

## ***After Backing Military Force in Past, U.S.A.I.D. Nominee Focuses on Deploying Soft Power***

If confirmed to oversee the U.S. Agency for International Development, Samantha Power will confront adversaries by bolstering democracy and human rights. China is an early focus.



By Lara Jakes

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WASHINGTON — Near the end of the 2014 documentary “Watchers of the Sky,” which chronicles the origins of the legal definition of genocide, Samantha Power grows emotional. At the time, Ms. Power was President Barack Obama’s ambassador to the United Nations, and, she said, had “great visibility into a lot of the pain” in the world.

From that perch, preventing mass atrocities abroad required “thinking through what we can do about it, to exhaust the tools at your disposal,” Ms. Power said in the film. “And I always think about the privilege of, you know, of getting to try — just to try.”

Few doubt Ms. Power’s zeal — given her career as a war correspondent, human rights activist, academic expert and foreign policy adviser — even if it has meant advocating military force to stop widespread killings.

Now, as President Biden’s nominee to lead the United States Agency for International Development, she is preparing to rejoin the government as an administrator of soft power, and resist using weapons as a means of deterrence and punishment that she has pushed for in the past.

A Senate committee is expected to vote Thursday on her nomination to lead one of the world’s largest distributors of humanitarian aid.

If she is confirmed, Mr. Biden will also seat her on the National Security Council, where during the Obama administration she pressed for military intervention to protect civilians from state-sponsored attacks in Libya in 2011 and Syria in 2013. (However, she also opposed the 2003 invasion of Iraq.)

That she will be back at the table at the council — and again almost certain to be debating whether to entangle American forces in enduring conflicts — has concerned some officials, analysts and think tank experts who demand military restraint from the Biden administration. Mr. Biden appears to be leaning that way: He has embraced economic sanctions as a tool of hard power and is expected to announce a full withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan by Sept. 11, ending the United States’ longest war.

“If you’re talking about humanitarianism, famine, the wars — really, other than natural causes, war is the No. 1 cause of famine around the world,” Senator Rand Paul, Republican of Kentucky, told Ms. Power last month during her Senate confirmation hearing. “Are you willing to admit that the Libyan and Syrian interventions that you advocated for were a mistake?”

Ms. Power did not. “When these situations arise, it’s a question almost of lesser evils — that the choices are very challenging,” she said.

By its very nature, the U.S. aid agency takes a long-term view of the world compared with the immediacy of military action. Beyond the roughly \$6 billion in humanitarian aid it is delivering this year to disaster-ridden nations, the agency seeks to prevent conflict at its roots, largely bolstering economies, countering state corruption and fostering democracy and human rights.

That mission is central to Mr. Biden’s foreign policy, and will perhaps prove nowhere more pivotal than in his global competition with China.

Last month, Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken assured allies that they would not be backed into an “‘us-or-them’ choice with China” as the two superpowers vie for economic, diplomatic and military advantage.



Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken at the opening session of talks with China at the Captain Cook hotel in Anchorage. Pool photo by Frederic J. Brown

Instead, the United States is highlighting what officials call China's malign ideology and self-interests as it expands an influence campaign across Africa, Europe and South America with financial loans, infrastructure funds, coronavirus vaccines and advanced technology.

The Trump administration also seized on China's human rights abuses — particularly against ethnic Uyghurs in the country's western region of Xinjiang — to persuade allies to turn against Beijing. On the Trump administration's final day in office, Mike Pompeo, the secretary of state, declared China's oppression against Uyghurs as an act of genocide, and he criticized Beijing's violent suppression of dissidents in Hong Kong and military harassment of Taiwan.

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Officials said China's much-debated Belt and Road Initiative was a prime battleground for U.S.A.I.D. to challenge Beijing.

Representative Tom Malinowski, Democrat of New Jersey and a former assistant secretary of state for democracy and human rights for Mr. Obama, described a "perception that China is exporting corruption" with its loans and development projects.

For example, a study in February by the International Republican Institute, a private nonprofit group that receives government funding and promotes democracy, concluded that Panama's decision in 2017 to sever diplomatic ties with Taiwan "appears to have been driven by payoffs" from China. It also noted that Nepal regularly revoked the legal status of Tibetan refugees after becoming economically reliant on Beijing.

The American aid agency alone cannot match the funds that China has seeded in developing countries. But Mr. Malinowski said its support to journalists, legal advisers and legitimate opposition groups could "expose and combat" corrosive foreign leaders who had benefited from Beijing's financial backing and playbook for how to remain in power.

"There is one issue that has risen to the top in this administration that I know she is very focused on, and that's fighting corruption," Mr. Malinowski said of Ms. Power. "And U.S.A.I.D. has a very important role to play there, potentially."

At her confirmation hearing in March, Ms. Power told senators she was moved to pursue a career in foreign policy after the 1989 massacre of protesters in Tiananmen Square in Beijing. She described China's "coercive and predatory approach, which is so transactional" in its dealings with developing countries that ultimately become dependent on Beijing through what she called "debt-trap diplomacy."

"I think it's not going over that well, and that creates an opening for the United States," Ms. Power told Senator Todd Young, Republican of Indiana.

The mostly benign prodding by Democrats and Republicans during the hearing signaled how countering China has become a rare, if reliable, issue of bipartisanship in Congress. “It’s absolutely essential that our development dollars, I think, be used to advance our geostrategic priorities,” Mr. Young said.

The aid agency and the State Department have budgeted about \$2 billion on programs to foster democracy, human rights and open governance abroad in the 2021 fiscal year — one-third as much as funding for humanitarian assistance.

It is an area that Ms. Power is expected to expand. The Biden administration’s first budget blueprint, released on Friday, asserted it would commit an unspecified but “significant increase in resources” to advance human rights and democracy while thwarting corruption and authoritarianism.



Asylum seekers from Central America crossing the Paso del Norte International Bridge, in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. One of Ms. Power’s priorities will be to target corruption, violence and poverty in the region. Jose Luis Gonzalez/Reuters

The spending plan also will support another of Ms. Power’s priorities: targeting corruption, violence and poverty in Central America as a means to curb the flow of thousands of migrants who head to the southwestern border each year. The Biden administration is banking on a \$4 billion strategy through 2025 — including an initial tranche of \$861 million proposed this year — to help stabilize the region.

In El Salvador, for example, homicides dropped 61 percent after a U.S.A.I.D. effort to reduce violence from 2015 to 2017, Ms. Power told the senators, and the agency’s programs in Honduras have yielded similar results. The programs not only supported local prosecutors but also brought together government officials, businesses and church and community leaders to divert young people from gangs through job training, tutoring and artistic activities.

She was met with some skepticism.

Senator Rob Portman, Republican of Ohio, noted that the number of children from Central America at the border had steadily increased since January, even though the United States spent \$3.6 billion over the past five years on similar efforts.

“The results are not impressive,” Mr. Portman said. “It’s an economic issue, primarily,” and “people will still be looking to come to the United States.”

Explaining foreign policy decisions to the American people, and making it relevant to their lives, is a driving theme of the State Department under Mr. Biden. Ms. Power can reach back to her own experiences as both an immigrant from Ireland and a storyteller to make the case for easing the border crisis by attacking its root causes.

“That’s part of the job, too — you’ve got to be a salesperson, you’ve got to go out there and explain to people, ‘Here’s why we need more resources to do this work, and here’s where U.S.A.I.D. can be an incredibly important partner,’” said John Prendergast, a longtime human rights and anticorruption activist and close friend to Ms. Power.

“There is so much that can be done between bombing and nothing,” Mr. Prendergast said, paraphrasing Luis Moreno Ocampo, the former prosecutor of the International Criminal Court who was featured in the same documentary about genocide as Ms. Power. “And Samantha’s whole work and life has been between those two extremes.”

Gayle Smith, who ran the aid agency for Mr. Obama and is now the State Department’s coronavirus vaccine envoy, put it more bluntly.

“It’s not like U.S.A.I.D. is going to invade somebody,” she said.