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Biden's 'middle-class foreign policy' departs from Obama and Trump

National Security Adviser Sullivan seeks to build support for 'less ambitious' plans

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NEW YORK -- A little-noticed report, released by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace shortly before the Nov. 3 presidential election, looks to serve as the foreign policy road map for the administration of U.S. President-elect Joe Biden.

Titled "Making U.S. Foreign Policy Work Better for the Middle Class," it argues that none of the current major foreign policy approaches -- whether post-Cold War liberal internationalism embraced by successive Republican and Democratic administrations, President Donald Trump's "America First," or the focus on climate change or potential downsizing of U.S. defense spending suggested by progressives -- draw wide support in the U.S.

Instead, the report calls for a humble, "less ambitious" foreign policy that eschews regime-change wars and ensures that decisions are made to benefit the middle class back home.

Three striking characteristics of the report are how, like Trump, it acknowledges that globalization is not working in favor of Americans; how the foreign policy team must coordinate with the domestic policy team and the economic team to align U.S. policy; and how the U.S. should strive to build a new political consensus around a foreign policy that works better for America's middle class.

Two of Biden's personnel choices suggest that the Carnegie report will feature prominently.

First, his pick for national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, is a co-author of the report and advised Biden throughout the presidential campaign.

When Biden introduced Sullivan on Nov. 24, he said the young appointee will bring "fresh thinking" to the foreign policy table.

"Jake understands my vision, that economic security is national security, and it helps steer what I call a foreign policy for the middle class, for families like his growing up in Minnesota, where he was raised by parents who were educators, and taught him the values of hard work, decency, service and respect," Biden said.

Second, the naming of former National Security Adviser Susan Rice, a careerlong foreign policy expert, as director of the White House Domestic Policy Council, points to her serving as a liaison between the national security and economic teams.

Introducing Rice last Friday, Biden said she will work closely with Sullivan and Brian Deese, the president-elect's pick for director of the National Economic Council.

"Together, they'll align domestic policy, economic policy and national security unlike ever before," Biden said.

Rice also said that "in the 21st century, our foreign, economic and domestic imperatives are deeply intertwined."

Biden also talked about the new strategy when introducing his choice for the U.S. trade representative, Katherine Tai. "Trade will be a critical pillar in our ability to build back better and carry out our foreign policy -- foreign policy for the middle class," he said.

This all foretells a foreign policy that looks notably different from those of Trump and former President Barack Obama, under whom Biden served as vice president.

"Until now, trade negotiations were aimed at securing business opportunities for U.S. companies first, and to a lesser extent, to lower prices for U.S. consumers," Edward Alden, senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, told Nikkei Asia.

"There is no concept of lifting the middle class in the current structure," he said. "It will be a different set of priorities."

Carnegie's project team conducted hundreds of interviews with small-business owners, farmers, educators, state and local government officials, and others in Ohio, Nebraska and Colorado, asking for their thoughts on U.S. foreign policy.

"After three decades of U.S. primacy on the world stage, America's middle class finds itself in a precarious state," the report says in its opening summary.

"Globalization has disproportionately benefited the nation's top earners and multinational companies and aggravated growing economic inequality at home. It has not spurred broad-based increases in real wages among U.S. workers," it notes.

The report does not spell out whether Biden should rejoin the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement but does repeat that both urban and rural Americans stressed how past administrations had not done enough to make foreign policy work better for the middle class.

The need for a "new political consensus" stems from the view that allies and partners around the world no longer have trust or confidence in the deals they sign with Washington. The fear that any agreement with an American administration will not survive a political transition to the next have led to allies "increasingly hedging their bets, trying to stay in the United States' good graces while also keeping their options with China and other U.S. rivals open," the report said.

CFR's Alden said the report deserves far more attention than it received in the run-up to the November elections.

He said the Carnegie report's call for a "less ambitious" foreign policy clashes with views of Trump's potential heirs in the Republican Party. "Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Sens. Marco Rubio, Tom Cotton and Josh Hawley are all stoking the fire for a new global confrontation with China. They believe they can build a stronger political position by being anti-China," he said.

The report notes: "There is no evidence America's middle class will rally behind efforts aimed at restoring U.S. primacy in a unipolar world, escalating a new Cold War with China, or waging a cosmic struggle between the world's democracies and authoritarian governments."

Which side accurately gauges American sentiment -- Biden and Sullivan or the Republican hopefuls -- could be a crucial factor in future elections.

Dale Mathias, a venture investor in technology businesses in the U.S. and Africa and previously vice president at financial advisory and asset management firm Lazard Freres, said that addressing the economic challenges faced by Middle America must be a top priority for any administration.

The U.S. "has not properly absorbed the hundreds of thousands of men and women that were deployed to the Middle East and came back injured, deformed or even dead," Mathias said. "There were spouses, children and families that have been influenced by these life-changing developments, and America has just not squarely tackled these issues face on," she said.

Since his election, Biden has repeatedly told Americans that "help is on the way." His "foreign policy for the middle class" looks to address these issues.

"There is simply very little public support for Trump's revolution in U.S. foreign policy," the Carnegie report says.

"But that should not be overinterpreted as support for the restoration of the foreign policy consensus that guided previous Republican and Democratic administrations," it adds. "That set of policies left too many American communities vulnerable to economic dislocation and overreached in trying to effect broad societal change within other countries. America's middle class wants a new path forward."

"Restoring predictability and consistency in U.S. foreign policy requires building broad-based political support for it," the report notes. "And the best and perhaps only viable path right now to rebuilding such support lies in making U.S. foreign policy work better for the middle class."