

An Exploration of U.S. Strategic Planning Capabilities of Diplomacy: A Case Study of the Two Administrations of Trump and Biden

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Abstract: Nowadays, the international environment is filled with increasing uncertainty due to the changes in the current international situation. Given the intensification of Sino-US competition in recent years and its long-term nature, the game between the two countries in the diplomatic field is also exceptionally intense, which makes it necessary to strengthen in-depth research on the diplomatic capabilities of the United States. This paper studies the strategic planning capabilities of diplomacy of the two administrations of Trump and Biden. It can be found that the United States has a relatively strong capacity for foreign strategic planning, but there is also variability due to the conflicting interests of domestic political groups, the governing styles of the leaders, and the orientation of the international system. The strategic planning capabilities of different governments have different political positions. How to balance the conflicting interests of all parties will also become an important part of U.S. diplomatic strategy.

Keywords: U.S. foreign policy, Biden administration, Trump administration, strategic planning capability of diplomacy

1. Introduction

With the current international situation changing, the uncertainty of the international environment has increased significantly. And for the sake of the United States' own strategic goals and national interests, the United States attaches great importance to the building of diplomatic capabilities. The National Security Strategy Report released by the Trump administration in 2017 mentions that it is essential to upgrade the diplomatic capabilities in order to compete in the current environment [1]. The Biden administration, moreover, sees diplomacy as the center of its foreign policy and the preferred way to reinvigorate U.S. national power [2,3]. The strategic planning capacity of diplomacy refers to the ability of a sovereign state to plan its national strategy through the formulation and planning of foreign policy [4]. The planning of U.S. diplomatic strategy has always been an important part of U.S. diplomatic capacity building, and the exploration of the U.S. diplomatic strategy planning capabilities between different government parties is of great significance to the awareness of the current international form.

Therefore, by taking the diplomatic strategy ability of the two administrations of Trump and Biden as a case study, this paper analyses the ability of US diplomacy to plan strategy in recent years from

four aspects: strategic environment, strategic interests, strategic resources, and strategic means. This paper is informative for the research of comparing and contrasting the foreign policies of the Trump administration and the Biden administration.

2. The Trump Administration's Exploration of the Ability of Diplomacy Strategy and Planning

2.1. The Study of the Strategic Environment

The Trump administration takes the maintenance of American hegemony as the primary goal of safeguarding national interests. In the National Security Strategy reports issued by successive U.S. administrations since 1987, the definition of "security threats" is the core task, and the perception of security threats comes from the judgement of the international and domestic environments, which plays a guiding role in how to safeguard the U.S. national interests and what kind of means to carry out to safeguard national security. The Trump administration believes that "the United States is facing an extremely dangerous world" [1]. In the Trump administration's report, it focuses more on security on traditional issues such as military security and economic security. The Trump administration puts more emphasis on "America First" and the leadership of the United States in the world. The Trump administration has the highest number of references to the word "America" and the highest percentage of the total vocabulary of all administrations, almost four times as many as in 1988, the lowest year, which is consistent with the "America First" and "America First" concepts presented in the report. This is in line with the "America First" proposed in the report, reflecting the utilitarian realism and moderate strategic contraction posture of the Trump administration.

2.2. Definition of Strategic Interests

Strategic objectives are a country's foreign strategic positioning and aspirations based on national interests. They are closely related to national interests, and they form a complete system that contains both the overall direction of strategy and specific implementation indicators and is more instructive and operational [5]. According to the U.S. National Security Strategy of the Trump administration, U.S. interests are summarised as "four pillars", namely: protecting U.S. homeland security, promoting U.S. economic prosperity, pursuing peace through military strength, and expanding U.S. influence. It is the Trump report that is more inward-looking in its strategic objectives, highlighting the contraction and introversion of policies. The report opens with the statement "The American people chose me to make America great again, and I will ensure that government puts the safety, interests, and well-being of the people first [1]." In addition, the report is rife with U.S.-centric statements, such as the one on multi-party relations, which states that "the United States must join and lead in arrangements that involve many parties in order to shape many of the provisions that serve U.S. interests and values [1]." The NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) alliance will be stronger when all members assume greater responsibility for protecting common interests, territories, and values in a fair and shared manner [1]. This provides a glimpse into the isolationist tendencies of the United States that disregard the interests of its allies.

2.3. Mobilisation of Strategic Resources

Since the strategic interests of the United States involve a variety of fields such as politics, economy, and ideology, strategic resources are particularly important for the U.S. government. At the international level, the U.S. is still very influential. It is a leader in many international organisations and has many alliance partners. At the economic level, the U.S. economic system influences the world's economic system and has a huge advantage in this regard. At the scientific and technological

level, the United States is a world leader in education, health care, aerospace, and other technologies. Although there has been a weakening trend in recent years, the strategic resources of the United States are still not supposed to be taken lightly.

2.4. Optimisation of Strategic Means

Strategic means is one of the most important parts of diplomacy. In the National Security Strategy, the Trump administration has always emphasised “America First”, showing unilateralism and a strong nationalist colour. The specific means are: under the Trump administration, the United States has repeatedly withdrawn from international organisations and international agreements, practised trade protectionism, and directly and indirectly undermined the multilateral trading system. On 3 June 2017, Trump tore up his previous climate governance commitments and announced his withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, and on 12 October 2017, the United States again announced its withdrawal from UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization). In addition, the report addresses alliances and partnerships 75 times, highlighting the role of alliances and partnerships in common defence, tackling terrorism, reciprocal cooperation, burden sharing, cybersecurity, etc. Meanwhile, the report, in particular, stresses that alliances and partnerships can expand strengths [1]. In other words, the European Union and NATO, the close allies and partners of the United States, play an important role, and the reality is that Trump made a big statement when he was a candidate for the presidency, stating that the European Union was a tool for Germany to promote its own interests and Britain’s withdrawal from the European Union was a good thing. As for NATO, Trump believes that the NATO defence alliance is outdated and that many countries do not pay their fair share of the costs [1]. It is clear that Trump’s behaviour is far from the content of the report.

3. The Biden Administration’s Exploration of the Ability of Diplomacy Strategy and Planning

3.1. The Study of the Strategic Environment

Both the Trump administration and the Biden administration have made the maintenance of U.S. hegemonic rule the primary goal of safeguarding national interests. The Biden administration’s report starts by noting that the United States is at the beginning of a decisive decade in the world, arguing that a strong sense of competition is the main theme of threat perception [6]. The Biden administration believes that geopolitical competition and global issues are interacting and transforming each other, contributing to the complexity of security threats, and that only by making better use of the dynamics unleashed by the era of competition and creating competition can America deal with the various threats and challenges. The Biden administration has not only mentioned great power competition many times in the report but also clearly defined such competition as “the competition between democracy and authoritarianism, the competition of values, and the institutional competition in the fields of ideology, international order, and international cooperation. The Biden administration is in a very different context from the Trump administration. With the rise and end of the global new crown epidemic and the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, the Biden administration is focusing on both traditional security issues and non-traditional security issues, that is, common international challenges. The Biden administration has paid more attention to the cooperation among some international organisations.

3.2. Definition of Strategic Interests

According to the official expression of the United States in recent years, based on the strategic goal of hegemonic protection, the core interests of the United States are mainly in four aspects:

maintaining homeland and national security, promoting economic development, defending the American way of life and values, and enhancing international influence. The United States diplomatic capacity building focuses on promoting the above four aspects of interests through continuous implementation of diplomacy. In terms of internal logic, the Biden administration has embodied the choice of “economic, diplomatic, and military” strategic means to achieve the strategic goals. Among them, economic means is the basis for gaining competitive advantages, diplomatic means is the guarantee for shaping the competitive environment, and military means is the deterrent force for restricting competitors. Though the report used “modernisation” mostly for military construction, it emphasised the need to strengthen “modernisation” in technology, infrastructure, international institutions, allies and partners, with the aim of serving US diplomacy and dominating the international order. The Biden administration also pointed out the combination of economic construction and the maintenance of national security. The achievement of the economic prosperity and development of the United States, the defence of American democratic values, the protection of the security of the American people, and the domination of the international order are the four core interests of the report, and the formulation of the strategic policy is to serve the core interests of the United States, which reflects the inseparable relationship between economic construction and the maintenance of national security.

3.3. Mobilisation of Strategic Resources

As mentioned before, for the U.S. government, strategic resources are particularly important. The Biden administration focuses on the same aspects as the Trump administration in terms of strategic resources. As for the international status, the U.S. keeps its leadership in many international organisations while collaborating with many alliance partners. From an economic point of view, the U.S. has a great impact on the world’s economic system. From the perspective of science and technology, the U.S. attaches great importance to its development in many fields such as education, health care, and aerospace. In general, the war resource reserves of the United States are still considerable. The country’s scholars even believe that “the United States is and will remain the only country in the world that is capable of maintaining a global presence [7].”

3.4. Optimisation of Strategic Means

Comparatively speaking, the Biden administration is softer. It emphasises the enhancement of the contact with international organisations and a selective return to international governance to assume international responsibility and strengthen international cooperation. The Biden administration’s “National Security Strategy of the United States” report explicitly takes shaping a “free, open, prosperous, and secure international order” as the approach of the U.S. national security strategy, i.e., to invest in Americans, build alliances, and strengthen a modern military. The first is to strengthen the investment in national strength. It is essential to strengthen strategic public investment, pursue a modern industrial and innovation strategy, and continue to carry out major reforms. It is also critical to strengthen the country’s governance capacity, prevent and intervene in acts that undermine the democratic process, and continue to defend the democratic system [8]. The second is to build a strong network of alliances and partnerships. The United States will continue to strengthen NATO and alliances that have signed bilateral and multilateral cooperation agreements, including the U.S.-European Trade and Technology Council and the U.S.-Britain-Australia Trilateral Security Partnership. This has saved the United States a certain amount of prestige in the international arena.

4. Conclusion

This paper conducts a comparative analysis of the Trump administration and the Biden administration's ability to strategically plan US diplomacy in recent years from four aspects, namely: the study of the strategic environment, the definition of strategic interests, mobilisation of strategic resources, and optimisation of strategic means. It is found that the Trump administration is more inclined to emphasise US leadership in the world and unilateralism. The Biden administration, on the other hand, focuses on multilateralism and cooperation among international organisations.

Theoretically, the Biden administration cannot avoid the impact of some of the Trump administration's policies, either subjectively or objectively. If Trump's criterion is to achieve the short-term interests of the United States according to the principle of "America First", Biden, on the other hand, wants to achieve both short-term and long-term interests.

Additionally, this paper lacks a related analysis of the data. An analysis of the data on unilateralism and multilateralism in the Trump and Biden administrations would have been more revealing in terms of the differences in the two administrations' diplomatic planning capabilities.

Overall, the United States still insists on its own "priority position" and "hegemony" in diplomacy. However, different governments have different political positions on how to deal with the definition of strategic interests and the optimisation of strategic means in their strategic planning ability. How to balance the disputes between the interests of various parties will also become an important part of the U.S. diplomatic strategy.

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