



# Creating a Foreign Policy of the Middle Class

**Mari Manoogian**

In February 2021, national security advisor Jake Sullivan clearly defined the overarching theme of President Joe Biden's foreign policy strategy as "foreign policy for the middle class."<sup>1</sup> The Chicago Council for Global Affairs contends that this Biden doctrine "recogniz[es] the linkages between American domestic strength and U.S. ability to maintain international competitiveness."<sup>2</sup> Under this new framework, foreign policy decisions, Sullivan indicated, would use the following simple rhetorical question as a basic metric for success: "Is it going to make life better, safer, and easier for working families?"

Critics of this framing and metric have said that it is a dressed-up version of former President Donald Trump's America First approach—simply removing the fearmongering or demonizing of the Trump years on topics like global engagement, trade, or immigration. However, that is an unnuanced, cynical view of this administration's approach to foreign policy decision-making. While there remains a focus on domestic investments to spur international influence and strengthen national security, the Biden approach centers on an appeal to our better angels. It understands that the potential to create a foreign policy and national security strategy that will achieve this administration's goals lies in not only the policies themselves, but also re-envisioning the makeup of the team who will make and carry them out and how we structure the institution tasked with pursuing these policy goals.

To get to the heart of Sullivan's question, however, the approach cannot only consist of engaging the people who already play an outsized role in the shaping of our foreign policy—people who are already embedded in the establishment. To truly build a foreign policy for the middle class, our foreign policy decision makers and practitioners must be of the middle class, bridging the divide between the folks who are traditionally recruited to work in this field and those who are too often shut out of these conversations.

There are two approaches that are essential to achieving a foreign policy of the middle class. First, we need to recognize that we must make a greater effort to fundamentally alter how we recruit and train our diplomats and other foreign policy practitioners to be more reflective of the American people. This would change the face and culture of what former Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes called "the Blob," which is the foreign policymaking establishment that, following 9/11, erred more on the side of interventionist decisions. Second, foreign policy practitioners must engage at all levels of government and civil society to learn from the people who would be impacted by the decisions made in Washington. Both approaches are essential to have a successful foreign policy strategy that positively impacts the American people in their everyday lives.

## **Changing the Face of the State Department: Recruiting a Foreign Service that Reflects America**

In early 2021, articles with the headlines "The State Department Has a Systemic Diversity Problem"<sup>4</sup> and "The State Department Has a Diversity Problem" ran in *Politico* and *Foreign Policy* respectively. The Department of State, established in 1789, is the nation's oldest cabinet department. It has a tradition of recruiting from and deepening ties with institutions and populations that have a history of being well-represented within the Department's ranks. According to the Truman Center's March 2021 report "Transforming State: Pathways to a More Just, Equitable, and Innovative Institution," "racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and discrimination based on disability have challenged the State Department since its inception."<sup>5</sup> The report specifically cites the lack of diversity in the Department, and references a Governmental Accountability Office (GAO) report that indicated "the State Department is behind other

federal agencies in employing ... historically underrepresented groups, especially at senior levels.” Moreover, the GAO reported “that Black women made up 2 percent of the Foreign Service in 2002, and the number only went up to 3 percent in 2018,” with “racial or ethnic minorities in State’s Civil Service ... 4 percent to 29 percent less likely to be promoted than their white coworkers with similar education, occupation, or years of federal service.”<sup>6</sup>

Not only does the State Department have a diversity problem, simply by the numbers, it also has no chance of fixing it using its current recruitment and promotion toolkit. For example, alumni groups and social networks are important tools that are often used in recruiting and door-opening, but they also play a role in perpetuating the cycle of students from elite institutions entering policy positions, creating an insular pipeline of talent. While the study by the GAO revealed that roughly nine percent of the 23,160 Foreign Service Officers (FSOs) examined in a study from 2002 through 2018 had a degree from an Ivy League university, their odds of earning a promotion are significantly higher than their non-Ivy-pedigreed colleagues. At times throughout their careers, the odds of earning a promotion are more than 20 percent higher for FSOs who attended an Ivy League university than those who did not.<sup>7</sup>

State must proactively increase its university engagement to bring more diverse young people from outside of these Ivy League bubbles into the fold. Professors who teach and research at public universities and colleges—particularly Historically Black Colleges and Universities—are often themselves ex-practitioners or well-connected within this space, usually having policy experience or high levels of engagement with policymakers as part of their work. They should be given the tools by State to work with bright, talented young people who would be an asset to foreign policy and national security and encourage their students to avail themselves of opportunities to embark on careers in these fields, such as the Presidential Management Fellowship, the Pickering Fellowship, and the Rangel Fellowship.

This conversation on reforming the Department also comes at a time when corporate America is facing a reckoning of how to diversify corporate board rooms.<sup>8</sup> Unsurprisingly, the policy recommendations for diversifying these spaces—both corporate America and the public sector’s oldest cabinet post—are very similar. The Center for American Progress suggests that corporations could consider “partnering with new membership or entrepreneurship organizations in diverse communities—such as the National Urban League, the NAACP, the National Council of Negro Women, the Black Economic Alliance, and the National Economics Association—to identify potential Black candidates.”<sup>9</sup> Indeed, active engagement with minority social groups, business coalitions, or even religious groups could be pathways for the State Department to consider when attempting to widen the recruitment net for the next class of the Foreign Service.

There are two other important approaches to consider when engaging individuals from a variety of backgrounds earlier to show the possibilities of careers available in the foreign policy apparatus. First, similar to the way that various branches of our military recruit within our high schools, colleges, and universities, the State Department should consider establishing a Junior Foreign Service Corps, which would function like the Reserve Officers’ Training Corps. This would create a pipeline of junior officers that would be prepared to serve in the Foreign Service upon completion of the program. Second, Americans should be exposed to the variety of roles within the State Department that are not policy-related or Foreign Service Officer positions. This will offer not only a wider array of opportunities to serve, but also break the misconception that working for the State Department or other national agencies requires a degree from an elite university or interest in the policymaking aspect of the national security apparatus. This includes promoting Foreign Service Specialist positions including Medical Officer roles, Office Manager positions, Diplomatic Security, Regional English Language Officers (we have former educators in the field at embassies around the world to promote the teaching and learning of American English as a tool in the public diplomacy toolkit), and Construction Engineers. Each of these positions can open doors to foreign policy and national security careers to populations that may not otherwise consider working in this arena.

National leaders in the international affairs decision-making space, like Congressman Joaquín Castro (D-TX-20), Vice Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee and co-chair of the Truman Center report, are leading the charge at the congressional level to codify measures that would create hard, statutory means and requirements to increase diversity at the State Department. Congressman Castro has been vocally critical of the Department’s efforts, or lack thereof, to diversify its ranks, saying that “for years, the State Department has failed to look like the face of our country and the lack of diversity in the diplomatic corps is appalling.”<sup>10</sup>

To this end, Congressman Castro and several others introduced H.R. 4589, the Diversity and Inclusion at the Department of State Act, which, according to the Congressional Budget Office, “would require the Department of State to take several steps to promote diversity and inclusion in the department’s workforce and operations and to report annually to the Congress on those efforts.” The bill establishes a position of Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer and ensures there are senior advisors tasked with a similar role in each of the department’s bureaus. The legislation also mandates the implementation of mentorship programs “for employees in underrepresented groups by pairing them with more experienced employees,” and would establish a “council of leaders to coordinate policy and initiatives promoting diversity and inclusion.”

An important factor to consider when recruiting a more diverse workforce is the barriers to entry into the State Department that underrepresented populations may face. Along with Congressman Lee Zeldin (R-NY-1), Congressman Castro is also the lead sponsor of bipartisan legislation that would provide funding for the State Department to pay its interns,<sup>11</sup> which is an important step that would help to level the playing field for those who may not be able to afford to work an unpaid internship.

## **Meeting Americans Where They Are: Making the Case for Why Diplomacy Matters**

In addition to recruiting a workforce that is more reflective of the diversity of America, the Department must also make some structural changes that will make diplomacy more relevant and accessible to the American people. The Truman Center’s report outlines several potential opportunities for further engaging the American people, namely the creation of a National Diplomacy University that is modeled on the Department of Defense’s National Defense University, which would be a great way to ensure easy access to continuing education for the vast workforce of the Department. The report also suggests the creation of several other offices that could expand the American people’s imagination and conception of what diplomacy is and what it can be. (While admirable, some of the offices suggested, like the Office of Entertainment Diplomacy, could simply be functions of a gutsier and more outgoing public affairs approach, rather than a separate office entirely.) However, there is one office that should be created to deepen engagement with those who engage in diplomacy and trade at other levels of government. As our world becomes more connected at the individual level, and with local and state governments pursuing transnational relationships through partnerships like sister cities and trade missions, the State Department could better understand and facilitate local diplomatic relationships through the creation of an Office of State and Local Diplomacy within the department, helping to ensure some of the key diversity and equity measures are met while these engagements are happening. In July 2021, Congressman Ted Lieu (D-CA-33) reintroduced the City and State Diplomacy Act (HR 4526) with bipartisan support,<sup>12</sup> and Senators Chris Murphy (D-CT) and John Cornyn (R-TX) introduced similar legislation in the Senate.<sup>13</sup> The legislation would codify the creation of an Office of City and State Diplomacy, which would be led by an Ambassador-at-Large, “to maintain international networks and reduce duplication and inefficiency in outreach by mayors and governors to create jobs, promote economic development, improve public health, and protect the environment.”<sup>14</sup>

There are many ways that a future State and Local Diplomacy office could be utilized, including through the expansion of the Pearson Fellowship for the Foreign Service and additional civil service positions, for which the Truman Center advocates. This could allow for up to 60 fellows to be placed in every state and tribal territory, thus providing an on-the-ground linkage back to Washington to ensure that policymaking is not simply a top-down exercise in imposition. A re-imagined role of a Pearson Fellow could be one that functions as an interlocutor between other State Department staff—such as those serving as a Diplomats in Residence—and alumni of the Department and of its exchange programs, and international relations-focused non-profits and forums, like the Chicago Council on Global Affairs.

A person in the role could also develop relationships with local and state-level elected and appointed leaders working in this space, presenting potential opportunities for collaboration in the context of city and state diplomacy or with the public to engage groups often siloed from traditional foreign policy channels, and creating a formal way to determine the success of such engagements through data collection and benchmarking. Developing relationships with local and state leaders, like statehouse members or county-level officials, could help leaders who have great potential but little experience in this arena further their understanding about the importance of international engagement at their level of governing—and potentially even provide the Department another pipeline of informal advisors or future employees.

For example, in late August 2021, I—in my capacity as a member of the House of Representatives of the state of Michigan—hosted Earl Provost, the Ontario Agent-General in Chicago for a roundtable in Birmingham with county and city officials, including Oakland County Executive Dave Coulter, Birmingham Mayor Pierre Boutros, and economic development officials from both the county and city. Canada and the State of Michigan have a long-standing relationship dating back to before Michigan's statehood. People in the local community can tangibly see the impact of this relationship in everything from the price of a gallon of gasoline at the pump, to seeing Canadian brands, such as the iconic Roots apparel store, when walking downtown. Further developing these natural relationships between local communities and different countries or cities, including leaning into Sister City relationships, is a way for communities to bring foreign policy and diplomacy to the local level, making the pursuit of these relationships meaningful and worthwhile to the people local leaders serve. While my previous work experience and university background in international affairs was crucial to convening the aforementioned meeting, not all elected officials have the experiences that would lend themselves to making or fostering these relationships. Having a Pearson Fellow assist in making these relationships and connections would be a tremendous asset to bringing the work of the Department to more Americans.

## Conclusion

For the Biden administration's "Foreign Policy for the Middle Class" approach to diplomacy to be successful, there are some major structural shifts that must happen. The State Department should modernize its approach to recruitment and retention of staff, not only to ensure they are recruiting the best and brightest our nation has to offer in this field, but also so that the new staff that is recruited—as well as the staff that remains in the department year after year—is reflective of the diversity of the people and individual experiences of our country. This will help ensure that the diplomacy of our nation is a product of the needs of the American people, specifically opening doors for middle class Americans to see themselves reflected in diplomatic engagement. There also must be a fresh approach to engaging the American people by bringing the work of the Department to places where diplomacy is often happening without any State Department engagement, namely through the creation of the Office of State and Local Diplomacy. Instead of viewing these necessary changes as burdens that a department with a long and rich history must bear, these changes can and should be viewed as great opportunities to improve the work of the Department and chart a new course for stronger, deeper diplomatic relationships in the future at all levels of government, which will result in real benefits for the United States domestically, as well as opportunities for the United States to lead and be competitive on the world stage.

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<sup>1</sup> Jen Psaki et. al, "Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jen Psaki and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, February 4, 2021," *The White House*, February 4, 2021, accessed January 20, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2021/02/04/press-briefing-by-press-secretary-jen-psaki-and-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivan-february-4-2021/>.

<sup>2</sup> Dina Smeltz et al., *A Foreign Policy for the Middle Class – What Americans Think*, (The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2021) accessed January 20, 2022, [https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/sites/default/files/2021-10/ccs2021\\_fpmc\\_0.pdf](https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/sites/default/files/2021-10/ccs2021_fpmc_0.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Ryan Heath, "The State Department Has a Systemic Diversity Problem: Diplomats Trained to Keep Their Heads Down Are Now Starting to Speak Out," *POLITICO Magazine*, March 16, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/03/16/state-department-diversity-problem-476161>.

<sup>4</sup> Nicholas Krlev, "The State Department Has a Diversity Problem: Despite Decades of Attempts to Make the Foreign Service Look More Like the Real America, It's Still Pretty Much White, Male, and Yale," *Foreign Policy*, May 22, 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/05/22/state-department-race-gender-diversity-susan-rice-kerry/>.

<sup>5</sup> Maryum Saifee et al., *Transforming State: Pathways to a More Just, Equitable, and Innovative Institution*, (The Truman Center for National Policy, 2021), accessed January 20, 2022, [https://assets-global.website-files.com/60b7dbd50474252e6c8c4fc5/60f5acf9dcd30575c7386ab1\\_Truman-Center-Task-Force-Transforming-State-Final.pdf](https://assets-global.website-files.com/60b7dbd50474252e6c8c4fc5/60f5acf9dcd30575c7386ab1_Truman-Center-Task-Force-Transforming-State-Final.pdf).

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- <sup>7</sup> Nahal Toosi, "Ivy League Grads Have a Leg Up in State Department Promotions, Stats Show: Data Shared Exclusively With POLITICO Suggest an Ivy Degree Is Still a Career Booster in Foggy Bottom," *POLITICO Magazine*, June 14, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/06/14/ivy-league-grads-state-department-promotions-316531>.
- <sup>8</sup> Alexandra Thornton et al., *How to Make Corporate Boards More Diverse: Race and Gender Diversity on Corporate Boards Is Unacceptably Low, But Better Corporate Practices and SEC Engagement Could Help Accelerate Progress Toward More Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion*, (The Center for American Progress, 2021), accessed January 20, 2022, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/make-corporate-boards-diverse/>.
- <sup>9</sup> Alexandra Thornton et al., *How to Make Corporate Boards More Diverse: Race and Gender Diversity on Corporate Boards Is Unacceptably Low, But Better Corporate Practices and SEC Engagement Could Help Accelerate Progress Toward More Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion*, (The Center for American Progress, 2021), accessed January 20, 2022, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/make-corporate-boards-diverse/>.
- <sup>10</sup> Congressman Joaquín Castro, "Congressman Castro Introduces Comprehensive Bill to Promote Diversity and Inclusion at the U.S. Department of State," news release, July 21, 2021, <https://castro.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/congressman-castro-introduces-comprehensive-legislative-to-promote-state-statement-diversity-and-inclusion>.
- <sup>11</sup> U.S. Congress, House, "To Establish the Department of State Student Internship Program as a Paid Internship Program to Provide Students with the Opportunity to Learn About a Career in Diplomacy and Foreign Affairs, and for Other Purposes," HR 1109, 117th Cong., 1st sess., introduced in House February 18, 2001, <https://www.congress.gov/117/bills/hr1109/BILLS-117hr1109ih.pdf>.
- <sup>12</sup> U.S. Congress, House, "To Establish an Office of City and State Diplomacy Within the Department of State, and for Other Purposes" HR 4526, 117th Cong., 1st sess., introduced in House July 19, 2021, <https://www.congress.gov/117/bills/hr4526/BILLS-117hr4526ih.pdf>.
- <sup>13</sup> Senator Chris Murphy, "Murphy, Cornyn Introduce Legislation to Establish City and State Diplomacy," news release, October 26, 2021, <https://www.murphy.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/murphy-cornyn-introduce-legislation-to-establish-city-and-state-diplomacy>.
- <sup>14</sup> Senator Chris Murphy, "Murphy, Cornyn Introduce Legislation to Establish City and State Diplomacy," news release, October 26, 2021, <https://www.murphy.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/murphy-cornyn-introduce-legislation-to-establish-city-and-state-diplomacy>.