



Slip-up or signal? What US official's 'clash of civilizations' remarks suggest

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When the senior Trump administration official Kiron Skinner settled into her chair before a largely sympathetic crowd on a Washington panel a few weeks ago, she had little idea how quickly her words would reverberate beyond the cosy think-tank world, across the American plains and out over the Pacific.

Skinner, the US State Department's policy planning director, was the last speaker in a long day at the annual Future Security Forum, a foreign policy seminar on global challenges sponsored by the New America think tank. After the usual pleasantries, she turned her attention to Washington's growing competition with China.

Rivalry with Beijing is "a fight with a really different civilisation and a different ideology, and the United States hasn't had that before", she said, before adding that this would be "the first time that we will have a great power competitor that is not Caucasian".

The racial and civilisational framing by a senior administration official – who is herself African-American – has fuelled distrust at a time when the trade war between the world's two largest economies is ratcheting up, roiling markets and endangering global economic growth. And there's little sign of a truce any time soon. Earlier this month, President Donald Trump announced ramped-up tariffs on US\$200 billion worth of Chinese goods, prompting Beijing to respond with higher tariffs of its own on US\$60 billion worth of US products. Washington quickly followed with tough new restrictions on Chinese telecoms giant Huawei Technologies.

Skinner's comments attracted an immediate outcry US critics who dubbed them "awful", Australian foreign ministry officials who called them "unhelpful" and the Chinese government, which termed them "absurd".

Then there was China's decidedly less diplomatic social media. Racist, dangerous, evoking Hitler, a trick meant to sow trouble, a plot to keep China down were among the thousands of angry reactions by Chinese netizens. "Skinner's words can only harm international cooperation, leading to a lose-lose game," said one of the more measured comments on Xinghuozk.com. "You give 'civilisation' a bad name," said another on CCTV's website.

The Skinner comments have also led Beijing to spotlight a competing vision of "civilisation", adding to the long list of irritants between the two sides that include investment policy, visas, espionage, military prowess, telecoms standards and national corporate champions.

They've also sparked speculation in Washington over whether her comments were cleared by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo or Trump and to what extent they reflected official policy. This

came after Skinner described her job as turning the president's "hunches and instincts into hypotheses".

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Wednesday. The department isn't saying whether he cleared Skinner's comments or to what extent they reflect Trump administration policy.

Skinner and the State Department declined to comment, citing scheduling issues. But Washington policy experts said they suspect she spoke without vetting her remarks, given this administration's poor record on agency coordination, her senior position and the latitude officials have to operate on their own. Or at least until an issue blows up, Trump notices and undercuts them with a tweet, analysts added.

With or without authorisation, her comments dovetail with apparent administration thinking, some said. "Everyone sort of acts like this is new," said Emma Ashford, a fellow with the conservative Cato Institute. "But these ideas have been floated around in the Trump administration from day one."

Trump and senior officials in his administration have repeatedly made comments along thinly veiled racial and civilisational lines about Mexicans, Muslims and immigration, Ashford said. Fuelling these have been writing and public comments by senior policy adviser Stephen Miller and Michael Flynn, whose brief tenure as national security adviser belied his influential voice during the 2016 campaign. "This fits with the broader trend," Ashford added.

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Even judged on their merits, Skinner's arguments make limited sense, said policy experts across the political spectrum. The US has faced great-power adversaries before who weren't Caucasian, most notably Japan during World War II.

Nor has Washington's experience with so-called Caucasian adversaries been more 'civilisationally' defined than with China, they added, including the US showdown with the Soviet Union during the cold war.

"It is at best inelegant and at worst really, really dumb," Daniel Drezner, professor of international politics at Tufts University's Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, said of Skinner's commentary. "I do pity other countries trying to negotiate with this administration."

In her bid to bring a more structured ideological framework to Trump's hunches, Skinner echoes Samuel Huntington's landmark 1996 book "The Clash of Civilisations", which argues that cultural and religious differences provide fertile ground for conflict in the post-cold war era.

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But this is an apparent misreading, foreign policy experts said, particularly given that Huntington called for lowering tension, avoiding fights and not directly challenging rivals, which hasn't exactly been the administration's approach. "It's almost as though they've taken this Huntingtonian framework, this book he wrote, and they haven't read the theory," Ashford said.

"It's a crude framework for understanding the world they're trying to map onto a whole bunch of problems."

A series of noted heavyweights have held Skinner's job, the only foreign policy think tank post within the federal government, including Paul Nitze, Richard Haass and George Kennan, who used the position to develop the US containment strategy and the Marshall Plan at the height of the cold war.

After her Caucasian civilisation comments, even some long-time supporters of Skinner and the Trump administration were shaking their heads. "This is not a clash of civilisations," said Steve Bannon, a former White House chief strategist, fierce critic of Chinese policy and self-avowed "huge admirer" of Skinner, adding that he helped bring her into the administration and thinks she's brilliant. Still, "it's not Confucianism versus Judeo-Christian values," he said.

Former White House strategist Steve Bannon, shown in Norway this month, is a fan of Skinner but concedes that her comments were off: "This is not a clash of civilisations." Photo: EPA-EFE

Bannon added that he and leading voices in the Trump administration see the showdown with Beijing rather as one involving competing economic and political visions.

China, he said, is trying to advance its totalitarian one-party and state-led economic system bent on restricting the internet and human rights while the US espouses democratic government rooted in the rule of law that values freedom of expression and a market economy.

What the outcome of these competing visions will be is not up to Trump or Vice-President Mike Pence or some foreign policy argument but rather the will of the Chinese people, Bannon said, adding: "This is going to be a long and tough struggle."

The administration has made little effort to walk back or apologise for Skinner's comments, despite the potential damage among Chinese citizens who might otherwise quietly welcome US pressure on their government to reform. Analysts pegged this radio silence in part to the style of an impetuous president who almost never apologises or acknowledges perceived mistakes. "That's the way the Trump administration rolls," said Bannon, who lasted seven months in Trump's high-turnover White House. "He's got a house style, that's just the way it is."

Past articles and statements by Skinner – a professor of international relations and politics at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, before joining the administration – did not dwell much on race, other than comments in 2015 explaining her brief stint as an adviser to Senator Rand Paul of Kentucky's ill-fated presidential run. And those were limited to praising Paul's willingness to address issues of race and rights in the US. Most scholarly work by Skinner, who is also a Hoover Institution fellow, has instead focused on Ronald Reagan, the subject of five books she has co-written.

As the 2016 election approached, Skinner's writing started to embrace more of Trump's ideas, including the need to make allies pay a bigger share of defence costs, praise for his "man-on-the-street wisdom" in foreign policy and the need to challenge China economically and militarily.

"Is there any country other than the United States that most Americans would like to see as the organiser of the international system?" she wrote in *Forbes* in May 2016.

Her views appear to have sharpened after she joined the administration in September 2018. In a radio interview with the conservative *Hugh Hewitt Show* in December, Skinner contrasted the thinking behind China's "Belt and Road Initiative" with the Marshall Plan that the US used to help rebuild Europe after World War II. "The Chinese don't give a fair deal," she said. "And

they will destroy the international system because they really are not attempting to save peoples, societies and nations.”

Skinner’s recent controversial race comments and Trump’s aggressive “America First” stance come as China touts a competing, more inclusive vision of civilisation in line with efforts to draw Asian and European countries into its orbit with the multibillion-dollar belt and road plan.

As the US-China war of words has spread beyond manufacturing, logistics chains, island-building and economic growth rates, Beijing has spent more to expand its global influence through print, broadcasting, Hollywood tie-ups and, with the proliferation of its controversial Confucius Institutes, cultural and language training.

At this month’s “Dialogue of Asian Civilisations” conference in Beijing, Chinese President Xi Jinping warned, without mentioning the US by name, that one civilisation forcing itself on another would be “stupid” and “disastrous”.

“We should hold up equality and respect, abandon pride and prejudice,” Xi said, “and promote harmonious dialogue and coexistence between civilisations.”

A key battleground as the two sides face off is Southeast Asia, China’s traditional backyard and a focus of the Trump administration’s “Indo-Pacific” strategy intended to check Beijing and expand the US’ regional influence.

Southeast Asian nations want the US to succeed in nudging Beijing to protect intellectual property, play by international rules and live up to its promise of opening its markets, said Lye Liang Fook, senior fellow at Singapore’s ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute. “But the approach is wrong,” he said of the Trump administration’s efforts.

Particularly bothersome is the administration’s focus on forcing countries to choose between Beijing and Washington, Lye said, which undercuts their ability to manoeuvre in line with their national interest. “It will affect greatly the credibility of the US among smaller countries,” he added.

China’s more inclusive, generous language on civilisation reflects the confidence of a rising power that knows it can play the long game and that its global influence will only grow, analysts said. China’s rose-tinted references to a glorified Asian past also tend to airbrush a time when vassal states on its periphery paid homage to the Middle Kingdom – arguably an early vision of “China First”, they add.

China is also adept at using ambiguity to portray differing visions of civilisation depending on its audience, some said. In referring to the Belt and Road Initiative, Beijing tends to speak of “cooperating among civilisations”, which presumably includes the US, Europe and other traditional Western allies.

In contrast, its recent conference focused on “Asian civilisation”, which implicitly excludes the US. And in meetings with leaders of Greece and Armenia, Chinese leaders have referred to “ancient civilisations” involving an even smaller club that includes China, India and Egypt.

“So it’s a mixture,” said Lye. “China is very good at making things very vague.”