

# *Blinken Proposes a Foreign Policy Not ‘Disconnected From Our Daily Lives’*

In his first major address, the secretary of state pledged to focus on how diplomacy has a direct effect on regular Americans. At the top of the list: dealing with China.



**By Lara Jakes and Michael Crowley**

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WASHINGTON — Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken used his first major address on Wednesday to rally a domestic constituency for President Biden’s foreign policy at a time when Americans are focused on the coronavirus pandemic, the economy and other problems at home.

The 28-minute speech, delivered to a mostly empty reception room at the State Department, sought to show that the most urgent issues of diplomacy were matters that have a direct effect on Americans.

From defending democracy to combating climate change to managing the nation’s relationship with China — “the biggest geopolitical test of the 21st century,” he said — Mr. Blinken outlined eight priorities of the Biden administration’s foreign policy. He said they must be confronted both at home and abroad, “or we fall short.”

Mr. Blinken’s remarks were a companion to the White House’s release of what it called its Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, a 24-page document meant to serve as an initial foreign policy blueprint until administration officials produce their first official national security strategy, a congressionally required report published by every White House, later this year.

Briefing reporters on the document, the national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, said the guidance was premised on the idea that the United States must be able to engage in “great power” competition with rival powers such as China and Russia at the same time

it defended against transnational threats, including pandemics, climate change and terrorism.

The key to that, Mr. Sullivan said, was rebuilding America's economy, democracy and alliances, to work "from a position of strength" worldwide.

Neither Mr. Blinken nor Mr. Sullivan offered new policy announcements. And while the guidance document was designed for government officials, Mr. Blinken tried to connect with average Americans in a speech he might have delivered, but for pandemic restrictions, to an audience far beyond the Beltway.

"I know that foreign policy can sometimes feel disconnected from our daily lives," Mr. Blinken said. "It's either all about major threats, like pandemics, terrorism, or it fades from view."

"Those of us who conduct foreign policy haven't always done a good job connecting it to the needs and aspirations of the American people," Mr. Blinken said. As a result, he said, "Americans have been asking tough but fair questions about what we're doing, how we're leading — indeed, whether we should be leading at all."

(His immediate predecessor, Mike Pompeo, frequently gave talks around the United States to college students, factory workers and religious groups — although critics noted that he also chose venues and audiences potentially tied to his presumed future political aspirations.)

Although Mr. Blinken said several countries — including Russia, Iran and North Korea — posed serious challenges, he made clear that China was America's chief rival.

He repeated Mr. Biden's campaign pledge to alternate among competitive, collaborative and potentially confrontational postures toward China on different issues, and said strong alliances were the best way to counterbalance Beijing. "Where we pulled back, China has filled in," Mr. Blinken said.

But he offered few specifics, a vagueness that drew cautionary notes from some former State Department officials, who said that matching Beijing's global influence would require expensive diplomatic and development efforts.

"We cannot confront China on the cheap," said Brett Bruen, a former career diplomat and White House official in the Obama administration.

Mr. Pompeo had also routinely singled out China during the Trump administration, calling it a rampant violator of human rights whose communist leaders had encroached on foreign territories and failed to stop the spread of the coronavirus.

Mr. Blinken repeatedly drew contrasts with the previous administration and President Donald J. Trump's bombastic "America First" approach. "Real strength isn't bluster or bullying," he said.

On immigration, Mr. Blinken said the government would continue to secure U.S. borders but also pursue a "just plain decent solution" to the plight of the thousands of desperate Central Americans trying to enter the United States.

He also noted the deep fractures that have emerged in American politics and helped produce the Jan. 6 riot at the Capitol. "There is no question our democracy is fragile," he said.

Yet Mr. Blinken also acknowledged that past administrations — including the Obama presidency, in which he served — had sometimes let ordinary Americans down.

On free trade, "we didn't do enough to understand who would be negatively affected, and what would be needed to adequately offset their pain, or to enforce agreements that were already on the books, and help more workers and small businesses, fully benefit from them," he said.

Some liberal critics view Mr. Blinken as having been too supportive of past military interventions, and he conceded that "we must remember what we've learned about the limits of force to build a durable peace" — especially in Afghanistan and in the Middle East.

"The day after a major military intervention is always harder than we imagined," he said.

Lara Jakes is a diplomatic correspondent based in the Washington bureau of The New York Times. Over the past two decades, Ms. Jakes has reported and edited from more than 40 countries and covered war and sectarian fighting in Iraq, Afghanistan, Israel, the West Bank and Northern Ireland. @jakesNYT

Michael Crowley is a diplomatic correspondent in the Washington bureau. He joined The Times in 2019 and was a White House correspondent for the last 18 months of the Trump administration. @michaelcrowley