakeholder” speech in 2005 noted that “China needs a peaceful political transition to make its government responsible and accountable to its people.... We can cooperate with the emerging China of today, even as we work for the democratic China of tomorrow.” The idea that democracy/autocracy is a (or the) defining cleavage of world politics—in Asia and globally—comes through clearly in the Biden Administration’s initial strategy documents, and does so with a more explicit emphasis on democracy as a strategic asset: The steps outlined to revitalize global democracy are intended to “strengthen our enduring advantages and allow us to prevail in strategic competition with China or any other nation.”

This language is intended to address a range of Chinese behaviors that have intensified in recent years and that policymakers appear to see as emanating in large part from China’s authoritarian,

and increasingly personalist, system of government. Under Xi Jinping’s leadership, and following his promulgation of a new national security concept that emphasizes the political security of the Chinese Communist Party leadership, the party-state has taken a series of actions that are increasingly repressive at home and assertive, even combative, abroad. The party has tightened control over Hong Kong in ways that hollow out the civil liberties that were at the core of the “one country, two systems” framework, and has escalated repression in Xinjiang to the point that both the Trump and Biden Administrations have deemed China’s policies a genocide.

At China’s periphery, tensions have escalated in the South China Sea, on the border with India, and in the skies around Taiwan. China’s public diplomacy has become increasingly strident, and boycotts have applied economic pressure on regional neighbors in an effort to get them to temper criticism or adopt stances more favorable to party-state interests. An increasing number of STEM researchers in the United States have been investigated for what the Department of Justice describes as a state-sponsored effort to siphon talent and innovation back to China via illicit tech transfer and exploitation of the United States’s democratic, open approach to scientific research. Most recently, sanctions levied by the PRC against officials, scholars, and research institutes for research conducted on Xinjiang and China’s treatment of its Uyghur minority population have catalyzed transnational discussions about how civil society and the global scholarly community should act to defend against Chinese attempts to curtail academic freedom not just within China’s borders but extraterritorially as well. That this is not an exhaustive list of developments indicates the intensity and pace of forces that have impelled successive U.S administrations toward the current emphasis and framing of the national security strategy.

Will Allies and Partners Cooperate?

All of these developments seem to put a tailwind behind the Biden Administration’s efforts to emphasize and promote democracy as a strategic advantage in the U.S.-China competition and in broader contours of American foreign and national security policy. But every strategy has costs and risks, as well as questions and challenges that will have to be addressed during implementation. In particular, the Administration’s “democratic offset” framing highlights two key questions for American strategy vis-à-vis China and the Indo-Pacific going forward—one to do with allies and partners in the region, and one to do with China itself.

The first question facing this strategy is: How will the United States work with allies and partners whose commitment to democracy is either weak or simply less central to their conduct of foreign policy? Some of America’s longest-standing strategic partners, in Asia and globally, fall into one of two categories: a) those who are not consolidated democracies, or b) those whose democratic political systems are not sufficient factors to propel them into more actively collaborating to defend democratic interests at the expense of other national interests. This was perhaps most apparent in the inconsistent discussion of America’s Indo-Pacific allies in the interim NSSG: Australia, Japan, and South Korea were named, but Thailand and the Philippines, whose political systems fall below the threshold for consolidated liberal democracy, were both omitted. Under a subsequent paragraph on regional security partners, however, the NSSG did mention Singapore, Vietnam, and India, the latter of which was recently downgraded by three major international democracy-ranking projects, one of which went so far as to term India an “electoral autocracy.” Perhaps for this reason, the readout from the Biden Administration’s Quad

summit—a virtual meeting among the United States, Japan, Australia, and India held in mid-March—used the term democracy sparingly, and “liberal democracy” not at all, even as it sought to create a working group on critical and emerging technology that was framed in the language of “shared values” and “a free, open, inclusive, and resilient Indo-Pacific.”

Even for partners who are consolidated democracies, democracy may not be the orienting value for foreign policy in the way that the Biden Administration’s strategy envisions for the United States. South Korea, for example, is itself a lively democracy (though critics have raised concerns about the potential for democratic backsliding), but when it comes to foreign policy, it has been decidedly reluctant to participate in global criticisms of North Korea and China on human rights grounds. It also recently passed a law suppressing the rights of activist groups to launch balloons or send USBs into North Korea on the grounds that this could destabilize the peninsula and endanger national security, as well as the Moon Administration’s hopes of improving relations with Pyongyang, prompting some criticism in Washington. Similarly, the message from Southeast Asia has largely been “don’t make us choose” between the United States and China, even as bilateral tensions have escalated.

There is also skepticism of the United States’s tendency to treat all questions of democracy and democratic erosion or autocratization through the lens of “Chinese influence,” in a region and world in which many autocracies have achieved their regime type much more through the efforts of their own leaders than via pernicious Chinese meddling. As a result, even allies and partners who sign up for a project of democratic collaboration may have differing preferences on how much to focus on the domestic drivers of autocratization versus China’s role in that process.

The cumulative effect of these dynamics is that a binary framing of democracy/autocracy—especially in a region marked by relative heterogeneity of regime types—is unlikely to gain full traction even with some more democratically oriented leaders and publics. Given these considerations, the United States will need to focus on practical security, economic, and other benefits of cooperation, as it appears to have done with the Quad statements on public health and technology, while retaining democratic aspiration as the organizing or framing concept.

How Will China Respond?

The second question that this strategy will have to grapple with is: How will a framing that emphasizes democracy and human rights as a tool for national security competition impact China’s perceptions of American strategy and the bilateral relationship? Under Xi Jinping, China’s own approach to foreign affairs has adopted a more ideological frame, and Xi’s “comprehensive national/state security concept,” as well as his anti-corruption campaign, appear to be grounded in the belief that insufficient ideological coherence and fidelity risk dooming the party to the path taken by the Soviet Union to the “ash heap of history.” China’s 2013 “Document No. 9,” more formally titled the “Commuque on the Current State of the Ideological Sphere” identifies seven political perils to China’s ideological framework, and calls on party officials at all levels to be vigilant against these risks and to guard against foreign infiltration of China’s ideological sphere. Subsequent publications have reiterated this emphasis, for example by calling for early warning mechanisms to assess ideological risks and prevent their gaining ground.

The first of the “false trends” identified by Document No. 9 is in fact “promotion of Western constitutional democracy,” and specifically features including “separation of powers, the multi-party system, general elections, independent judiciaries, nationalized armies” and the like. The document adds: “The point of publicly proclaiming Western constitutional democracy’s key points is to oppose the party’s leadership and implementation of its constitution and laws. Their goal is to use Western constitutional democracy to undermine the Party’s leadership....” The second threat listed in Document No. 9 is “universal values” such as “freedom, democracy, and human rights,” which the document suggests is similarly aimed at “supplanting socialism.” In this framing, Western promotion of constitutional democracy and universal values of human rights is not a defensive posture, but an offensive act: It suggests that an assertion of democratic values operates, in fact, to undermine the political security that lies at the center of China’s entire national security concept.

How will the United States work with partners whose commitment to democracy is either weak or less central to their foreign policy?

Thus, China’s own framing of ideology and its relationship to democracy and human rights erects a structure in which American assertions of democracy and human rights can be seen as intrinsically threatening to China. Correspondingly, an overarching American security concept that puts these at the core will be seen, whether intended this way by U.S. policymakers or not, as dominating these issues, narrowing the space for pragmatic cooperation, and turning the competition more and more into a zero-sum exercise. It runs the risk of generating what one China-based scholar has referred to as an ideological (or perhaps ideational) security dilemma: Moves taken by the United States in the name of defending liberal democracy could be seen as offensive and aimed at destabilizing the CCP. Moreover, if the object to be secured is the CCP’s political security, not the broader conception of national security that American policymakers typically use, then reassurance also becomes more difficult: The United States might state a negative—that it does not actively seek to topple the CCP from political power—but it cannot (and should not) be in the business of trying to reassure Xi or the party leadership that they can remain in power in perpetuity.

None of this is to say that the United States should avoid asserting and defending its core values; it should not. It is important, however, for American policymakers to understand that China’s perceptions of ideological risk and ideological security have shifted, and that that shift will impact the interactive elements of the U.S.-China relationship regardless of the preferences of American policymakers—in particular, through their interaction with this particular framing of American national security strategy. This understanding will help American policymakers more accurately predict China’s response to their framing of U.S. national security strategy, and better calibrate the interactive dimensions of the U.S.-China relationship to achieve the strategy’s desired ends.

Conclusion

Democracy commonly plays a major role in American national security strategy, and under the Biden Administration, early national security strategy documents have framed democracy both as a core value and institution to be defended, and a strategic asset to be deployed. In Asia, that

has meant a considerable focus on the challenges posed by China, and behavior by the Chinese party-state that has grown increasingly repressive at home and assertive or combative abroad. The key questions facing the Biden Administration in articulating such a strategy are how it will navigate collaboration with security and economic partners who are either undemocratic or do not equally prioritize democracy as a shaping force in foreign policy, and how to address the way that this framing will interact with a national security concept on the Chinese side that sees ideological security as an important objective and assertion of democracy and human rights as a potential offensive threat to that ideological security. In the years ahead, these two questions will do much to shape the outcomes of the strategy that the Biden Administration has proposed.

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