

# USAID officials prepare for higher-profile role under Samantha Power

By [Michael Igoe](#), [Adva Saldinger](#) // 13 January 2021

President-elect Joe Biden's announcement Wednesday that he plans to nominate Samantha Power to be administrator at the [U.S. Agency for International Development](#) and elevate the position to the National Security Council has officials and experts hoping a leader with "star power" can help turn the page for an agency that has struggled in recent months.

Power, formerly a U.S. ambassador to the [United Nations](#) and member of the NSC, as well as a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, would be among the highest-profile figures to ever occupy that role.

"Samantha Power is a world-renowned voice of conscience and moral clarity — challenging and rallying the international community to stand up for the dignity and humanity of all people," Biden said in a statement, adding that "her expertise and perspective will be essential as our country reasserts its role as a leader on the world stage."

The announcement comes after months of turmoil inside the U.S. foreign aid agency, which has seen morale suffer as a result of controversial appointments by President Donald Trump's administration, leadership battles, and management problems.

Inside and outside USAID, the move was met with hope that Power would be able to restore the agency's standing and credibility.

"In terms of star power, international chops, respect for USAID, and closeness with the rest of Biden's cabinet, she's an outstanding pick and I'm really looking forward to her arrival," a current USAID official wrote to Devex.

As the pandemic threw the world into disarray, the U.S. Agency for International Development found itself in the midst of its own political upheaval. Devex spoke to current and former officials about a year when USAID made headlines for the wrong reasons.

"I do know there are legitimate concerns at her limited international development experience, and she has essentially no experience managing a vast complicated bureaucracy. She'll need to surround herself with an all-star team and be able to discern which of USAID's senior leaders will be helpful and which to sideline," the official added.

Career staffers at USAID are describing the pick as healing, inspirational, and bringing leadership, all of which “are just sorely needed at USAID right now,” said Erol Yayboke, senior fellow at the [Center for Strategic and International Studies](#). Yayboke said her leadership is the “most important initial take” but added that she will need to have a strong team around her that understands how the agency and its “antiquated” systems work.

Some sources noted her standing as a member of Biden’s foreign policy inner circle could place greater demands on USAID’s programs and workforce.

“USAID had better buckle up. She will certainly raise the profile of the agency, but there won’t be a lot of group hugs. I imagine she will get right down to business,” a former USAID official wrote to Devex.

Biden’s decision to elevate the role of USAID administrator to a seat on the NSC was seen as particularly significant and a move that has been long advocated for by some in the development community. Sources also noted that Biden’s announcement came a week before his inauguration — perhaps the earliest a USAID administrator candidate has been revealed.

“She won’t have to fight for a seat at the table, she will be a player from day one because of the respect that she has with other key members of the administration,” another current USAID official wrote to Devex.

“That will be important for policy discussions at all levels, because it raises the importance of development as a critical consideration,” the official added.

In a video revealing his plans to nominate Power, Biden says, “There is simply no one better to ensure our development agenda is a core pillar of our foreign policy.”

In the same video, Power says, “Humanitarian support, democracy assistance, economic development — those are not ‘nice to have’ in our foreign policy toolbox; they are critical if we are to see a more stable and just world exist.”

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Humanitarian intervention Power rose to prominence as a forceful advocate for U.S. intervention to stop genocide around the world — the subject of her first book, “‘A Problem from Hell’: America and the Age of Genocide,” which won the Pulitzer Prize in 2003.

As U.N. ambassador in 2016, she delivered a scathing denunciation of Syrian President Bashar Assad’s government and its foreign allies for their role in the humanitarian crisis in Aleppo, as well as their obstruction of a U.N.-backed civilian evacuation plan.

Power’s interventionist views were “extremely influential two decades ago in defining where progressives were going in foreign policy, in defining what liberal or progressive foreign policy was, for a generation,” Stephen Wertheim, deputy

director of research and policy at the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, told Devex.

Those views do not necessarily represent how progressives view America's role in the world today, he added.

Progressives "question whether the United States has the duty, the right, or the capabilities to stop ethnic conflict around the world — and in our own moment, of course, they're questioning whether the United States itself can repair its democracy," Wertheim said.

A USAID staffer posted overseas said colleagues were excited to have a leader with a humanitarian background who has worked effectively in the multilateral system before. The staffer said that people also expect Power to be a strong voice for USAID within the interagency and to push for it to be on equal footing with the [State Department](#).

Although Power is an experienced humanitarian, the staffer said she'll need to prove herself when it comes to the agency's development mandate, and some have expressed skepticism over Power's past support for military collaboration with USAID.

A U.S. development expert, who commented on the condition of anonymity, told Devex that while Power's nomination might be good for USAID's standing, it could create challenges for U.S. foreign policy coherence if she finds herself butting heads with leaders at the State Department or NSC.

Wertheim described Power as "a somewhat surprising pick for USAID," noting that she "made her mark to date doing very different work, related to intervention — particularly military intervention — on humanitarian grounds."

"What role she will play on issues that traditionally the USAID administrator would not have much of a voice in remains to be seen," he added.

A former Republican congressional staffer, who also spoke on the condition of anonymity, noted that the U.S. Congress has typically regarded USAID as a bipartisan agency. With the exception of a handful of hot-button policy issues such as abortion and climate change, Democrats and Republicans both largely support the agency's mission and programs.

The former staffer worried that Power, a more partisan figure with strong political views, might challenge that bipartisan consensus and insert USAID into more divisive foreign policy terrain.

Despite those concerns, Power is likely to have a fairly rapid Senate confirmation process, especially if history is any guide, experts told Devex. Power was confirmed as U.N. ambassador by a Republican-controlled Senate in 2013 with strong bipartisan support.

She is likely to face questions this time "from isolationist senators on her role in promoting American intervention abroad, including in Libya, Syria, and Yemen,"

Donald Steinberg, formerly an ambassador and USAID deputy administrator, [wrote Wednesday](#).

Sen. Chris Coons, a Democrat from Delaware who sits on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, which will hold Power's confirmation hearing, released a statement Wednesday supporting the nomination and [tweeted](#), "We must swiftly confirm a leader for [@USAID](#) to harness the international community to confront the [COVID-19](#) pandemic."

Though viewed as having an adversarial relationship with foreign aid, the Trump administration did set up a number of development-related initiatives, policies, and even a new agency. What will happen to them with the change in administrations? Global COVID-19 vaccine distribution, educational opportunities for foreign students in the U.S., and "waging a high-profile fight against corruption at home and abroad" are key areas where the U.S. can act quickly, show leadership, and prove that it can once again be an effective partner, Power wrote in a [Foreign Affairs article](#) published online in November.

The U.S. should join COVAX — the COVID-19 Vaccine Global Access Facility — she wrote, but it should also go further by developing bilateral partnerships with low- and middle-income countries that need help and using the "deep experience" of USAID and the [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) in the effort, from training health care workers to bolstering supply chains and supporting public information campaigns.

Power argued that Biden should make anti-corruption a centerpiece of his international agenda, including by taking a lead on reducing corruption, money laundering, and global tax evasion.

"Aggressively tackling corruption can ... play a role in helping blunt the global democratic recession at the same time as it helps countries preserve precious state funds during the pandemic and the resulting economic crisis," she wrote.

Restoring the U.S. government's "reputation for competence" is critical to countering China and providing an alternative model to its approach, which has prompted growing global concern, particularly around the country's Belt and Road Initiative and whether it is pursuing a "deliberate strategy of 'debt-trap diplomacy,'" she wrote.

The USAID staffer posted overseas said they are also eager to see the agency refocus on larger issues instead of "pushing fringe agendas" and to spend less time "on having to figure out how to not get fired while being enraged and more actually executing our mission."